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# Air Umbrella Without a Puncture

By Squadron Leader H. E. Bates

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On the morning of June 5, as Rome's fall was celebrated and hailed throughout the Allied world, a most momentous conference was being held on an airfield in southern England. To that airfield just four years before had come the first blitzing Nazi bombers, bringing to black ruins its hangars and buildings in preparations for the much-boasted invasion of England. From that airfield for four years had gone out thousands of Allied aircraft to raid, police, and blitz the northern coast of Europe in return. Now, on the fourth anniversary of Dunkerque, its pilots were gathered together to be briefed for the greatest comeback of all time. "Now, at last," said the station commander, "I can offer you the party you have waited for. Tomorrow is not only D-Day; it is your day."

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The day broke blue and bright with that hard radiance that in England tells of a sky soon to be brushed with broken summer cloud. The first squadrons—the toughest of the Canadians—were off the airfield at 6:30, their candy-striped Spitfires flashing black and white in the still, clear air. They were off on the greatest task of their lives—to keep the air over the beaches and the peninsula of Cherbourg clear of enemy fighters. They expected and hoped to meet the most fanatical fighting resistance there, and hoped to smash it as no air defense had ever been smashed before. The swift angry purpose of those dawn Spitfires reflected all the day's tremendous implications.

Back for breakfast two hours later, these Canadians brought an astonishing report. They brought news of boats filling the little shore bays of France like excited beetles, of cruisers bombing the coast, of troops pushing their way inland. What they did not bring was news of a single German aircraft flying over these assaulted beaches. No Messerschmitt, no Focke-Wulf, no Junkers had pushed up its nose into that June air for one second. Squadron after squadron of covering Allied fighters flew over the beaches pulsating with assault, in a calm air where no shot was fired. On the day of the greatest challenge of all, the German Air Force had refused fight.

By midday, the Allied air umbrella was wide open and taut and untouched even by so much as a pin prick of attack all over the wide and deepening beaches. Canadians flew over Le Havre at no more than 400 feet and saw nothing that would have frightened a bumble bee. Le Havre had gained for itself—like Brest and other northern French ports—a reputation for unkindliness in defending itself. Today hundreds of Allied fighters flew above it as safely as if every one of its guns had been spiked during the night. By mid-afternoon other squadrons were back from the great battle area. With every fresh sortie it was hoped that the story would change, that the pilots would begin to bring back the news that at last the Luftwaffe had come up to defend itself, its soldiers, and its much-boasted Atlantic Wall.

By 3 o'clock a hot sun shone through vast lakes between white clouds. But still squadron after squadron returned in perfect band-box formation, fast, neat, sure, and always with the same story—no Messerschmitts, no Focke-Wulfs, no Luftwaffe.

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The general report of the wing commanders had an unbelievable carelessness: "No, I guess they are not putting anything up. We flew in and looked around but there was nothing. Assault troops were putting hospitals up, and casualty clearing stations and supply dumps, but Jerry was not there."

Time will show where Jerry was and what he will do to counter this attack of 10,000 planes, these fighter squadrons of Britons, Americans, Canadians, Poles, and other Allies. Whatever it shows, it cannot alter this simple fact: that in those first hours during that first cloudy, warm day in June when every fighter pilot in Britain hoped for

the greatest air clash of all time, there was no Luftwaffe in the summer sky.

History may explain that astonishing fact. It cannot alter it. On that bright June morning the sky was completely ours. To see squadrons of fighters coming back from the beaches with their guns not fired, their emergency fuel tanks not dumped, was to witness an incredible triumph.

For those of us who saw it could remember and were, indeed, remembering the days when squadrons of enemy aircraft flew over this same countryside in another dazzling June. We could remember how the Luftwaffe had sought to screech the whole of southern England with a fighter umbrella beneath which Junkers and Heinkels could blast to ruins airfields and towns of an England soon to be invaded. We could remember how that air umbrella was never for a moment allowed to spread itself intact, how it was assaulted, punctured, and ripped until at last it was taken away. Now we are holding the umbrella—a vast higher and more powerful umbrella than has ever been seen in the air. We are holding it and no one from the vast occupied territory of Europe was sending against it so much as a gnat in reply. This incredible state of things continued throughout that first memorable and astounding day. And we knew, indeed, because of it that it was Our Day.