



Spitfire pilot remembers

by Peter Ricketts

He sits in a quiet corner of Olton Golf Club, a gentle soul of 97 years, the epitome of a man at peace with the world.

But it was very different 75 years ago. The old man with snowy white hair, Ken Wilkinson, was then a 22-year-old Spitfire pilot who, along with his comrades, was engaged in a pivotal struggle in World War 2, fighting off hordes of Nazi raiders in the Battle of Britain.

While many of his friends died, Ken survived to tell the tale and went on to become a prominent figure in Worcestershire Freemasonry. And as one of only a handful of those brave young men still living, he has for the past ten years or so played a leading role in the Battle of Britain annual service of thanksgiving and many other occasions dedicated to the victory that undoubtedly

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foiled German plans to invade our island. Such fame has brought him into close contact with members of the Royal Family, among them Prince Philip, Prince



THEN: Ken Wilkinson in his RAF days

Charles (“he’s a great guy; what he does for this country is astounding”), Camille (“we always talk about red wine”), and the Duchess of Wessex (“she asked me to call her Sophie, so I did”).

This year’s service of thanksgiving is special, being the 75th anniversary. It takes place at Westminster Abbey on Sunday, September 20 – and Ken will be there, having been picked up from his home in Solihull and whisked off to London.

The Abbey service is only one of a whole series of events that weekend linked to the Battle of Britain.

Ken said: “There’s a posh lunch at Petwood in Lincolnshire and a big do at Northolt for those of us who are left when an enormous gaggle of aircraft will do a fly-past. There’s also the AGM of the Battle of Britain Fighter Association, then there’s a Battle of Britain Memorial Flight at Coningsby – I’m due to speak there. It’s all I can do to keep up with it all.”

At the Abbey, Ken will act as one of the escorts as the RAF Colours and the RAF roll of honour of those who died in the Battle of Britain are presented. With him will be two other survivors. “There used to be six of us,” said Ken, “but now we are down to three.”

He still has vivid memories of those perilous days when young men took to the skies not knowing if they would make it back.

“Every day we’d be up at 4am to wait for the alert. Then we would run like hell to our planes. I saw friends fall out of the sky, aircraft go up in flames. It was terrible. I was one of the lucky ones.

“I don’t think the younger generations know how close we came to being a suburb of Berlin.”

Back in civilian life after the war, Ken became a quantity surveyor. Sadly his wife Josephine died in 1979 and, a Freemason since 1960, the Craft became one of the rocks to which Ken clung as he filled the lonely hours. He still belongs to his mother lodge – Frankley Beeches 5846 at Kings Heath – and is their Chaplain. He has held high rank in many other Orders and this year earned that most meritorious honour, a 31 degree Mason.

Despite his 97 years, his mind is still sharp – witness his very active membership of the Birmingham and Edgbaston Debating Society. Golf he has had to give up but we met at Olton Golf Club because Ken is a past captain there. He lives close by in Solihull where his daughter Penny keeps an eye on him.



IN THE NEXT SOURCE

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