



RAF Air Commodore John Ellacombe DFC

John Ellacombe was born in Northern Rhodesia and was recruited to the RAF in Capetown, 1939. He came to England for an interview and his preliminary training at Jesus College, Cambridge. He then trained at Yatesbury, where he spent over 100 hours flying Tiger Moths, and then at Brize-Norton, where he flew Harvards. John was one of the most successful trainees and was posted direct to Fighter Command.

He was to join 151 Squadron at North Weald. This Squadron had been involved in the Battle of France and Dunkirk and had suffered heavy casualties. The Squadron Commander, Ted Donaldson had been shot down on the week before John's arrival and was still unwell.



John Ellacombe with a Hurricane

John flew Hurricanes.

It was a stable aeroplane. Quite easy to land once you got the sort of feel for it. You had to land in your semi-stall position otherwise you would start bouncing, but once you learnt all that, it was a delightful aeroplane to fly, stable, and you could pull a very tight turn, and we were taught all that, and we were told that we could out-turn the Messerschmidt 109, as long as you saw him coming. The good thing about the Hurricane, it had a big mirror above the cockpit, so if you looked at that when you were looking around you would, with luck, not get somebody on your tail.

The Station Commander, Wing Commander Victor Beamish always flew with a Squadron. His Hurricane was kept outside the control tower in case he should see a raid coming. John was very impressed by him from their first meeting and regarded him as one of the great men he met during the War.

151 Squadron was a very experienced squadron and John began by flying to Southend airfield awaiting enemy raids and making combat reports. He also escorted convoys.

Flew up and down, up and down one end to the other, watching these poor wretched ships ploughing along. We were told that a convoy of ships was the equivalent of about 1,000 trains so they were absolutely essential to get the goods from one part of the country to the other. Later on, of course, things started hotting up and they started attacking the airfields. We landed back one day, and my annex to the officers' mess had been destroyed and I was left with not even a collar and tie because we used to wear a silk scarf. I had to go into town the next day to Mr Burberry's and get re-equipped. Your uniform allowance in those days was forty pounds and that was enough to buy your two uniforms, lots of shirts, several shoes and everything else.

On August 15th 1940 there was a battle involving 151 Squadron. John's engine blew up just thirty seconds after take off. He had to land on an Army headquarters, where they looked after him very well. On his return, he found that two of his comrades had been killed and another



two severely wounded in the battle. He was later told that 151 had shot down five Messerschmidt 109s and two Dorniers on that day.

John's Hurricane was soon repaired. The following days and weeks were hectic, North Weald was bombed again and the staff was sent to another airfield. On one occasion 151 Squadron attacked some 109s and drove them away only to find a formation of Heinkels, but managed to shoot them all down.

My particular one landed at Samuel's Corner in Essex, and I had no ammunition left, but I saw this aircraft land and three men climb out. I saw a policeman ride up on his bicycle, put his bike down, and he ran up to these men who, by then, had their revolvers out, their pistols, their Lugers and I thought "You silly bloke. Get out of the way!", but no. In two minutes they all had their arms around each other and he was writing down all their details. There were two men in the aircraft severely wounded.

On August 30, 1940, a large formation of Heinkels was reported to be heading for the airfield. John was about six miles away and decided to meet the enemy head on. He closed in and aimed at the formation leader, flew underneath, and pressed the trigger on his eight guns. John saw all the perspex on the Heinkel shatter and hit two of the engines. On this manoeuvre, his own engine blew up - a return bullet had hit the Hurricane's spinner. He saw a large field where he managed to land, and was attacked by a man with a pitchfork who assumed he was German. An Army Sergeant from the nearby anti-aircraft battery resolved the situation then the Heinkel crashed in the next field.

The Army Sergeant went over and said "Don't go and look, they are in a filthy mess." There was only one man alive so I was very happy to have a few pints of draught cider. Eventually a van came up and took me back to North Weald. I walked into the bar and there was Victor Beamish, my Station Commander. He said, "John, go and get in a Hurricane. You will fly as my number two, there is another raid coming in." I said, "Sir, I'm as drunk as a skunk. I have had three pints of draught cider and my head is whirling." He said, "How can you drink on duty?" and I explained what had happened and he said, "Oh well, never mind. Let's not go." And I reckon that saved his life, possibly mine too.

The next day there were only six operational pilots. The squadron was scrambled and they attacked some 109s and lost another pilot. They then attacked a group of Junkers 88s.

