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PLAN

Introduction

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Introduction

- 1 On 28th January, 2020, the last surviving fighter ace of the Battle of Britain, Wing Commander Paul Farnes, died at the age of 101. Farnes had previously fought in the Battle of France, where he claimed three victories: two “shares” and a Heinkel He 111 shot down.¹ Farnes had also been one of the last two surviving RAF pilots to have served in France in 1940, and, upon his death, the honour of becoming the last Battle of France pilot veteran was bestowed upon an Irishman, Group Captain John Hemingway. Within a matter of months, on 7th May, 2020, the eve the 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day, Hemingway found himself becoming the last surviving Battle of Britain veteran following the death of Flight Lieutenant Terry Clark.² The unexpected announcement that an Irishman, a man who had not only hailed from a neutral European nation, but from the only dominion of the British Commonwealth to adopt the policy, had acceded to the title of “last of ‘the Few’” sparked considerable interest in the United Kingdom, and around the world. For some, the occurrence provided an important moment of introspection; at a time when the British state and society sought to cling to their wartime myths and legacies of British stoicism during the war, both saw the least-likely candidate,

a Dublin-born Irishman, suddenly inherit the mantle of an identity which, some commentators have argued, is fragmenting at the precise moment that the last members of Britain's wartime generation are slipping away.³

2 Sadly, despite public interest in Hemingway's status as Britain's last veteran of both air campaigns over northern France and southern England in the summer of 1940, little comment has been made or interest shown concerning the role of Irish personnel who served in the British forces during the war, as an accompaniment to this development. Furthermore, this apathy was reinforced by a sense of apparent unease and hesitation shown by British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, when questioned in parliament about how the 101-year-old Irish veteran ought to be honoured by the British government as "the final representative of the few".⁴ In stark contrast, the French government, represented by the Embassy of France in the Republic of Ireland, have shown eagerness and determination in recent years by bestowing their highest honour of state, the *Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur*, upon all Irish veterans who served either in the defence of French Third Republic in 1940 or the liberation of Nazi-occupied France in 1944.⁵ However, as is the case in the United Kingdom, in contemporary France, in spite of the recent engagement of their government and diplomatic service with the subject of neutral Irish involvement in the Second World War, there still remains a distinct absence of public awareness of Irish military service in wartime France, along with a lack of any real understanding of the social and cultural context of Irish service generally in the British and Allied forces.

3 This article, while acknowledging recent contributions in the field published in France,⁶ seeks to address a considerable gap in knowledge and scholarship on Irish service personnel in the Royal Air Force, and to highlight their role and service in France during the brief conflict phase of 1940. It will do so by concentrating upon a small group of six Irish RAF officers who both served on the ground and fought in the air campaign during the Battle of France, utilizing an admittedly limited number of primary sources available, including a handful of oral history testimonies, published accounts and supporting archival documents. The article provides a lens through which to examine the recruitment and service of Irish officer personnel in the RAF during the late 1930s and the early years of the Second

World War, when the service was still a relatively new branch of the British armed forces and when Irish recruitment to the RAF was comparatively limited when contrasted with the other services. A key aim of the article is to trace the historical antecedents of Irish service in this, the world's first independent air force, and how a lengthy tradition of British-serving Irish officers adapted to this new form of martial service. The article also addresses key questions, such as who neutral Ireland's RAF volunteers were, why they decided to join the British forces and, most importantly, why they selected the RAF as their chosen service, and how many of these recruits enlisted in the Northern Ireland Recruitment Area over the duration of the war. It will briefly examine the context of voluntary Irish service in British uniform, from a political, social, cultural and economic standpoint, and will discuss the ways in which such military service was accepted by the Irish government in spite of neutral policy. Lastly, this article provides a brief narrative of Irish service in the RAF throughout the Battle of France from the perspective of five Irish airmen. By utilizing excerpts from oral history interviews and published accounts, together with RAF Combat Reports and squadron Operational Record Books held at the UK National Archives in London,⁷ it is possible to deliver a narrative account of the service of Irish RAF personnel in France during May-June 1940, and highlight the role played by Irish airmen in this historic air campaign.

1. Pre-war Irish recruitment to the RAF: traditions, politics and cultural affiliations

- 4 Irish service in the RAF during the Second World War was a natural manifestation of a military tradition long established in Ireland. For more than three centuries, Irish people had rendered formal military service in the armed forces of the British Crown. According to Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery, in the introduction to their celebrated volume, *A Military History of Ireland*, war and the use of force made an indelible and lasting impression on Ireland, an island:

whose peoples, structures, society and politics have been for centuries shaped, where not determined, by war, the threat of war or, at

least, by the absence of peace... a small country out of which vast armies of men have poured to do battle abroad.⁸

- 5 Irish service in the British armed forces during the eighteenth century, whether rendered formally through regular service in either the army or navy, or through the amateur tradition of service at home in the yeomanry or militia, was under the constraints of the Penal Laws which officially restricted Catholics from bearing arms, even in the service of the Crown, in order to neutralize any perceived threat posed by the majority Catholic population towards the Irish Protestant Ascendancy.⁹ At the same time, Irish Catholic soldiers also served in the French Royal Army, a tradition commencing at the end of the Williamite War, in 1691, when the Irish Jacobite army of the deposed King James II entered the service of King Louis XIV in the Irish Brigade of France. Known as “the Wild Geese”, these émigré Irish troops served France and other European Catholic states for more than a century.¹⁰
- 6 However, the aftermath of French Revolution of 1789 resulted in a watershed moment with the passing of the Catholic Relief Act in 1793, which legalised Catholic enlistment in the British forces, permitting them to bear arms and, crucially, to hold officer commissions.¹¹ This would coincide with an ending to the Irish tradition of enlisting in the Catholic armies of France and Spain. In 1795, the government authorised the formation of “an exclusively Catholic Irish Brigade”, made up mainly of former officers of the Irish Brigade of France; Ciarán McDonnell argues that this new Catholic Irish Brigade in the British army represented “a significant turning point in the military history of Ireland, illustrating both the decline of the ‘Wild Geese’ tradition in the French service and the emerging tradition of Irishmen, Catholic and Protestant, serving in the British armed forces”.¹² In a simultaneous development to the Catholic Relief Act, the Irish Militia would be formed in 1793 to guard Ireland from external invasion by Revolutionary France, as well as any possible internal insurrection. This force, which represented almost two-thirds of the Irish military garrison during the French Revolutionary Wars, would see a “coming together of the upper-class Anglo-Irish Protestant military tradition, represented by the officer corps, and the Catholic majority, who filled the ranks”.¹³ The effect of these political reforms upon the British milit-

ary was profound: the scholarship E. M. Spiers suggests that Irish soldiers would come to represent as much as 40 per cent of the total manpower of the British army from 1793 to 1815, some 159,000 troops in all, with the Duke Wellington estimating that half of the men under his command during the Peninsular campaign were Irishmen. By 1830, official records revealed that Irish soldiers represented 42.2 per cent of total manpower.¹⁴ However, although the way had now been opened for Irish Catholics to obtain commissions, the nineteenth century would not show meaningful progress on this front. This was due to a system of “socially exclusive or ‘closed shop’ officer selection” where candidates for officer training were chosen mainly from public schools or purchased their commissions, resulting in “underwhelming numbers of Irish Catholic officer being found” within the British army even by the latter decades of the century.¹⁵ This would alter significantly in the decades leading up to the Second World War.

