



*Archaeologists value human remains for all they can tell about the past, but the issues now provoke strong debate. In the UK this mostly concerns ancient bones or recent people from far away. World War II fatalities are different, raising awkward questions for archaeologists, collectors and government. In the first of two provocative pieces, Vince Holyoak looks back to the last war fought in British skies*

Breakfast, Friday 6 September 1940. Cathode ray displays at RAF radar stations on England's south coast begin to fill with returns as Luftwaffe aircraft jockey into position over northern France. By 8.40 Observer Corps posts can actually see the enemy formations approaching. Six squadrons of Spitfires and Hurricanes are scrambled. Taking off from Middle Wallop in Hampshire, bucking and weaving as they climb furiously with throttles wide open, the Spitfires of 234 Squadron are guided south-east. Inside the aircraft, sweating despite the chill of altitude, pilots scan the horizon. Over the Sussex coast, the Spitfires suddenly find themselves engaged by Messerschmitt 109s. For the next 30 minutes a desperate struggle takes place, eventually stretching from Beachy Head to Romney in Kent, that ends only when ammunition and fuel are expended.

Pilot Officer William 'Scotty' Gordon of Banffshire, aged 20, never returned to Middle Wallop. His Spitfire X4036 was hit almost immediately, burying itself in Hadlow Down, East Sussex. An RAF recovery team probed the smoking crater, collected any salvage, made the area good and recovered Gordon's remains.

On the same day a further 17 British fighters and six aircrew were lost: almost 3,000 British and German aircraft were destroyed over and around the UK in the Battle of Britain alone. By the end of the war, after the arrival of the US Army Air Forces in 1942, the total had risen to over 11,000. Some 100,000 aircrew had been killed.

The death of Scotty Gordon, then, was unremarkable for the time. What did excite the press, however, 63 years after Gordon was buried in Mortlach churchyard watched by his parents and two sisters, was the discovery of more human remains.

Having searched unsuccessfully in 1974, on 31 May 2003 aviation archaeologists found not only the plane, but also tattered pieces of uniform and human bone. Few familiar with the air war were surprised. Recovery teams—often civilian contractors, lacking equipment and time—worked under intense pressure in the face of unrelenting aircraft losses. High speed crashes, often accompanied by fire or explosions, hindered identification of bodies.

The law stipulated that 7 lb (3 kg) was needed to establish a body. The common belief that coffins were weighted to appear full may have been all too true. Though not widely reported, small pieces of bone can be found today at plane crash sites, even when aircrew have graves. Take the Spitfire excavated for *Time Team* in France. Pilot Flight Sergeant Klipsch had been buried nearby: but it was euphemistically remarked in a magazine article about the dig that it was obvious somebody had died.