

# Offscreen hero

*As the RAF celebrates its 75th birthday, Bernard Josephs meets the remarkable Ken (Klaus) Adam*

**A**s you enter the study of Ken Adam's Knightsbridge house, your eye is caught by two objects. Both represent high points of his life.

On his desk is the Oscar he won for his work on Stanley Kubrick's 1973 film, "Barry Lyndon," and, proudly positioned on the top of a filing cabinet is a model of a Typhoon fighter, the aircraft in which he and his RAF comrades wreaked havoc during the Second World War.

Adam today is the epitome of a Hollywood bigwig. His London home is complemented by another in Malibu. He shares both with his Italian wife, Letizia. He chain-

Mementoes of a high-flyer — Ken Adam in 1944 and, below, as he is today, an Oscar-winning movie man



sary of the Royal Air Force, an event which was really a great moment of his life.



Manou. He shares both with his Italian wife, Letizia. He chain-smokes huge Cuban cigars and has about him the heady aura of success.

As one of the film industry's top art directors, Adam has designed the sets and chosen the locations for a string of smash-hit movies including seven James Bond films — among them such classics as "Dr No," "Goldfinger" and "Diamonds Are Forever" — "Around the World in Eighty Days," "The Ipcress File," "Dr Strangelove," "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" and "Pennies From Heaven."

Surrounded by framed Oscar nominations and British Academy Awards, he practically purrs with pleasure when considering his film career. But lately it has been the glorious past rather than the glamorous present that has been occupying his mind.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Royal Air Force, an event celebrated in a book of recollections by Max Arthur, entitled "There Shall Be Wings," in which Ken Adam's exploits are recorded, among others. The book has refreshed memories, some of them quite horrific, of his wartime days as a fighter pilot with the RAF's famed 609 squadron.

He leafs through the green exercise book that was once his pilot's log book and points to a neatly written entry, partly underlined in red:

"Woody crashed into houses, exploding. Damn bad luck." Very Biggles. Very British.

"It does read like a caricature," he admits. And yet Ken Adam is a German-born Jew. He still retains traces of the accent that marked him out as a far-from-typical RAF air ace.

"Reading it now, it seems incredibly cold. But the fact is that most of

us were really scared most of the time. And this way of describing events and treating the war as a kind of rugby game was an effort to disguise real emotions."

Adam, who came to Britain in 1934 with his parents and two brothers, had flying in his blood. He was born Klaus Hugo, to an assimilated Jewish family in Berlin. His father, a wealthy and much-decorated cavalry officer who considered himself a true Prussian, had sponsored the first German pilots crossing the Atlantic east to west.

"Though we were Jews," recalls the man whose many credits include such biblical epics as "Sodom and Gomorrah" and "King David," "there is no doubt I felt German first and foremost."

His father's illusions ended in 1934 when he was arrested by the Gestapo. A family friend, who was a member of the SS, arranged his release and the family fled to Britain. "My father died a year later," says Adam. "He was a destroyed human being."

After attending St Paul's School in London, Ken/Klaus trained as an architect at University College. Then, with war clouds gathering, he made several unsuccessful attempts to join the volunteer University Air Squadron.

In 1940, by which time he was working for the War Office as a design engineer on the Bofors Gun, his employers intervened to prevent his being interned as an enemy alien. He eventually managed to join the Pioneer Corps.

"All the time," he recalls, "I kept firing off applications to join the RAF. And then suddenly they accepted me. I don't know why — I was flirting with the unit commander's daughter and he was probably pleased to get rid of me."

Training in Canada and the United States was followed, in 1943, with a posting to 609 squadron at Lympne, in Kent, where his German background earned him the nickname Heinie.

Adam's first taste of combat was nearly his last. His aircraft had not been fitted with long-range tanks but, feeling gung ho, he took off anyway. Short of fuel, he radioed his commander. "He was furious," Adam remembers. "He told me to go back to the base. Three minutes later he was dead. The squadron was attacked by American fighters who mistook us for Germans."

The 609 squadron's place in RAF history was secured when its Typhoons became the first warplanes to be fitted with air-to-ground rockets. Ken Adam and his comrades dived on enemy tank concentrations and other ground targets at speeds of over 500 miles an hour, before releasing their missiles. The effect was devastating, but so was the cost.

"We always attracted a terrible barrage of flak," says Adam, chewing

thoughtfully on his cigar. "We took terrible casualties."

Adam's log-book does not reflect the horror. A crash is described as a "beautiful prang." High losses are a "hell of a shambles." Such detachment was an aid to resilience, he claims. But fear was ever present:

"I was always very, very scared and I was aware that, as a German and a Jew, if I bailed out and was captured that would be the end of me."

I never expected to survive. I knew the chances were against me, and I was determined not to be captured alive. No one wanted to admit they were frightened and some managed to hide it. I had a friend, an Australian, who always volunteered for the most dangerous assignments and always appeared to be unafraid. I thought of him as a kind of superman. Finally he was killed."

The men of the squadron were flying close support missions for the Army and advanced almost to the front line. It was then that Adam saw at first hand the devastating effect of air power.

"The smell of death was everywhere," he recalls. "Everything was rubble. To see all those bodies was terrible. I have never forgotten it."

He ended the war in Germany and visited his family home in Berlin. "There was nothing left but a doorway," he says. "I met some neighbours, including a family who were anti-Nazi and had spent the war hiding from the Gestapo in the forest. They were starving and I gave them some of my rations."

He learned that relatives had been killed in the Holocaust. "At least I was able to fight back," he reflects. "It may sound strange, but I would not have missed my part in the war for anything. I don't live in the past like some of the old comrades I have met at reunions. But I truly believe that those days were this country's greatest times."

"There Shall Be Wings" by Max Arthur is published by Hodder & Stoughton at £18.99. Ken Adam's latest film is "The Addams' Family Values," for which he was the production designer.