- 7 The First World War brought a notable change to the predominance of the Anglo-Irish officer tradition. The Irish contingent, numbering almost 210,000 service personnel recruited from across the UK, would be Protestant and Catholic to a ratio of two-fifths and three-fifths respectively, representing a major contribution towards British wartime military mobilization. Although well below the rate of voluntary enlistment in Britain during the First World War, Irish enlistments would constitute the largest military mobilisation in Irish history.¹⁶ Just over 152,000 of these were recruited in Ireland, of which some 5,000 were officers; the total number of Irishmen to have served as British officers during the war is estimated at 11,000, of whom 5,000 were commissioned during the war. However, as Timothy Bowman, William Butler and Michael Wheatley have observed, it has been often assumed that, firstly, the “long-established military tradition of the Anglo-Irish gentry class continued without any significant variation”, secondly, that a disproportionate number of Irish Protestants made up the bulk of the officers recruited into the British forces and, thirdly, that Catholic nationalists faced discrimination in their efforts to secure officer commissions. While aspects of these assumptions are factual, the three authors have established that the needs of wartime mobilisation instilled significant social mobility within the British recruitment apparatus in Ireland, with a large

compliment of officers coming from middle-class backgrounds, as in the case of the 10th Irish Division.¹⁷ Irish people would not cease to join the British forces after the war, neither during the Anglo-Irish Conflict of 1919-21, nor even after southern Irish independence from the United Kingdom in 1922.¹⁸ According to Steven O'Connor, during the interwar period Irish soldiers "comprised about five per cent of the British army's manpower and while there are no returns of officers' nationality, anecdotal evidence suggests a similar proportion for the Irish in the officer corps".¹⁹ If anything, this suggests that the cultural impact of Irish military service in British uniform had become so deeply engrained in Irish society that it continued unabated despite the independence struggle.

- 8 In the case of the RAF, a relatively new branch of the British forces established in 1918, a strong Irish tradition of service can be traced back to its predecessor in the First World War, the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), which was founded in 1912. One of the first Irish wartime pilots to join the early frontline squadrons of the RFC in 1915 was Charles Mackay, who hailed from Aughafin, County Westmeath. Mackay, who had transferred from the British army after having previously served as a platoon commander with an Irish infantry regiment, flew mainly contact patrol, reconnaissance, and bombing missions in numerous campaigns on the Western Front in France. He would become a pioneering figure in the new service, and continued to serve in the post-war successor to the RFC, lecturing at the RAF Staff College at Andover and advising the Air Staff during the inter-war years until his sudden death in 1935.²⁰ Some of the most famous aviators of the wartime RFC were Irishmen, especially the legendary Irish fighter ace, Edward "Mick" Mannock, who achieved the majority of his 61 aerial victories over France and was the top scoring British ace of the war. It is now estimated that over 6,500 Irish had served as airmen in both the RFC and its sister service, the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS), during the war.²¹ In addition, the level of Irish recruitment to the combined air services during the closing months of the war in 1918 reflected an increasing fascination among members of the Irish public with the air war over the Western Front. Some 4,400 candidates were recruited to the RAF in Ireland from 1 June to 15 October, 1918, almost level with recruitment for the British army during the same recruiting period and representing an astonishing 45 per cent

of the total Irish recruitment for the British forces in this duration.²² This surge in Irish recruitment during the third quarter of 1918 is particularly noteworthy; the British government attempted to introduce conscription in April 1918. Bitterly resisted by Irish nationalists through non-compliance and vigorous anti-conscription campaigns, the law was never enforced in Ireland, but, nonetheless, service in the British forces became a tainted issue in the Irish political sphere.²³ The RAF, therefore, proved popular in Ireland at a time when recruitment to the British forces became decidedly unpopular.

- 9 However, despite its popularity, the RAF, like the British army, did not escape the wrath of Irish nationalists after independence. Throughout the inter-war period, the service became a popular choice among young Irishmen, especially during the 1930s, when emigration to Britain from Ireland spiked, with 30,000 Irish emigrants arriving in 1936. According to O'Connor, "the perception of a growing exodus of young people, particularly the middle classes" struck Harold Maguire, a young Trinity College graduate who joined the RAF in 1933 and rose to Air Marshal in the service.²⁴ One young man who was among the flood of Irish migrants to Britain, traveling to London with his family in November 1936, was Brendan Eamon Finucane; he would enlist in the RAF in 1938, eventually becoming the second-highest RAF fighter ace of the war and the youngest ever Wing Commander in RAF to date.²⁵ Another pre-war recruit to the RAF was John Hemingway. In the summer of 1937, he was undecided about what to do with his life upon finishing school:

We used to go to Greystones for three months every year on our holiday, and September 1937, I was sitting in the harbour at Greystones and my father came up to me and said, "what are your plans for the future?" And my answer was, "my plans are to do exactly what you're doing which is absolutely nothing". I didn't use those words, but I meant that. Well, he didn't wholly agree with that, although he did nothing about it.

Later that year, we went over to London and I was given a medical examination and all sorts of examinations, balancing things on so they didn't fall down, that sort of thing, and I was granted a short service commission in the Royal Air Force, which started in March 1938.²⁶

- 10 One of the more unusual developments which aided Irish recruitment to the RAF during the late 1930s was the publication of RAF recruiting adverts in Irish newspapers, together with a wide circulation of British newspapers which printed similar adverts. Indeed, RAF recruiting notices appeared in a number of Irish newspapers, including the *Sunday Independent*, the *Cork Examiner*, and the *Evening Mail* as late as 1939.²⁷ The recruiting notice published in the *Sunday Independent* stated that new unmarried recruits, aged 17½ to 25, who were of good physique and who had passed their school certificate, were “required in large numbers for training and service in the Royal Air Force as Air Observers”.²⁸ These recruiting adverts provoked an irate response from Irish republicans, particularly veterans of the War of Independence. At a meeting of the Old IRA Men’s Association in Cork City, a resolution regarding these advertisements was passed by members of the two city battalions, and after the approval of the committee for the Cork No. 1 Brigade, the secretary wrote to the Irish Prime Minister, Eamon de Valera: “we protest against the insertion of advertisements in our Irish papers, recruiting for the RAF.”²⁹ Although he needed to appease the republican faction of his population, de Valera had to factor in another consideration: the unemployment problem. It had been the policy of the government of de Valera’s predecessor, William T. Cosgrave, which administered the Irish Free State from 1922 to 1932, to permit young Irishmen to enlist in the British forces as a means of alleviating domestic unemployment. At a cabinet meeting held on 2 December, 1930, where the matter of British recruiting activities in the Irish state was discussed, one of Cosgrave’s ministers had been particularly frank on the matter:

If young men, otherwise unemployed, or unemployable, find an outlet for their energies in the British army, I do not feel that we should, in the present economic conditions, endeavour to prevent them. They are better in the British army than in our gaols.³⁰

- 11 De Valera adopted the same policy during the 1930s, especially when economic problems were exacerbated by the Great Depression, followed by a long tariff war with Britain. Upon acceding to power in 1932, his Minister for Industry and Commerce, Sean Lemass, commented drearily that “the late Government was able to solve, partially, its unemployment problem by the annual emigration of 25,000 or

30,000 young people”, but that this course was no longer open due to tough economic conditions abroad.³¹ He had also inherited a difficult brief in a very challenging economic climate, and closing off a well-trodden path to British armed forces recruiting offices would have been both impractical and ill-considered at that time.

