

How Air Combat Changed Roald Dahl

As an adult rereading Roald Dahl's works, such as *James and the Giant Peach*, *Matilda*, or *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, you may be surprised by just how dark they can be at times even though they're written for children. Dahl certainly had a knack for writing about the macabre or darker sides of life, as his adult-oriented literature would show. As for where some of that ability came from, one wonders how much it was influenced by his experiences in World War II (1939-1945).

Dahl started flying Gloster Gladiators, a dated fighter plane at the beginning of World War II. It was in this plane that he actually crashed and nearly perished. From *The Telegraph*, we find this [account](#):

"It was not bravery, Dahl later noted, simply a 'tendency to remain conscious' that saved him from being burned to death. 'All I wanted was to get away from the tremendous heat and rest in peace. The world about me was divided sharply down the middle into two halves. Both these halves were pitch black, but one was scorching hot and the other was not.' In terrible pain, Dahl crawled slowly away from the burning wreckage. But he was not yet out of danger:

'My face hurt most. I slowly put a hand up to feel it. It was very sticky. My nose didn't seem to be there. I tried to feel my teeth to see if they were still there, but it seemed as though one or two were missing. And then the machine guns started off. I knew right away what it was. There were about 50 rounds of ammunition left in each of my eight guns and, without thinking, I had crawled away from the fire out in front of the machine, and they were going off in the heat. I could hear them hitting the sand and stones all round, but I didn't feel like getting up and moving right then, so I dozed

off.'”

He was rescued and patched up. But during his recover, he went through an incredibly difficult period, afflicted with blindness and the general pain resulting from his wounds, that he credits with inspiring him to write:

“For Dahl, it was a time of existential crisis. For almost a month he inhabited a hazy world of total darkness, uncertain of time or surroundings. Concussed, blind and isolated from family and friends, he was disoriented and helpless. His imagination ran wild. It was a situation he recreated in an early short story, *Beware of the Dog*.

‘A monumental bash on the head’ was how Dahl once described this accident in the Western Desert, claiming that it directly led to his becoming a writer. This was not just because his first published piece of writing was a semi-fictionalised account of the crash, but also because he suspected that the brain injuries which he received there had materially altered his personality and inclined him to creative writing.

His daughter Ophelia recalled her father’s fascination with tales of people who had experienced dramatic psychological and physiological changes – such as losing or recovering sight – after suffering a blow to the head. He also told her that he was convinced something of this sort had happened to him...”

Upon recovering, Dahl was upgraded to a Hawker Hurricane fighter plane in the British failed effort against the Germans in Greece in 1941. Here’s how he recalls that combat:

“Over Athens on that morning, I can remember seeing our tight little formation of Hurricanes all peeling away and disappearing among the swarms of enemy aircraft. They came from above and they came from behind and they made frontal attacks from dead ahead, and I threw my Hurricane around as best I could and whenever a Hun came into my sights, I pressed the button. It was truly the most breathless and in a way the

most exhilarating time I have ever had in my life. I caught glimpses of planes with black smoke pouring from their engines. I saw the bright red flashes coming from the wings of the Messerschmitts as they fired their guns, and once I saw a man whose Hurricane was in flames climb calmly out onto a wing and jump off..."

According to *Flight: 100 Years of Aviation*, upon landing at his airstrip "Dahl found he was perspiring so heavily the sweat was dripping to the ground, and his hand was shaking so much he couldn't light a cigarette."

Not long after his combat experiences in Greece, Dahl began experiencing severe headaches that lead him to blackout – a likely sign of combat stress. He was then considered an invalid and shipped back to Britain to recover. Later during the war, he would be appointed to represent the British at their embassy in Washington, D.C.

While a short period in Roald Dahl's life, there is no doubt that his flying, the crash, and air combat thoroughly changed him. If you're wondering where some of the darker sides of his writing come from, they may very well have been heavily influenced by his experiences noted above. As is often the case, the great authors seem to be souls deeply scarred by life, able to transform and convey their experiences through their writing in magnificent ways that resonate with broad audiences.

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