

The Letter



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Written for children aged 7+

A young man wakes up suddenly. Weak sunshine is streaming in through the covered windows. Opening his curtains, he sees green hills and fields, a small village nestled by the river. This is England, autumn 1940.

The young man frowns. You wouldn't think this beautiful country had been at war all summer, a battle raging in its skies with an enemy intent on defeating, invading and occupying England.



The letter is where he left it on his bedside table the night before. He picks it up and reads the words on the cover:

To my son, Gordon

Gordon Mitchell snatches the envelope from the bedside table and rips it open. Now he reads:

"My dear Gordon,

Happy Birthday. Today, my son, you are a man. I wish I could be with you today, to see your smile, to shake your hand. But that cannot be and there's nothing we can do to change it. This letter is all I can offer instead.

First, I must wish you well on this, your twenty-first birthday and hope you live to see many happy returns.

Second, I will deal with the one question of yours that I never really answered. When you were a boy of five or six you would ask what did I do in the Great War of 1914 to 1918. You badgered me about why I did not go to fight in the trenches, on the seas, or in the air. I could tell, very well, that you were disappointed I had stayed safe at home in England, as other men fought bravely overseas, too many giving their lives for our country. This is my chance to explain myself to you.

Do you remember when you were 13 years old?

It was 1933. We were listening to the wireless one evening after I had returned from the Supermarine Factory. We heard more worrying news: Adolf Hitler was making trouble in Germany. After dinner you and I spoke about it. And I clearly remember you saying that, once that dreadful man had finished making trouble in Germany, he would come to make trouble in other countries too. Like here, in England. And soon,

you added. I remember thinking that you were so wise for your age. To imagine what it took years for other men to anticipate.

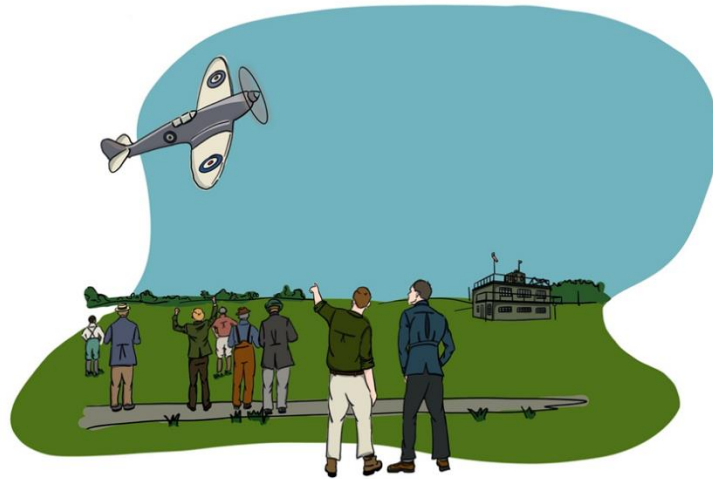
Around that time I was given permission to redouble my efforts on a new aircraft at the Supermarine factory. Gordon, I took your wise words with me. I knew that the Type 300, the aircraft that I was working on, had to be a better fighter plane than anything we had ever had before. To defend England from the Germans you so feared.

Your words 'and soon' gave me urgency. And – of course, as you well know – I was ill. That gave me urgency too. There was only so much time to play with.

Unlike Adolf Hitler, I had no great ego. And I did not think that my way was the only way. So, I set about learning from other designers, other engineers who were creating aircraft all around the world. From the USA, I learned about monocoque, the way an aircraft's wings can be made of a fine metal skin. I researched the way the Canadians were developing elliptical wings, creating speed and agility in aircraft, the like of which had never been seen before. Just by changing the shape of the wing tips! Then – in Paris, at the Aero Show in 1934 – I saw the German Heinkel HE 70. Up close and under the noses of the Nazis, who were boasting of their superior technical abilities. Like a magpie, I took their ideas and raced home to England.

I remember coming back from France and drawing the Heinkel's wings to show you what I would do with my Type 300. You told me that you thought it was wrong to use someone else's idea, even a German's and that it was cheating. And I told you ... Do you remember? I told you that the only way that science and technology can advance is to build on other people's ideas; their successes and their failures.

In 1936 – two years on – Germany was even more terrifying. A European war seemed inevitable. To you and me, at least. You were 16 and the Type 300 was ready. All those months of research and experimentation, trial and error, and you stood with me at RAF Martlesham Heath as we – and all the top bods from the Royal Air Force – came to see what the prototype of the Type 300 could do.



Do you remember how, when it lifted off from the airfield, it looked too lightweight, not like a machine that could gun down and out-maneuvre any other aircraft in the history of aviation. But persevered with our watching and saw that it did exactly what I had designed it to do. Up and down. Round and round. The faces of the officials gaped in awe.

When the Type 300 touched down it had been recorded doing 349 miles an hour. An astonishing feat. Before we had a chance to find a pot of tea to celebrate, the RAF chaps came over and ordered 310 of the Type 300. There and then! It was unheard of! And, at that moment, I saw you look at me and there was something in your eyes.

Were you proud of me, Gordon?

If you were, I want you to remember that moment. Because now I can give you the answer to your question about what I did in the Great War.

I was taken on as an apprentice at an aircraft firm as war raged in France. I worked all day at the factory, then every evening I went to night school to learn about aircraft, about engineering, how to make experiments and learn by using other people's ideas to develop my own, by trying and failing, over and over again, until I failed less and less and became the man who designed the Type 300.

During that time, I did – in fact – try to volunteer to fight in the trenches. Twice, indeed. I felt guilty, sensed that I wasn't a real man if I didn't; go to war.

But I was refused. Both times. The authorities told me that I was needed as an engineer. They did not want me in the Army, the Navy or the Flying Corps. I remember my teacher at the night school told me 'There is more than one way to prove that you are a man, Reginald.'

So, Gordon, here is my answer to your unanswered question that you asked as a boy. Now you are a man you need to know that the reason I did not go to war was that I had to be an engineer and had to build the Type 300.

Who knows if it will be enough to keep the Nazis away from our fine country? I hope so. Whatever happens, I just wish they'd given the aircraft a better name. I mean... what an absurd name for an aeroplane!

Spitfire.

Happy 21st Birthday son. I wish I could have seen you grow to become a man. But that was not to be.

Your loving father,

Reginald Mitchell

June, 1937."



Photograph of R.J Mitchell

Gordon Mitchell stares out of the window watching soft white clouds in the bright blue skies above England. Those skies are quiet. That Battle of Britain has been won.

His mind takes up the story that his father was unable to tell: he remembers what happened next in 1937. How his father's illness overcame him. Quickly. Less than a year after the RAF ordered his Type 300s, he was dead and Gordon was a seventeen-year-old boy without a father. Gordon remembers, too, how, on his death bed, his father had handed him this letter.

'Open it on your 21st birthday,' he'd croaked.

Tom Palmer is proud to be the RAF Museum's Children's Author in Residence. He has written several First and Second World War children's books, including the Wings series that he wrote with the help of the RAF Museum, featuring stories about the Sopwith Camel, Spitfire and Typhoon.