- 12 In addition to various the domestic disadvantages, to say nothing of the impracticalities of banning recruitment in Ireland during a time of severe economic hardship, the RAF offered abundant employment opportunities to young Irishmen from the mid-1930s, an aperture which de Valera’s government sorely needed. As part of the rearmament policy of then British Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, introduced in 1935, air defence become a top priority and the RAF underwent a rapid expansion between 1934, when the service numbered some 31,000 officers and men, and 1939, when the RAF reached an actual strength of 118,000, supported by 45,000 in the RAF Volunteer Reserve. The Air Minister, Lord Swinton, aimed to boost the number of short service commissions by attracting entrants from British public schools and a pilot training scheme for serving non-commissioned officers (NCOs). However, many more recruits would be needed to build up a large reserve of trained airmen and an appeal was made to the Dominion countries, with the governments of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa all being asked to contribute men.³² The Irish Free State was not likely to escape Swinton’s attention as a potential recruiting ground, and many incentives were to be offered to all prospective recruits. A gratuity of £75 was given to new recruits upon enlistment, along with promotion to the rank of Sergeant followed from satisfactory completion of training and, after a sound probationary period of 6 months, a salary of 12/6 per day; there was also the opportunity to be “selected for training as Airman Pilots or for advancement to commissioned rank”.³³ In view of the hardships wrought by de Valera’s “economic war” during this period, such incentives must have proved attractive to a large number of young unemployed Irishmen. The RAF was also, quite notably, a popular choice for Catholic recruits, since a strongly Catholic ethos had crept into the service due to a curious predominance of Catholic officers within the Air Staff. Both Catholic traditions and dietary requirements were not only catered for, but made mandatory by high-ranking RAF officers, including the requirement to serve fish with the meals of Fri-

days, something that might have impressed incoming Irish Catholic recruits to the service. This was attested to by Eamonn O'Toole, a Northern Irish Catholic officer and pre-war recruit, who recalled:

the Service always had fish on Friday -always- and everybody had to have it whether they were R.C. [Roman Catholic] or not. And I remember a lot of friends saying: "Pity the Chiefs of the Air Staff are Papists. We always have this bloody fish!"³⁴

- 13 There were also a very significant cultural factors at the heart of recruitment to the RAF which would prove crucial in the Irish case: the first was the importance of education in RAF recruitment. The service sought to "recruit men who could create a distinctive ethos in its officer corps and also meet its technical demands", and due to the stringency of these requirements, it was often necessary for the RAF to recruit a more highly-educated candidate. Whereas British army recruiters were satisfied to accept those with only an elementary education, "the RAF was dependent on Britain's system of secondary and higher education for most of its personnel".³⁵ This point is significant in the case of Irish recruitment. O'Connor notes from his own survey of Irish officers during the inter-war period that:

Irish people who became officers in this period were not representative of independent Ireland; they were an elite and their backgrounds resembled those of English, Scottish and Welsh officers. In recruiting officers the British military authorities were informed by an elitist attitude which dictated that only young men who had been educated in a recognised "public school" had the necessary leadership qualities to become effective officers. The result was that the upper classes dominated the officer corps while the working class and lower middle class were expected to provide "the other ranks", i.e. the private soldiers and non-commissioned officers. This system of officer selection was reformed during the war; however, the majority of wartime Irish officers continued to come from upper middle-class backgrounds.³⁶

- 14 In O'Connor's study, a sample of 1,000 Irish in the British officer corps, it was evident that the majority were Protestant, at least 19 to 20 years old, and tended to come from affluent urban areas and prosperous agricultural backgrounds. A slight majority were boarding

school-educated in Ireland or Britain, and their fathers were quite likely to have been either officers in the British services, both retired and active, and/or they held a middle-class profession, such as medicine, the legal profession, accountancy, engineering or business and finance.³⁷ Two of the Irish RAF airmen featured in this article who fought in the air campaign in the Battle of France, for whom we have detailed biographies drawn from interviews, published accounts and other sources, fit this particular profile. John Hemingway, who served in No. 85 Squadron during the campaign, originated from a very affluent middle-class Protestant family background in south Dublin. He attended a number of private schools, including St Patrick's Cathedral Choir School and St. Andrews College, then located in St. Stephen's Green and Clyde Road, before passing the entrance examination for Dublin University (Trinity College).³⁸ Tim Vigors, who served in No. 222 Squadron providing air cover throughout the Dunkirk evacuation, had also come from a wealthy Anglo-Irish family who were landowners in County Carlow and owned a stud farm in Tipperary. His father served in the First World War, leaving the British army with the rank of Major, and became both a professional horse-breeder and a partner in a well-known London-based stockbroking firm. Vigors, who was born and partly raised in England, was sent to join his brother as boarder in Beaudesert Park School in Gloucestershire before joining the RAF.³⁹

- 15 There were also Irish Catholic officer airmen who, although not coming from wealthy or affluent backgrounds, had been able to obtain a boarding or grammar school level education. Squadron Leader Patrick J.H. Halahan was the son of soldier who served in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers during the First World War and had been educated at Weymouth College, then a well-regarded grammar school, before being accepted for officer training at RAF Cranwell. Known to fellow airmen as "The Bull" due to a blunt bullish nature, he was considered as an exceptional commander and was appointed to lead RAF Fighter Command's elite No. 1 Squadron in April 1939.⁴⁰ Aidan MacCarthy was the son of a well-to-do publican-grocer and property owner in Berehaven, County Cork. He was sent to Clongowes Wood, a Jesuit boarding school in County Kildare, and passed examinations to enter Cork Medical School where he qualified as a doctor in 1938. In an Ireland where all medical appointments were tightly controlled by "local

medical professional nepotism” and positions were few in number, a medical career in the British forces was the only option. Having already emigrated to London in 1939, he met up with two doctors with whom he had qualified, and during the course of a night out all three decided to join the RAF Medical Directorate over a coin toss.⁴¹ Eamonn O’Toole, who had enlisted in the RAF in 1938 and served in a ground crew role in France during the Phoney War and the May 1940 air campaign, was a Northern Irish Catholic from Larne, County Antrim. While not much detail is apparent from his interview concerning family background and education, it was clear that he was well-educated and quite possibly middle-class.⁴² However, not all Irish airmen who served in France had a privileged upbringing or education. John Ignatius Kilmartin, a young, talented Flying Officer in No. 1 Squadron, was born in Dundalk, County Louth. One of eight children, his father died when he was nine years old and he was taken into care. He soon became part of the “Big Brother” programme, which saw many school-age children sent out to Australia. Most boys partaking in this child migration scheme were taught how to farm, and Kilmartin spent five years working on a cattle station in New South Wales. He subsequently lived with an aunt in Shanghai, China, working for two years as a clerk in the Shanghai Gas Works. It was during this period that he saw an opportunity to become an RAF pilot and set out in 1936 on the Trans-Siberian railway with a group of Japanese sumo wrestlers heading for the Berlin Olympics.⁴³

- 16 These six Irish RAF airmen, all of them officers, all pre-war recruits and all remarkable in so many ways, each fitted a particular social profile corresponding to a social strata within Irish society that the British forces, and especially the RAF, absorbed into its ranks. However, just like their fellow Irishmen and women, who enlisted in the British forces during the Second World War despite their country’s neutrality, they were often driven by common motivations to join the RAF. The next section explores this desire to serve in contrast to Irish neutral policy.

