



Dear Reader,

Welcome to the November edition of my Special Operations Newsletter.

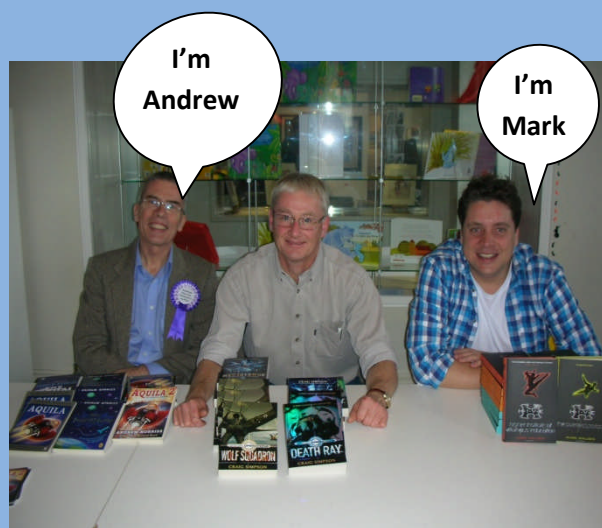


Fact can sometimes be stranger than fiction!

History is full of amazing and bizarre true stories. Read on to find out the part played by these chaps in helping RAF Fighter Command win the Battle of Britain.

But first, the latest news.....

Last month I reported on my appearance at the Wessex Children's Lit Festival (held at Winchester's Discovery Centre) alongside fellow authors Andrew Norriss and Mark Walden. I've since heard that the festival proved a real success with a host of top children's writers attracting a total audience of over **9,200** enthusiastic children and families. Feedback was brilliant and the organisers (Anne Marley, Outreach & School Library Service Manager, Hampshire, and her dedicated team) should be congratulated for all their hard work – let's hope it's run again next year!



Fingers on the Buzzers....

On the 23rd November I was at Warblington School in Havant for the Southern Regional Heat of the famous International Kids Lit Quiz. It was a tight contest with Portsmouth High School triumphant after ten tough rounds. Taking part for fun, the authors team, comprising myself, James Riordan and Candy Gourlay, did OK (I think we came joint third). Candy's first children's book, *Tall Story*, has been nominated for the prestigious Carnegie Medal, so good luck to her for that.

Then, on the 30th November, the UK finals of the quiz were held in Oxford's Town Hall. Despite the terrible weather all but two teams made it in time, along with teachers, parents,



family and friends. Also there were over thirty authors, including Julia Golding, Tim Bowler, M. G. Harris and Echo Freer. The organisers 'paired' two authors with each of the 15 teams for official photos etc. Ann Evans and I were given my local team (Hooray!) of Portsmouth High, and we wished 'our' team comprising Alisha, Maddy, Georgina and Genevieve 'good luck'.

Special Guest Speaker was Charlie Higson (Best known for his TV work and for his Young James Bond series of books) who single-handedly recreated a well-known comedy sketch on stage based on the 'Mastermind' TV quiz, and first performed by that famous comedy duo The Two Ronnies. The quiz comprised five rounds of fourteen questions on topics from 'Authors' and 'Myths and Legends' to 'Openings'. It was fastest finger on the buzzer as our 'Quiz Master', New Zealander Wayne Mills, pictured below in his famous 'hat' read out his craftily constructed questions comprising a series of clues that gradually got easier. Many times, however, he'd barely begun before the air was filled with loud a *bzzzzzzzz*.



Charlie Higson



The lead changed hands frequently as the quiz unfolded. Glasgow High School and Litcham High School tied for third place and in a 'best of three' tiebreaker Litcham grabbed third spot 2-1. First and second places were also tied (Bristol Grammar and Cockermouth School). In a nail-biting finale, Cockermouth prevailed 2-1 in the tiebreaker to take this year's UK title. Receiving their prize, however, was far from the best bit. As UK champions they qualify for the World Finals and

as these will take place in New Zealand, the lucky four are off on a trip of a lifetime.

