

Tribute to forgotten Kiwi hero

What do Peter Jackson, Boris Johnson, a London financier and Phil Goff have in common? **Nicola Shephard** explains.

PETER JACKSON has joined a campaign to honour a forgotten Kiwi hero who changed the course of world history.

Coromandel-born Sir Keith Park commanded the Royal Air Force squadrons that won the pivotal Battle of Britain against superior German forces during World War II, saving Britain from invasion.

Political intrigue saw him pushed sideways after the battle and all but erased from the history books.

But a campaign spearheaded by multi-millionaire London financier Terry Smith and backed by aviation buff Jackson, could see Sir Keith restored to collective memory with a temporary statue in Trafalgar Square — built by Wellington's Weta Workshop — and a permanent one in nearby Waterloo Place.

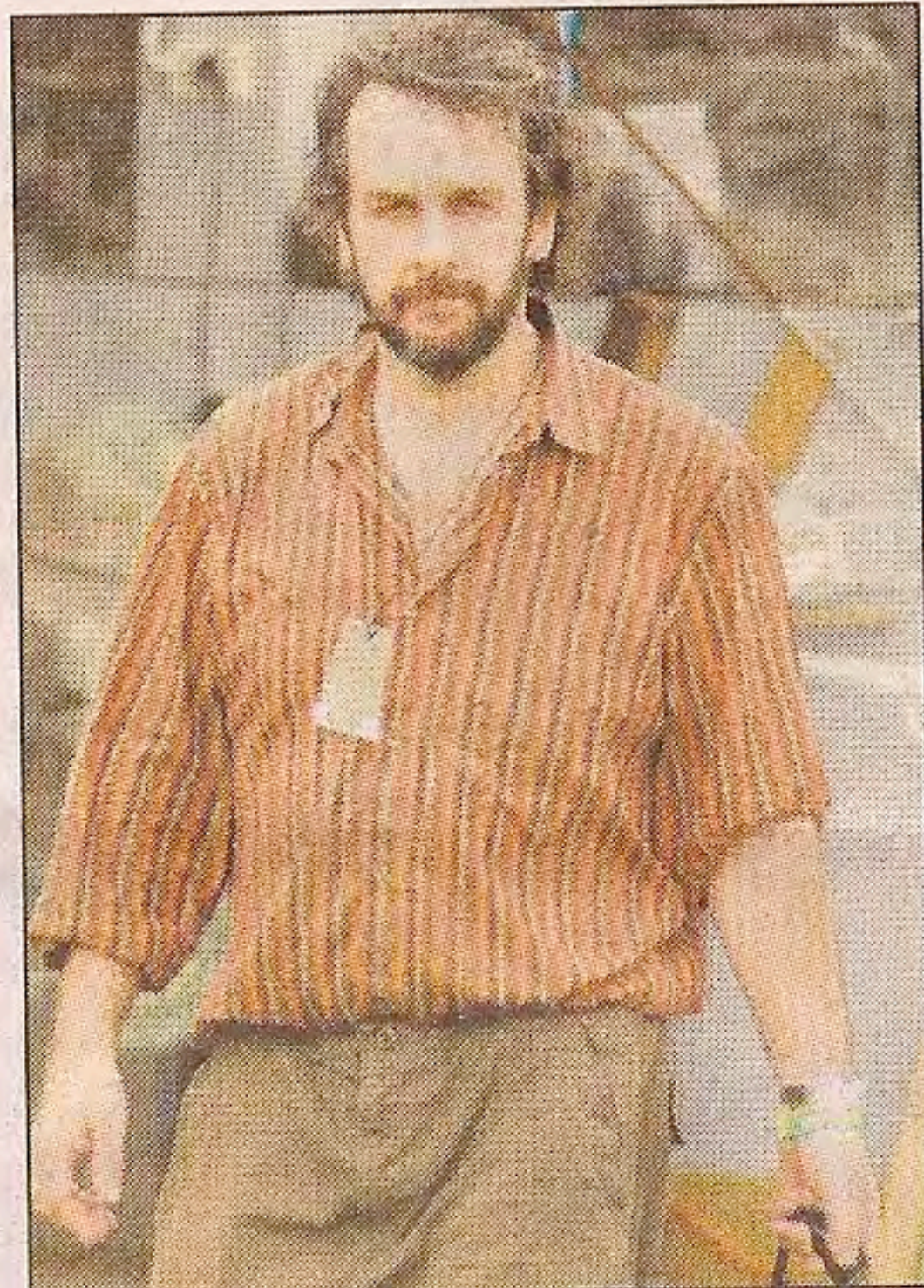
"But for the skill of Sir Keith and the courage of the pilots under his command, Trafalgar Square could well have been echoing to the sound of marching Nazi jackboots," said Jackson.

In 1940, Hitler's forces were massed on the European mainland for an invasion of Britain, but first needed control of the air.

Sir Keith led the celebrated 11 Group that defended London and England's southeast, bearing the brunt of the German assault.

Despite having more aircraft, the German Luftwaffe was defeated after 16 weeks of intense air battles and 500 Allied deaths. The Germans called Sir Keith the "defender of London".

After the war RAF Marshal Lord Tedder said: "If ever any one man won the Battle of Britain, he did. I don't believe it is realised how much that one man, with his leadership, his calm judgment and his skill, did to save not only this country, but the world."



CAMPAIGNER: Peter Jackson

Political scheming by Air Vice-Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory, a rival commander who disagreed with Sir Keith's tactics, saw him shifted sideways, and his mentor, Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding, removed from his post.

Sir Keith's great-great-niece Leigh Park is delighted the statue campaign may finally earn him a place in the history books.

"He was always a family hero, so to have him recognised for his achievements would be amazing."

Retired RAF Wing Commander Tom Neil was 19 when he flew for Sir Keith in the Battle of Britain. Speaking from Britain last week, the 89-year-old said Sir Keith won respect and affection for his unstuffy approach. "He was a nice man," said Neil.

Smith will meet the full £250,000 (\$685,000) cost of the tribute campaign. A history buff and hobby pilot whose father was in the Air Force, he has lobbied London's elite for support.



WAR HERO: Sir Keith Park and right, the temporary statue for Trafalgar Square.

WHO WAS SIR KEITH PARK?

- || Sir Keith was born in Thames on the Coromandel Peninsula in 1892.
- || During World War I, he fought at Gallipoli and the Somme.
- || In Britain, he joined the RAF and married Dorothy Margarita Parish, with whom he had two sons.

- || After World War II he worked in civil aviation, returning to New Zealand in 1948.
- || In the 1950s he persuaded the Government to build Auckland Airport at Mangere.
- || He died in 1975, aged 82.

Mayor Boris Johnson, his predecessor Ken Livingstone, British peers, British and New Zealand MPs and various veteran groups have got behind the campaign.

Labour leader Phil Goff won Johnson's support during a visit last October, and Act's Rodney Hide has also been particularly active.

Campaigners are optimistic the statues will get the green light from the Westminster City Council in April but want Kiwis to write letters in support. The Trafalgar Square statue would be

installed in October, and the permanent Waterloo Place statue unveiled in September next year on the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Britain.

"This statue is more than a tribute towards a great military tactician," said Jackson.

"It reminds us of the dark days when Britain turned to its colonies for help, and we answered that call."

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