2. Wartime RAF recruitment from Éire: motivations, trends and neutral policy

- 17 One of the great myths about Irish neutral policy is the idea that Irish nationals faced a complete ban on service in the British forces; such was not the case. In fact, recent scholarship, unveiling official Irish government memoranda, underlines the fact that recruitment to the British forces was not only state sanctioned, but state sponsored. As we have seen in the previous section, the preceding administration of W. T. Cosgrave had set a clear precedent, which would be followed throughout the 1930s and during the war years, by viewing British military and naval recruiting in the Irish state as an aperture for both the “unemployed and unemployable”, and maintaining a permissive attitude towards such activities.⁴⁴ According to O'Connor, there is an abundance of documentary evidence of the state's support for British recruitment activities in the form of active cooperation in the sharing of information between the Irish police authorities, An Garda Síochána, and officials in all three British armed services ministries in Whitehall, London. The Gardaí often carried out background checks on prospective Irish recruits to the British forces at the request of the War Office, Admiralty and Air Ministry throughout the interwar period, a practice which continued into the Second World War until discontinued in 1941.⁴⁵ Curiously, in 1937 the Irish Department of Defence, a ministry responsible for the administration of the Irish Defence Forces, cooperated with a request from the Air Ministry in relation to a candidate for enlistment in the RAF, William J. O' Hora, formerly a cadet at the Irish Military College, who applied for a short service commission. To fulfil their enquiries, the Air Ministry desired to obtain details of Mr. O'Hora's service record, including reasons for his discharge. The then Secretary to the Department of Defence, Lieutenant-General Peadar MacMahon, referred to his counterpart in the Department of External Affairs, Ireland's foreign ministry, to query whether he should furnish this information; he was advised to comply with the Air Ministry's request.⁴⁶

- 18 With the outbreak of war in September 1939, accompanied by de Valera's declaration of neutrality, it was obvious that certain restrictions would have to be enforced with regard to British recruiting activities in the Irish state. Firstly, a stringent prohibition on the publication of recruiting adverts in Irish newspapers was introduced. This reinforced a pre-existing policy formulated by de Valera's government in response to the aforementioned controversy over the publication of RAF recruiting notices in several Irish newspapers in early 1939. Although this policy had technically applied only to RAF notices, the Department of External Affairs advised that advertisements for recruits for the British army and Royal Navy should be treated similar.⁴⁷ In addition to tackling the dissemination of British recruiting propaganda throughout the state, the government imposed a zero-tolerance policy on the wearing of foreign military uniforms, specifically aimed at Irish servicemen coming home on leave from the British forces. Sir John Maffey, appointed Representative of the United Kingdom to Eire in early September of 1939, held two meetings with de Valera during his first month in post to discuss neutrality and points of cooperation between the two countries. In his second meeting with the Irish Prime Minister, on 20 September, the wearing of uniforms by returning Irish personnel was raised by de Valera:

Recruiting is active here for the British forces. We place no obstacle whatsoever in the way... But you would help us, and help yourselves, if these men did not come into Eire in uniform.⁴⁸

- 19 De Valera requested that the British make arrangements for all British-serving Irish personnel to be provided with civilian clothes at ports such as Holyhead before being allowed to return to Ireland on leave. The British, anxious not to create difficulties that might interfere with the flow of Irish recruits to their forces, acquiesced to de Valera's request; their authorities installed "dumps" of civilian clothes at Holyhead for Irish personnel to change into prior to boarding the ferry home.⁴⁹ One RAF serviceman, Sean Deegan, recalled how the process operated:

If I was in England and coming back on leave now I'd have to go up to London. There was a depot in London that fitted you out with a civil-

ian suit, and you travelled back incognito, and you came back, but you weren't allowed... under no way, you see, would they allow you on the boat in England, or off the boat here, in uniform'.⁵⁰

- 20 The strictness of the Irish authorities in enforcing the uniform ban was apparent to Tim Vigors in the early months of the war. On 23 December 1939, he completed his cadet training at RAF Cranwell and was returning home to his family in Ireland for his Christmas leave in December 1939. Having boarded the night ferry at Holyhead, he arrived in Dublin the following morning and made sure to look inconspicuous:

The next morning I packed my uniform into my suitcase and donned an old tweed jacket before we docked. Ireland was a neutral country and if I had appeared in my RAF uniform, I would have been immediately arrested and interned.⁵¹

- 21 The normal route for prospective Irish recruits to the RAF during wartime was through Northern Ireland, a British jurisdiction and an active recruiting area. Throughout the war, many Irish nationals took the Belfast train from Amiens Street Station in Dublin in order to enlist in one of the three branches of the British forces at the Combined Recruiting Centre on Clifden Street.⁵² This facility in central Belfast would be the focal point for Irish recruitment from both north and south, and in the opening months of war, and at many points throughout the conflict, "recruiting booms" were recorded at this centre, driven, it seems, by large numbers of southern candidates who registered there.⁵³ A total of 71,450 recruits were recorded in all three branches from both jurisdictions by the close of the war; of these, a total of 15,260 men and women from neutral southern Ireland were registered as having joined the RAF between 1940 and 1945. The British army, although remaining the most popular service of choice for Irish recruits, was very nearly outdone by the RAF in the latter years of the war, and only recruited 2,500 more southern Irish nationals than the RAF by 1945, indicating the level of popularity that the service enjoyed in neutral Eire. This surge occurred in the recruiting period August 1943 to August 1944, when more than 5,000 southern Irish recruits enlisted in the RAF; this would be the largest surge of recruitment for any one service from either jurisdiction re-

corded in Northern Ireland during the entire war.⁵⁴ It should be noted that these figures are not inclusive of the number of Irish recruits who joined in Britain during the war, as, unfortunately, these tallies were not maintained in the same manner that they had been in the Northern Ireland Recruiting Area. Although recruits to the RAF in Northern Ireland also included deserting soldiers from the Irish Defence Forces, in spite the Irish government's concerns de Valera made no attempts to seal the Irish border, nor would Irish nationals be banned from travel into the jurisdiction for the purposes of enlisting.⁵⁵

- 22 There are a number of reasons why Irish people chose to join the RAF. My own analysis of oral history testimony taken from a sample of 100 Irish veterans of the war in a study entitled the Volunteers Motivations Database (VMD), examines these motivations in order to provide an indicator of recruiting trends.⁵⁶ By far the largest group of interviewees whose motives are assessed analysed in the VMD, around 40 per cent, joined the RAF, and 14 per cent who were ex-RAF, cited their family tradition as a reason for joining this service.⁵⁷ Many Irish ex-RAF, about 13 per cent, had also indicated that a strong desire for adventure was a potent motivator for enlistment in this particular service. Another 13 per cent indicated an ideological motivation, and 12 per cent stated that they enlisted because they had peers, whether school friends, sports team mates or personal acquaintances who joined up, and this, in turn, had inspired a personal decision to enlist in the service.⁵⁸ This latter per centage highlights a social aspect to voluntary enlistment, where Irish youths often succumbed to a form of peer pressure and enlisted because young friends and acquaintances from their school, or neighbourhood, were joining up. David Fitzpatrick addresses the influence of "group affiliations and collective pressures", observing that these might take on such forms as "communal patriotism, local traditions of soldiering, or prior enlistment of comrades from one's school, club or workplace"; he makes the case that an interpretation, or examination, of these factors is potentially advantageous to our understanding of recruiting trends.⁵⁹ Some had pragmatic reasons for joining the RAF. One "fairly pragmatic reason", observed by Richard Doherty in discussing the enlistment of Eric Dunlop in the RAF, was that Dunlop considered it to be better to join "a service where you either survived intact or were

written off". Dunlop felt that the army was not his "cup of tea" and he also thought that there was "too much of a chance of being terribly injured, whereas he believed that in the RAF it was a case of either 'being okay, or you were just a cypher and that was the end of it'".⁶⁰ The same is observed by David Robertson, who notes that pupils of Wilson's Hospital School, a Protestant boarding school west of Dublin, appeared to favour the RAF over the Army and the Royal Navy; out of a total enrolment, 66 per cent of past pupils enlisted in the RAF. Robertson's interpretation of this statistic is that the "thought of a repetition of the horrors of the trenches must have directed many towards the Royal Air Force".⁶¹

