

Our Finest Hour

The Brief

The RAF Museum, Hendon were looking to enhance their static Battle of Britain display and create an experience for audiences of up to 60 people. The current displays and programmes were colourless and lacked emotion; what was needed was a show that would bring all the vibrant history of this epic battle to life.

It was intended that the audience would be seated, and the show would take place around the actual aircraft housed within the 36m x 45m Battle of Britain Hall.

Sarner impressed Keith Blumire, Marketing Manager at the Museum, with its innovative and exciting approach to the brief. He explained:

"Sarner's presentation was by far the most dramatic and theatrical. It captivated our imagination whilst simultaneously providing a clear explanation of how the project would evolve and be managed.

RAF Museum
Hendon



Original Second World War aircraft were dramatically brought back to life

We were also impressed that they challenged our brief, taking their solutions one step further. As a result, we were not only sold on the creative ideas, but also felt confident to invest in these exciting and progressive concepts, with the full support of our veterans."

The Realisation

On first seeing the location, Michael Bennett, Sarner's Creative Director realised to do justice to the scale of the environment, there would need to be some inventive, design concepts.

Once the museum confirmed that Sarner was to be retained to create 'Our Finest Hour', the Sarner team got to work developing visuals, the script and a scale model - whilst all along working closely with RAF advisors on the storyline. The show was to be created against the background of the actual World War II aircraft including a Spitfire, Hurricane, Heinkel, Junkers and a Messerschmit - in fact, the ME-109E was moved into its new position specifically to add to the show backdrop.

An early visual concept to be included was that the audience should view the whole show through a huge transition gauze, which in addition to its scenic paint effect would also be used for stills projection at the opening of the show. The next dramatic reveal would be a barrage balloon which would also be used for the main show video projection soft edged into the balloon scenic treatment.



LEFT: A Heinkel bomber with the London skyline
 MIDDLE: The London Blitz scene
 BOTTOM: The transition gauze appears

Once the scenic elements had been designed, crucial elements in creating the whole multi-sensory experience would be the technical sound and lighting design. The audience on raked seating would be enveloped by enhanced digital sound. It was critical to design an audio system that would operate effectively at extremely low bass frequencies, and be intelligible through the mid-range and high-range frequencies - so as to include the sounds of bombs, aircraft engines and other effects; the spoken word and music.

The lighting design which would reveal the scenes as the story progressed, needed a skillful scheme to cope with the size and scale of location, and the theatrical demands of the director. For example, a key requirement was for the painted image on the huge transition gauze to disappear completely during the main reveals of the show.

The Experience

The show "Our Finest Hour" is a 14 minute dramatic recreation that re-lives the events of the Summer of 1940 over the skies of southern England and the Battle of Britain. As the audience is seated, in front of them the gauze is illuminated, the lights dim and the show starts; slides are projected onto the gauze, the music is kept low merely hinting at the drama to unfold.





On a musical crescendo the arresting sight of the huge barrage balloon is revealed. The projected images, which are initially video rostrum, appear on the balloon. From behind the audience a voice shouts "scramble", this is the cue for the images to jump to live action and we hear the mighty sounds of the aircraft engines firing up. The lighting changes to dramatically reveal the aircraft in the auditorium. With the various elements revealed, the drama unfolds theatrically using the different levels of projection, audio, scenics and lighting.

The audience is then swept up in all the drama and fear of the Battle of Britain; the air battle is further enhanced by using a sequence from the MGM motion picture in full colour, accompanied by a rousing music track composed by Ron Goodwin. Through this sequence the aircraft in the auditorium come to life, bringing the audience even closer to the drama.

As we move towards the final chapter of the story, the experience has one more trick up its sleeve. Just when the audience thought they had witnessed all the venue has to offer, the ominous drone of formations of bombers flying overhead leads to the back wall of the venue exploding into action with a faithful depiction of the London blitz.

TOP: A JU 88 bomber and the blitz
 BOTTOM: Scenes from the video production

Using a 3D foreground representation of the London skyline, backed by a huge cyclorama of the classic St Paul's image as seen during the blitz, the scenes are brought to life by means of theatrical FX including smoke, fire, explosions and searchlights, all accompanied by a powerful multi-channel audio production.

As the sound of the bombers fades, the music swells and the final imagery projected onto the balloon provides a highly emotive conclusion to the whole event as we see three spitfires depicted in a victory roll over Churchill's evocative words "... our finest hour."

The scenes gradually fade as the gauze is lit and in conclusion the audience experiences the dramatic sound of a low-level fly-past by a brace of Spitfires into the distance as the simple end title appears "... for the few."

Conclusion

The ultimate test of a successful experience is not only on the quality of the show, but also in completing on time and within budget. Sarner achieved all these requirements comfortably.

There can be no greater praise for a Battle of Britain experience than from the veterans themselves who attended the press opening. They were captivated and moved by the whole show