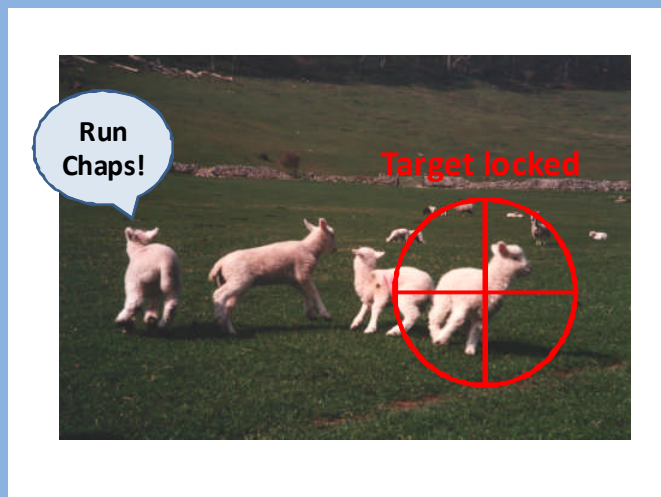
Amazingly, so are the runners-up, Bristol Grammar. As the quiz is celebrating its 20th Anniversary it's been decided that the runners-up can take part in New Zealand too! If you'd like to take part in next year's quiz talk to your school librarian. Teams of four from years 7&8 can take part and more information is available at www.kidslitquiz.com (Note: Next year's World Finals will also be in New Zealand, so it's really worth having a go).



Strange but true.....

During November I was also invited to give a talk at Guildford Grammar School's *History Society* – with special emphasis on the story behind my book *Death Ray*. The school has been in existence for 500 years and my talk was held in the historic 'Big School' hall. I relished the chance to tell a really bizarre but true story that helped us win WWII. I gave my talk the title: ***Death Ray: Fact or Fiction.***

Here's a taster.....Long ago, in the 1930s, there were rumours flying about that a Death Ray had been invented which could blast aircraft out of the sky, or melt their fuselages, or incapacitate flight crews. Many such claims were investigated and the supposed 'inventors' exposed as being complete nutters. But the claims persisted and so Britain's Air Ministry Research tried to get to the bottom of it all once and for all. They held a competition, offering £1000 Prize to anyone who could demonstrate a Death Ray (Back then £1000 was a lot of money – you could buy a house with it!). The test was simple they'd provide a field full of sheep and anyone who could *Zap* them would win the money (no kidding!).



Thankfully (for the sheep) no one came forward. Nevertheless the head of Air Ministry Research continued to wonder..... What if? He posed the question to a friend called Robert Watson-Watt who was working at the National Physics Laboratory. He passed the problem to his assistant 'Skip' Wilkins who calculated that in theory a death ray could work but was beyond current technical capabilities.

Nevertheless, they had an idea to test

the theory in principle by seeing if they could detect radio waves bouncing off of an aircraft. In a historic experiment using the BBC radio transmitter at Daventry, they succeeded in measuring the reflected radio waves – it was the first demonstration of 'RDF' or Radio Detection Finding. Today we call it RADAR! That was in 1935, and by the outbreak of WWII in 1939 Britain had a chain of 20 radar stations defending our coast. It was an amazing achievement. Without radar our famous 'few' Spitfire and Hurricane pilots wouldn't have had such an effective early warning system of approaching enemy aircraft. It is possible the outcome of the Battle of Britain would have been different. If the Luftwaffe had gained control of the skies, the invasion of Britain (Operation Sealion) would have been given the green light and, well, maybe the war would have turned out very differently. My talk was really well attended and my thanks to Chris Eldridge and Tamsin Farthing for giving me such a warm welcome.

That's it for now..... except to say that if you've missed previous newsletters I've put them on my website for you to download, together with Part 2 of my SOE briefings which is all about secret wartime codes.

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