- 23 By far the most interesting point on the study of motivations and cultural factors which inspired Irish people to join the RAF is the role of "air literature". O'Connor argues that such material played a highly significant role in prompting young Irishmen to enlist in this service, and cites the example given by Raymond Finucane, brother of Brendan Finucane, who himself became an RAF fighter pilot. Both brothers were particularly inspired by the Irish fighter ace, Mick Mannock, and loved reading books about First World War air aces, trying to read "every book that we could possibly get our hands on".⁶² Irish fighter pilots such as Mark Downey had held lofty expectations prior to joining the RAF, quite possibly inspired by similar tales of daredevil aces from the Great War: "I had this concept that I was going to be a bloody ace pilot, you know, we all thought that."⁶³ Some were also fond of the "Biggles books" written by W. E. Johns, including Arthur Dennison, who had joined the RAF in 1936 and who cited the reading of such literature as his probable motive for joining.⁶⁴ Literature such of this had an extremely popular appeal in Britain and beyond, and independent Ireland was no exception. Among those who cited it as reason for choosing the RAF was Tim Vigors; he had developed an interest in flying before the war, and managed to take flying lessons at Bristol airport in the 1930s. During his first introduction to a Hornet, he remembered: "from my constant reading of Biggles books and many others on aeroplanes I knew all about aircraft controls".⁶⁵ It is clear from his account, along with some limited evidence given in the testimonies of other pre-war and wartime RAF recruits, that a love of flying and an interest in flying for the RAF was a powerful motive which propelled many young Irishmen into the

ranks of the RAF, and many “linked their desire to fly to adventure fiction and early encounters with aircraft”.⁶⁶ However, for those Irish who served in the RAF during the Battle of France, the early romanticism which had attracted them to the service was very rapidly smashed in the course of the May-June 1940 air campaign.

3. The experiences of Irish airmen during the Battle of France

24 For the small cohort of Irish RAF airmen who experienced it, the air campaign during the Battle of France was far removed from the stories they had read in Biggles books. Eamonn O'Toole best sums up the experience of the RAF in France after the Phoney War in one sentence: “the whole bloody German army proceeded by the *Luftwaffe* knocked the shit out of us and we had no option but to flee.”⁶⁷ Irish airmen, whether serving on the ground, or fighting in the air, were caught in the maelstrom of war for the first time alongside their British colleagues, and forced to adapt quickly to a constantly evolving scenario of defeat and withdrawal, with the position of their forces rapidly deteriorating with every passing day. John Hemingway, who was serving with No. 85 Squadron at Lille-Seclin aerodrome on 10 May 1940, always remembered the day he first shot down an enemy aircraft. It was the same day that during an early morning briefing in the mess, Squadron Leader Johnnie Hill, a twenty seven-year-old Ops Room officer told the men of the squadron that “the thing was blowing up now -the Germans were getting ready to attack and the thing would be no longer a phoney war”.⁶⁸ German aircraft frequently strayed into French airspace in the preceding months, but there was no denying that the *Luftwaffe* had arrived in force when a large formation of German aircraft flew over the aerodrome just after 04:00 hours on the morning of 10 May. The heavy drone of the apparently innumerable enemy aircraft roaring overhead was broken by the steady drumming rhythm of light and heavy anti-aircraft guns around the airfield. This, according to the squadron's Operational Record Book, was the commencement of *Blitzkrieg*. Minutes later, two sections, taken respectively from both “A” and “B” Flights of the squadron, had taken off to intercept the raiders. In the course of forty minutes, both sections returned to the airfield at Seclin, landing to

re-fuel and re-arm, having completely emptied their ammunition boxes. During that first sortie, both sections claimed four enemy aircraft between them, including three Henschels (a German reconnaissance plane) and one Heinkel 111K bomber.⁶⁹

- 25 Hemingway flew with the section of “B” Flight which took off that morning. It would be the first of four sorties he would fly that day, one of which would produce his first “kill” of the war:

On 10th May I flew 4 sorties from Lille -4 hours flying, patrolling the Louvin-Hasselt area in Belgium- at about 12000 feet... I saw nothing on sorties 1,2 and 4 on the 10th May. But on No. 3, I sighted a small formation of Heinkels 111s flying in 3 vics of 3 aircraft in line astern. This was an ideal formation to attack, or so it seemed to me, so I dived down, settled behind the leading Heinkel of the vic, and opened fire, in my innocence, sure that the Heinkels on either side of me could not fire at me for fear of hitting each other. It immediately seemed to me that no-one was firing back. I could see no tracer, and I had not been hit as I half expected. Strange to say, I pulled up and away immediately, but only momentarily. I dived straight back again and emptied my guns into the same aircraft, which faltered and crashed.⁷⁰

- 26 After he had fired on the Heinkel He 111 aircraft, a thought occurred to Hemingway which he later related:

And then a terrifying thought struck me: had we really started a fighting war, and should I really be shooting at German aircraft? All the signs were wrong; the Heinkels were flying east, not west. We were over Belgium, not France, and no-one seemed to be shooting at me... should I be shooting at them?⁷¹

- 27 Hemingway's combat report detailing the incident highlights the manner in which the aircraft was intercepted and brought down. Hemingway manoeuvred right behind the Heinkel aircraft, bringing it into close range with his Hurricane, and had “opened fire at 250 yards and closed to 50 yards”, firing three bursts at the aircraft while he closed in. He reported that he was “so close that my engine had been covered in Enemy Oil”.⁷²

- 28 This tactic of getting in close to enemy aircraft was first developed by the Irish squadron commander of No. 1 Squadron, Squadron Leader “Bull” Halahan. He was among the first RAF airmen to discover that the gun convergence on Hurricane fighters was incorrectly harmonized at 400 yards; the first pilots to engage German aircraft discovered that it was almost impossible to inflict any effective damage using the British .303 round at a range greater than 250 yards.⁷³ This was one of the reasons why his squadron proved to be one of the most effective front-line fighter squadrons that the RAF had in France. Halahan’s best pilot in No. 1 Squadron, Irishman “Killy” Kilmartin, was already close to achieving “ace status” prior to the German offensive on 10 May. The 26-year-old had gained a promotion to Flying Officer by distinguished himself in air combat by shooting down a Dornier Do 17 bomber on 23 November 1939, a Messerschmitt Me 109 fighter on 2 April 1940 and a Heinkel He 111 bomber on 20 April 1940.⁷⁴ Kilmartin’s tally from 10 May until 19 May was beyond exceptional: he was an ace by the 11 May, having claimed two Messerschmitt Me 110 fighters on that day, together with a shared kill on a Do 17 on the previous day. In the nine days of combat the No. 1 Squadron saw, he claimed 10 enemy aircraft destroyed, including five fighters and five bombers, plus two shared kills and another two unconfirmed kills.⁷⁵ After 19 May, Kilmartin was withdrawn from front line service with No 1, and along with a selection of five other senior and experienced members of the squadron, was ordered back to Britain to serve as flight instructors on Operational Training Units (OTU’s) “so that their valuable combat experience could be passed on to the next generation of fighter pilots”. “Bull” Halahan would also relinquish command of No. 1 squadron and returned to home to serve as an instructor on 5 Operational Training Unit.⁷⁶
- 29 Hemingway’s record in the Battle of France was not as distinguished, partly due to the fact that he was missing in action for three days after being shot down on 11 May, the day after he had claimed his first kill. During his third sortie on the 11th, while attacking a Fieseler Storch spotter aircraft at low level to the west of the River Mass, his Hurricane was hit by enemy anti-aircraft fire and he was forced to crash land in field in Belgium. He was picked up by a British army scout car, whose occupants did not believe him when he told them that the German army had crossed the River Mass and were pro-

gressing westwards. He did not remember much about those three days, except his first night with British army medics and the experience of joining Belgian refugees on country roads as they fled towards Brussels:

I remember having to make my own way on foot among the refugees for parts of the journey. My uniform, although torn and soaked in oil etc, was still easily recognisable, so I was welcomed as I progressed westwards -with my parachute over my shoulder. I do not remember when I slept, or where I slept, or ate except on one occasion when I gobbled up a bowl of Stew from an enormous black cooking pot at a cross roads, containing every conceivable vegetable and animal that could be dug up or caught in the surrounding fields- it was delicious. Three days after being shot down I remember standing for hours and hours on a bridge in Brussels, waiting for a black Citroen to collect me. Eventually the care turned up and drove me as far as Lille. Where a squadron van met me, and I completed my journey, arriving at Seclin late 14th May.⁷⁷

