

Local Chelmsford hero, **Wing Commander Wilf Sizer**, who died on December 22 aged 86, served as a fighter pilot during four major campaigns.

Wilfred Max Sizer was born in Chelmsford on February 23 1920 and educated here at King Edward VI Grammar School. In March 1938 he joined the RAF on a short service commission. After completing his pilot training he joined No 17 Squadron, flying the Gauntlet biplane, but soon transferred to No 213.

After flying Hurricanes during the fall of France and the withdrawal from Dunkirk, he was in action throughout the Battle of Britain. He flew during the north-west African campaign before leading his squadron of Spitfires in the invasion of Sicily.

Sizer had joined No 213 Squadron during the days of the biplane fighters and had become an accomplished fighter pilot by the time the squadron was re-equipped with the Hurricane.

Within days of the German invasion of France on May 10 1940, the Hurricane squadrons of the Air Component in France had suffered heavy losses; the eight aircraft in Sizer's flight were sent to Merville as reinforcements on May 17.

He was immediately in action, and within three days he had shared in the destruction of four enemy aircraft and had damaged a fifth. On his final patrol on May 21 he was attacked and shot down by five enemy fighters, forcing him to crash land near La Panne.

He sustained facial injuries when his head hit the Hurricane's gun sight, but swam across a canal to reach friendly territory, had his wounds dressed and returned to his unit. He was back in the air two days later.

With the Germans advancing, No 213 was withdrawn to Biggin Hill, from where it flew constant patrols over the French coast during the evacuation from Dunkirk. On May 28 German fighters engaged the squadron, Sizer shooting down a Messerschmitt Bf 109.

The following day he attacked a Heinkel III, which was starting its bombing run over the beaches. With its engine ablaze, the bomber turned away.

Three days later the squadron was involved in a fierce dogfight with German fighters escorting a bomber formation preparing to bomb the evacuation convoys. Sizer attacked a Bf 109, which he shot down before he was attacked from behind. He managed to damage another Bf 109, but was heavily outnumbered, and his Hurricane was hit and set on fire. He managed to crash land just south of Dunkirk.

Sizer took the parachute from his wrecked aircraft, but left it in the sidecar of a motorcycle that had come to his aid. Realising that it was missing, he returned to retrieve it (as the squadron's parachute officer, he had often exhorted his colleagues to rescue the precious item in the event of a crash).

Clutching his parachute, he was about to board a destroyer in Dunkirk harbour when a beach-master ordered him to leave and join a Clyde paddle steamer, the Plynlimon.

As the steamer was setting off, a swarm of Stuka dive-bombers attacked the destroyer, and a direct hit ripped it apart.

Sizer returned to No 213 to discover that he was one of five squadron pilots posted as missing from the morning's fighting. Following his experiences on the Plynlimon, he never forgot the role played by the "little ships" during the evacuation from Dunkirk.

At the start of the Battle of Britain the squadron was based at Exeter. By the second week of August the German attacks over southern England had intensified. On August 11 No 213 intercepted a large raid on Weymouth and Sizer shot down a Junkers 88 bomber.

On the following day the squadron engaged a large force of bombers heading for Portland; Sizer shot down one of the escorting fighters. He and his fellow pilots flew three or four patrols each day as the attacks intensified, and on August 15 Sizer shot down two Stukas over Portland.

Although in constant action throughout the battle, Sizer's next success did not come until early October, when he and his wingman destroyed a Junkers bomber over Beachy Head. Shortly afterwards he was awarded the DFC, having shot down seven aircraft and shared in the destruction of five others.

Sizer instructed new pilots in fighter tactics until April 1942, when he joined No 152 Squadron, equipped with Spitfires, and left for North Africa five months later. During the advance through Algeria towards Tunis he flew sweeps and bomber escort sorties, damaging three enemy fighters. In January 1943 he was promoted to squadron leader and given command of No 93 Squadron.

The squadron flew ground attack sorties until the defeat of the Axis forces in Tunis, after which it moved to Malta to prepare for the invasion of Sicily.

At dawn on July 10 1943 Sizer was leading his squadron as it patrolled over the beaches of southern Sicily. Flying as his number two was Raymond Baxter, who would later become a well-known television personality.

In his autobiography, Baxter described Sizer as "an outstanding character and fighter leader, [who] commanded my unqualified respect, admiration and affection — he saved my life at least twice and I'd have followed that man anywhere."

Over the next few days Sizer led his squadron on many patrols, shooting down two Italian fighters and damaging at least five other enemy aircraft. Returning after one engagement, he had to make a wheels-up landing after his Spitfire had been hit. At the end of the month he was rested after a year's constant action and was awarded a Bar to his DFC.

Sizer remained in the Middle East, first as a fighter instructor and then in command of No 680 (Photo-reconnaissance) Squadron in the Canal Zone. In 1946 he left the RAF, but rejoined two years later.

He became a flying instructor and later assumed command of No 54 Squadron in 1953, flying Meteor jet fighters before converting to the new supersonic fighter, the Hunter.

After service at the Air Ministry, he spent two years in Hong Kong before returning to the Air Ministry in 1961, retiring two years later to join Marconi Radar. Sizer worked for the company in the Middle East, before finally retiring in 1985.

As a young man Sizer had been a keen sportsman, representing the RAF at boxing and at hockey. He was a conscientious member of the Battle of Britain Fighter Pilots' Association.

Wilf Sizer married, in 1942, "Nita" Humphreys, who survives him with their three sons, five grandchildren and two great grandchildren.. His son Nigel Sizer remembered him with fondness: "He was a very unassuming and modest man. He saw everything he did as just his job, but he was a hero - everyone in the RAF was."