- 30 When John arrived at Lille-Seclin aerodrome on 14 May, a different scene greeted him from what he remembered when took off on the 11th:

Because I was missing, all my stuff had been gathered and put in a bag in the equipment section and the equipment section had been blown up by bombing and things like that, but strangely enough, we still operated from, but the place was completely bombed and a lot of the pilots were no longer, they weren't there, they'd been killed or prisoners, or shot down and I didn't recognise a great number of the pilots and because so many aeroplanes had been shot -destroyed- I think 19 altogether were destroyed during our ten days there. All this was very unfamiliar to me, as were many of the faces (replacements) and the dearth of expected faces -casualties- the worse of any squadron at that time.⁷⁸

- 31 Hemingway's logbook shows that he flew another four operational sorties on 15 and 16 May, but he had no recollection of these. Much of No. 85 Squadron's fighter aircraft were destroyed during the ten days between 10 and 20 May. Even despite "terrible conditions and heavy losses -85 Squadron was the worst hit during the phoney war", the squadron continued to function with effectiveness and success.⁷⁹

However, a number of the pilots, including Hemingway, were already suffering from extreme exhaustion by 18 May; Hemingway, along with other surviving members of the squadron, were soon relieved of duty and sent home to rest.⁸⁰

32 Hemingway's experiences of fleeing a German advance within crowds of refugees were shared by Aidan MacCarthy who, at short notice, had been placed in command of an advance column of RAF support staff rushing into Belgium to support the British advance. When this advance became a rout, MacCarthy's column retreated back into France with instructions to be evacuated from Boulogne. On their journey they went through the town of St. Pol, which was "choked with refugees... there were also French soldiers everywhere, mostly drunk, and looting was in full swing".⁸¹ While leading the convoy to Boulogne, at one point they found themselves driving alongside German panzers on a parallel road that was 2 miles distant. When MacCarthy eventually arrived at the Boulogne docks, he was informed that priority was given to soldiers. Since his men were non-combatant personnel (his convoy carried RAF ground staff, including technicians and fitters) they were ushered out of the docks area by British military authorities and told to make their way to Dunkirk. MacCarthy spent three days on the beach under constant air attack and described the events there in the starkest terms: "the whole thing was a dreadful experience in that some men were crying, some praying, some singing, some completely silent and everybody terrified".⁸² MacCarthy and his men were ordered to dig foxholes and stayed in these supplied with food, water and cigarettes. On the third day, just as their supplies began to run out and their nerves were at breaking point, they were ordered to queue at what MacCarthy described as "a thousand foot jetty to the west of the harbour". There they would board a vessel previously used for the Stranraer-Larne ferry service, and were then evacuated to Britain.⁸³

33 One of the greatest myths of the Second World War was that the RAF did not do enough to protect British soldiers trapped in the Dunkirk salient or to support the Royal Navy warships which were sent to evacuate them. From 27 May, the second day of "Operation Dynamo", the operation to evacuate the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) from the beaches of Dunkirk, the RAF began a campaign to beat off *Luftwaffe* air attacks on British vessels crossing the English Channel

to lift BEF troops from the beaches or load them aboard at the Mole. Fighter Command committed 16 front line fighter squadrons to the fray to provide continuous air cover throughout the evacuation. On that first day alone, 287 fighter sorties were flown over the approaches to the port.⁸⁴ Among the pilots who helped to provide air cover from the first day of the evacuation was Tim Vigors, flying in No. 222 Squadron from RAF Hornchurch. Led by a future legendary Battle of Britain ace, Douglas Bader, Vigors flew more than a dozen sorties over the salient in a Mk I Spitfire, claiming an Me 109 as his first kill on 30 May.⁸⁵ John Hemingway would also take part in the air operations over Dunkirk, having quickly returned to active duty after being rested. He was posted to No. 253 Squadron, and flew from RAF Kenley and Hawkinge. As it happened, Hemingway's uncle, an army Major from Belfast in the 2nd Royal Ulster Rifles, was among the British soldiers waiting on the beaches near Dunkirk, while his nephew was flying fighter cover overhead to protect the naval evacuation force.⁸⁶ Indeed, the BEF was composed of many Irish infantry battalions with territorial affiliations to Northern Ireland, including well-known Irish regiments such as the 2nd Royal Ulster Rifles, the 2nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, the 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers, along with a cavalry battalion, the 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards, as well as three Northern Irish anti-aircraft and searchlight regiments. Had it not been for RAF air cover, these units, along with a large portion of the BEF, might well have been lost at Dunkirk; thus, thousands of Irish personnel serving in Irish regiments and supporting units, along with many more unknown numbers of Irish soldiers serving with other units of the BEF, may have been either killed or captured by the German army.⁸⁷ This sobering possibility bears testament to the personal relevance of the key events which occurred in France during May and June of 1940 to the people of Ireland, both north and south, whether they were directly involved in the conflict or removed from it as a consequence of living in a neutral state.

Conclusion

- 34 Writing many years later, an older and wiser, but nonetheless considerably experienced Group Captain Hemingway remarked: "I never regarded myself as a history maker, as it were, where every move would eventually have a subject for deep and prolonged interest and

study”.⁸⁸ His comment is typical of the understated attitude which many Irish veterans of the Second World War chose to regard their service. Whether this was to do with the complex nature of their own personal or national identity, or because of a prevailing spirit of the age where talking of one’s war experiences or sharing reminiscences of war was considered taboo for cultural and political reasons, Irish veterans were reticent about speaking or writing about their war experiences. For this reason, few accounts of the service of Irish personnel in the Battle of France exist today. It is, however, important to note that in the course of the past decade, the role of Irish personnel in the two world wars has become a topic of growing national significance in the Republic of Ireland for many reasons. During the early part of the last decade, a major controversy erupted concerning the pardoning of members of the Irish Defence Forces who were harshly treated by the Irish authorities over their decision to desert to join the British forces, including the RAF. In June 2012, the then Irish Minister for Justice and Defence, Mr. Alan Shatter, announced to the Irish parliament, Dáil Éireann, that his government were “committed to issuing an apology for the manner in which those members of the Defence Forces who left to join the Allied side during World War II... were treated by the State”.⁸⁹ This was soon followed by the introduction of an instrument which provided an amnesty to all Irish soldiers convicted of desertion during the war. This bill, which granted an amnesty to the deserters in May 2013, also acknowledged that these Irish deserters had “contributed in no small part to the allied victory against tyranny and totalitarianism” and that their treatment by the state after the war had been “unduly harsh”.⁹⁰ This *volte face* in the Irish government’s position on the legacy of both Irish neutrality and the role of the Irish volunteers who fought for the Allied cause had a significant precedent.

35 In April 1995, Irish Prime Minister, John Bruton, addressed a gathering which included representatives of major political parties, both unionist and nationalist, from across the island at the reopening of the National War Memorial Gardens at Islandbridge. There he delivered an emotional and unprecedented tribute to 150,000 Irish people who “volunteered to fight against Nazi tyranny in Europe, at least 10,000 of whom were killed while serving in British uniforms”. Brian Girvin notes that Bruton would shed light on “a little-known as-

pect of Irish involvement in the Second World War”, albeit a controversial one, because for the majority of the post-war period “the Irish state and popular nationalist opinion ignored the contribution of the volunteers or even questioned the motives of those who left to fight”.⁹¹ An explanation for this reticence in commemorating the volunteers can be found in the manner in which the commemoration of the First World War was regarded in the state until recent decades. According to Heather Jones and Edward Madigan, the dominance of the memory of the Irish revolutionary period in both “popular and official consciousness” in Irish society meant that the story of Irish service in the British military was “rarely regarded with esteem and the memory of Irish soldiers of the Great War became increasingly obscure and peripheral as the century wore on”. However, it is clear that the “advent of the centenaries of the conflict has enhanced this process” and popular interest in the Irish experience during the First World War, resulting in an explosion of newly-published scholarship, has “rescued the Catholic nationalist soldier from historical obscurity”.⁹² Moving away from the traditional Irish nationalist aloofness towards the Ireland’s role in both conflicts is not merely fashionable or historiographically significant, but a decisive strategic step for the Republic of Ireland in terms of both maintaining and enhancing positive relations with Britain and furthering the aims of the Northern Ireland peace process. A tertiary objective of ongoing engagement with the complex history of Ireland’s participation in the world war has also been the improvement of Irish relations with European partners. In this regard, interest shown by the French government in promoting this history, notably by providing a gift to Ireland of a First World War memorial in 2016, underlines the diplomatic and cultural significance of Ireland’s military tradition in the eyes of other nations.⁹³ Moreover, the participation of Irish personnel in the defence of France in 1940, including RAF volunteers from neutral Ireland, in many ways demonstrates the importance of Irish military tradition in the modern era. Exactly what purpose the Irish state may assign to this forgotten history in the national interest remains to be seen.

NOTES

- 1 “Paul Farnes, last Battle of Britain ace, dies aged 101”, *The Times*, 29 January 2020.
- 2 “Irishman is now sole survivor of Winston Churchill’s second World War ‘Few’”, *The Irish Times*, 10 May 2020.
- 3 Simon Heffer, a well-known British journalist, author and political commentator for the *Daily Telegraph*, has remarked on the unique vantage-point that Group Captain John Hemingway holds as the last Battle of Britain veteran concerning the myth and reality of Britain’s role in the Second World War. See “The last of the few: the future of the Battle of Britain”, *New Statesman*, 12 August 2020.
- 4 During Prime Minister’s Questions in the House of Commons in July 2020, when asked by Mr. Robert Courts, M.P. (Member of Parliament) for Witney, whether “the Prime Minister had given some thought to how we might recognise Group Captain John Hemingway not for himself, but as the final representative of the few”, the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, gave a brief and evasive response to the question. Johnson stated that he would “think about what we can do”, but ultimately informed Mr. Courts that such a question was a matter for “honours committees, which are independent of Government” and suggested that Courts make representations to these bodies on Hemingway’s behalf. To date, there is no evidence in the public record to suggest that Group Captain Hemingway has yet been offered any form of honour by the British Crown. See *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, Prime Minister, Vol. 678, Wednesday, 15 July 2020: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-07-15/debates/908810CD-251A-4012-A761-F71F9510FCAD/PrimeMinister> [Accessed: 11 April, 2021].
- 5 The author served as an advisor to the staff of His Excellency, Mr. Jean-Pierre Thebault, Ambassador of France to Ireland, from 2014 to 2017. In this period, some twelve Irish veterans of the conflict were awarded the *Légion d’honneur*, four of which received it on the recommendation of the author. “Irish second World War veteran given France’s highest honour”, *The Irish Times*, 8 December 2014; “Irish veteran of D-Day gets France’s highest military honour”, *The Irish Times*, 26 January 2015; “France’s *Légion d’Honneur* for Second World War veteran Sir John Leslie”, *The Irish Times*, 10 November

2015; “Irish hero honours Paris victims upon receiving the *Légion d’Honneur*”, *The Irish Times*, 24 November 2015.

6 In this article, the author wishes to acknowledge the work of Dr. Steven O’Connor, *Maître de conférences en Civilisation britannique* at Sorbonne University, who has published relevant work on this topic within a French scholarly publication, *Études Irlandaises*. See S. O’Connor, “Why did they fight for Britain? Irish recruits to the British forces, 1939–45”, *Études Irlandaises*, 40/1 (2015), 59–70.

7 These records are available in digitized form through the Discovery catalogue on the website of the UK National Archives, Kew, London, referred to hereafter abbreviated in this article as TNA.

8 T. Bartlett and K. Jeffery, “An Irish military tradition?”, in T. Bartlett and K. Jeffery (eds.) *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.

9 M. Scannell, “The position of Irish Catholics in the Officer Corps of the British Army: 1829–1899”, PhD Thesis, NUI Galway, 2018, 21–3.

10 R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1900–1972* (London: Allen Lane, 1988), 151.

11 A. Jackson, *Ireland, 1798–1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11.

12 C. McDonnell, “A ‘Fair Chance’? The Catholic Irish Brigade in the British Service, 1793–1798”, *War in History*, 23/2 (2016), 150–151.

13 C. McDonnell, “‘Zeal and Patriotism’: Forging Identity in the Irish Militia, 1793–1802”, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 42/2 (June 2019), 211.

14 E.M. Spiers, “Army organisation and society in the nineteenth century”, in Bartlett and Jeffery, *A Military History of Ireland*, *op. cit.*, 335–7.

15 M. Scannell, “The position of Irish Catholics in the Officer Corps of the British Army”, *op. cit.*, 58.

16 D. Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands, 1912–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 54.

17 T. Bowman, W. Butler & M. Wheatley, *The Disparity of Sacrifice: Irish Recruitment to the British Armed Forces, 1914–1918* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 9, 14 & 177–84. See also: S. Sandford, *Neither Unionist nor Nationalist: The 10th (Irish) Division in the Great War 1914–1918* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2014), 52.

18 According to the late Professor Keith Jeffery, almost 22,000 Irish service personnel were registered as serving in the British army during the Anglo-

Irish War, or War of Independence, from 1919 to 1921. This figure, which comprised 7.8 per cent of the total, would have included new recruits and re-enlisted soldiers, and no evidence of any mass exodus of Irish personnel from the armed forces in protest at the violence in Ireland is evident. See K. Jeffery, "The British army and Ireland", in Bartlett and Jeffery, *A Military History of Ireland*, *op. cit.*, 431-32.

19 O'Connor, "Why did they fight for Britain?", *op. cit.*, 61.

20 Mackay's story was conveyed to the author in 2016 by Marcus Clements, Lord Leitrim, within a short 12-page transcript of a lecture delivered by him about his war service: "War Experiences", C. J. Mackay, Squadron Leader, 22 September 1924. See also: J. Quinn, "An Irishman's Diary on Charles Mackay -pioneering RAF officer was eyewitness to 1916 Rising and fought in War of Independence", *The Irish Times*, 9 January 2017.

21 This figure has been compiled by Joe Gleeson. See J. Gleeson, *Irish Aces of the RFC and the RAF in the First World War: The Lives Behind the Legends* (Stroud: Fonthill Media, 2015), 2-3.

22 *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, Vol. 110, Col. 900-1, Thursday 24 October 1918: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1918-10-24/debate/s/642e22e4-ced2-47ef-87ef-b14dd8bd1914/CommonsChamber> [Accessed: 11 April, 2021].

23 Bowman, Butler & Wheatley, *The Disparity of Sacrifice*, *op. cit.*, 159-160. For more on the Irish conscription crisis of 1918, see A. J. Ward, "Lloyd George and the 1918 Irish Conscription Crisis", *The Historical Journal*, 17/1 (Mar. 1974), 107-129.

24 S. O'Connor, *Irish Officers in the British Forces, 1922-45* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 19.

25 D. Stokes, *Paddy Finucane: Fighter Ace* (London: Crécy, 1983), 24.

26 Interview with John Allman Hemingway, *Zampano Productions*, Martin Dwan & Joseph Quinn, March 2011.

27 The following is taken from the National Archives of Ireland (NAI), Department of the Taoiseach (DT) files, S series. NAI DT S6091, Note for the Minister's Information (Minister for External Affairs), 8 March 1939.

28 NAI DT S6091, Extract from *Sunday Independent*, 26 February 1939.

29 NAI DT S6091, Resolution of Cumann na Sean Oglac: Old I.R.A. Men's Association (Cork No. 1 Brigade) sent to Eamon de Valera, Taoiseach, 22 Feb. 1939.

- 30 NAI DT S6091/A, Extract from Cabinet Minutes, 2 Dec. 1930.
- 31 C. O'Grada, *Ireland: A New Economic History 1780-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 379.
- 32 P. Bishop, *Fighter Boys: Saving Britain, 1940* (London: Penguin, 2004), 45.
- 33 NAI DT S6091, Extract from Sunday Independent, 26 February 1939.
- 34 Eamonn O'Toole's interview forms part of a collection of 57 interviews which were recorded from 1995 until the early 2000s. These are held by one of the project coordinators, Professor Geoffrey Roberts, at University College Cork, and are catalogued within the "University College Cork Volunteers Project Archives" (UCCVPA). UCCVPA A5, Eamonn O'Toole.
- 35 T. Mansell, "Flying start: educational and social factors in the recruitment of pilots of the Royal Air Force in the interwar years", in *History of Education*, 26/1, 71.
- 36 O'Connor, "Why did they fight for Britain?", *op. cit.*, 61.
- 37 *Ibid*; see also O'Connor, *Irish Officers in the British Forces*, *op. cit.*, 15-29.
- 38 Interview with John Allman Hemingway, Zampano Productions, Martin Dwan & Joseph Quinn, March 2011.
- 39 T. Vigors, *Life's Too Short to Cry: The Compelling Story of a Battle of Britain Ace* (London: Grub Street, 2007), 17-22.
- 40 P. Caygill, *In All Things First: No.1 Squadron at War 1939-45* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2009), 11.
- 41 A. MacCarthy, *A Doctor's War* (London: Robson, 1979), 11-12; for more on Irish medical emigration and enlistment in the British forces, see Chapter 4 in O'Connor, *Irish Officers in the British Forces*, *op. cit.*, 83-107.
- 42 Cited in Steven O'Connor, "Irish identity and integration within the British armed forces, 1939-45", *Irish Historical Studies* 155/39 (2015), 421-2. Eamonn O'Toole's interview forms part of a collection of 57 interviews which were recorded from 1995 until the early 2000s. These are held by one of the project coordinators, Professor Geoffrey Roberts, at University College Cork, and are catalogued within the "University College Cork Volunteers Project Archives" (UCCVPA). UCCVPA A5, Eamonn O'Toole.
- 43 Caygill, *In All Things First*, *op. cit.*, 22-23.
- 44 The first person to produce a detailed island-wide study of recruitment in Ireland during the Second World War was a Masters student named Liam

Canny who attended Queens University Belfast in 1994-95. See L. Canny, "Recruiting in the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland for the British Armed Forces during the 1939-1945 War", MA Thesis, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, 1995, 16.

45 The author has conducted a great deal of research on this topic which is, as yet, unpublished. See O'Connor, *Irish Officers in the British Forces*, *op. cit.*, 162.

46 The following is from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) files, 241 series. NAI DFA 241/2, Letter from J. P. Walshe to Lieutenant-General Peadar MacMahon, 23 Oct. 1937.

47 NAI DT S6091, Note for the Minister's Information (Minister for External Affairs), 8 March 1939.

48 The following is taken from The National Archives (TNA), Kew, London. Prime Minister's Office (PREM) files. TNA PREM 1/340, Memorandum by Sir John Maffey to Anthony Eden, 24 Sept. 1939.

49 R. Fisk, *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster and the price of Neutrality* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1983), 111-12.

50 The following is taken from the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (IWM SA). IWM SA 25513/3, Brother Columbinus "Sean" Deegan.

51 Vigors, *Life's Too Short to Cry*, *op. cit.*, 87.

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53 P. Ollerenshaw, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War: Politics, Economic Mobilisation and Society, 1939-45* (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 2013), 162.

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RÉSUMÉS

English

This article seeks to address a considerable gap in knowledge and scholarship on Irish service personnel in the Royal Air Force, and to highlight their role and service in France during the brief conflict phase of 1940. It focuses upon a small group of six Irish RAF officers who served in the air campaign during the Battle of France. By utilizing an admittedly limited number of primary sources available, including oral history testimonies, published accounts and supporting archival documents, the article provides a lens by which to examine the recruitment and service of Irish officer personnel in the RAF throughout the late 1930s and the early years of the Second World War. A key aim of the article is to trace the historical antecedents of Irish service in this, the world's first independent air force, and how a lengthy tradition of British-serving Irish officers adapted to this new form of martial service. The article also addresses key questions, such as who neutral Ireland's RAF volunteers were, why they decided to join the British forces and, most importantly, why they selected the RAF as their chosen service, and how many of these recruits enlisted in the Northern Ireland Recruitment Area over the duration of the war. It will briefly examine the context of voluntary Irish service in British uniform, from a political, social, cultural and economic standpoint, and will discuss the ways in which such military service was accepted by the Irish government in spite of neutral policy. Lastly, this article provides a brief narrative of Irish service in the RAF throughout the Battle of France from the perspective of five Irish airmen. By utilizing excerpts from oral history interviews and published accounts, alongside RAF Combat Reports and squadron Operational Record Books held at the UK National Archives in London, it is possible to deliver a narrative account of the service of Irish RAF personnel in France during May-June 1940, and highlight the role played by Irish airmen in this historic air campaign.

Français

Cet article vise à combler une lacune considérable dans les connaissances et les études sur les militaires irlandais de la *Royal Air Force*, et à mettre en lumière leur rôle et leur mission en France pendant la brève phase de conflit de 1940. Il se concentre sur un petit groupe de six officiers irlandais de la RAF qui ont participé à la campagne aérienne pendant la bataille de France. En utilisant un nombre certes limité de sources primaires disponibles, y compris des témoignages d'histoire orale, des comptes rendus publiés et des documents d'archives, l'article fournit une lentille permettant d'examiner le recrutement et les missions du personnel officier irlandais dans la RAF à la fin des années 1930 et au début de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. L'un des principaux objectifs de l'article est de retracer les antécédents historiques du recrutement d'officiers irlandais dans cette première force aérienne indépendante au monde, et de voir comment une longue tradition d'officiers irlandais de service britannique s'est adaptée à cette nouvelle forme de service martial. L'article aborde également des questions clés, telles que l'identité des volontaires irlandais neutres de la RAF, les raisons pour lesquelles ils ont décidé de rejoindre les forces britanniques et, surtout, pourquoi ils ont choisi la RAF comme service, et combien de ces recrues se sont enrôlées dans la zone de recrutement d'Irlande du Nord pendant la durée de la guerre. Il examinera brièvement le contexte du service volontaire irlandais sous l'uniforme britannique, d'un point de vue politique, social, culturel et économique, et discutera des façons dont ce service militaire a été accepté par le gouvernement irlandais en dépit de la politique de neutralité. Enfin, cet article présente un bref récit du service irlandais dans la RAF tout au long de la bataille de France du point de vue de cinq aviateurs irlandais. En utilisant des extraits d'entretiens d'histoire orale et de récits publiés, ainsi que les rapports de combat de la RAF et les registres opérationnels des escadrons conservés aux Archives nationales britanniques à Londres, il est possible de fournir un compte rendu du rôle du personnel irlandais de la RAF en France en mai-juin 1940, et de souligner le poids des aviateurs irlandais dans cette campagne aérienne historique.

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Mots-clés

Irlande neutre (Éire), État libre d'Irlande, Seconde Guerre mondiale, volontaires, aviateurs, forces britanniques, armée britannique, Royal Air Force (RAF)

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