I had done one attack when the second attack - his return fire, I could see it coming and it hit my aeroplane, and my gravity tank blew up. Now fortunately I was wearing my gauntlets, which came right up, halfway up your arm. I was wearing those because I was flying number two to Pete Gordon and he was shot down by return fire and he baled out and landed in the River Crouch. I covered him down and watched him climb out of the water and I thought he was taking his white gloves off, but in fact what he was shaking off his hand was his skin. That saved my hands. The only part of my hand that was burnt was through the zip, which burned my skin.

I got out of the aeroplane very quickly and looked up. I was going to delay my drop until all the Messerschmidts were tiny little things in the sky. I reckon I dropped about 6,000 feet. I then looked down and realised I had no trousers on, and I took my helmet



off and looked at that, and that was badly burnt. Stupidly I threw that away, but then tried to grab it but couldn't quite reach it. I opened my parachute. I was heading down towards an open field when I saw a Home Guard ... he fired two shots at me. I was screaming out, "Don't shoot, I am British!" but he obviously couldn't hear because I think I heard the second bullet pass quite close. I crashed into this field, he came across, was very apologetic, and took me to a farmhouse.

John was taken to Southend General Hospital. His badly burnt face was treated with tannic acid, and he was relieved to find his eyes were unharmed. He shared a ward with Pilot Officer Frank Czajkowski, also from from 151 Squadron who had been shot down earlier that day. Frank had a bullet in his shoulder and another through his legs. The hospital staff had taken all the mirrors from the room so John couldn't see the injuries to his face, but Frank had a pocket mirror and showed John 'his extraordinary face'. Although it did not look good, the doctors had assured him they were second degree burns and that they would heal.

Now Czajkowski was an extraordinary chap. He used to get in his chair and he wheeled himself down the wards, and he came back very excited one day and he said, "John, there is a little ward there and they have got about ten Germans in there. Two of them came from that Heinkel you shot down and are a bloody sight worse off than we are." And he would rub his hands in pleasure. The next day a doctor came in and he said to me, "Keep that man out of my ward. I am looking after these Germans. Czajkowski is going there and telling them they are going to get them better, interrogate them and shoot them, and their recovery is not going well."

John and Frank were moved to St Luke's Hospital in Bradford and rejoined their squadron on their recovery.

There were two Poles in 151 Squadron, Frank Czajkowski and a Sergeant Gmur who spoke little English and was shot down and killed. There was also a Czech pilot. Their flying skills were exemplary.

They hated [the Germans]. Absolutely hated them. In fact, I understand once or twice when Germans were shot down in parachutes they were shot at, but then the Germans would shoot any of us, which was why we were all told, "If you do have a chance, don't bail out, crash land your aeroplane."

John's squadron resented the glory given to Spitfires. They believed the Hurricane was a more robust aeroplane that could take more punishment and fewer man-hours to produce. There were more Hurricane squadrons in the Battle of Britain than Spitfires, and they shot down more enemy aircraft.

After the Battle of Britain, 151 Squadron returned to convoy work. In February 1942, John was promoted to Flight Lieutenant and sent to 253 Squadron at Hibaldstow as Flight Commander. In August 1942, 253 Squadron was to provide air cover for the Allied forces' raid on Dieppe. They had canon-armed Hurricanes and twelve gun Hurricanes with which to attack the west headlands. John flew on the first sortie and on the third, when they saw the convoy withdrawing from Dieppe.



Squadron 253 was then bounced by Fokker Wolfe 190s, which were slightly faster than the Hurricanes, whilst facing enemy fire from a gun battery below. John's engine blew up over the coast and he managed to climb to about 600 feet, fell out of the aeroplane and opened his parachute.

... when I looked up all I could see was the tracer bullets going through. I thought the parachute was on fire, then I realised it was all the gunners on the coast shooting at me. I landed in the sea, kicked my boots off, jettisoned my parachute and set off to swim to Newhaven. It was only sixty miles and all those bullets were smashing into the water all around me. Then they turned their attention away and I was swimming away quite happily, thinking I had made quite a lot of distance, when a little assault landing craft came and picked me up. They lowered this thing ... as they pulled me in, you know, I was quite winded and the chap said "hang on", and with his boat hook picked the parachute up. I had hardly swum anywhere... There were four Petty officers and a sub Lieutenant, his name was Hall, RNZVR, and they had been there all day, bombed and shot at, and they were absolutely punch drunk. They were just beyond any more fear.



Squadron Leader John Ellacombe with
Flight Officer Bob Peel, Mosquito NS988
EGS 487 Squadron, August 1944.

A steam gunboat saw the landing craft and towed it, at high speed, to join the rest of the convoy. At Newhaven John climbed onto the wharf in his bare feet and an Army officer found him a pair of boots from the many casualties they had brought home.

Apart from Dieppe, John's time with 253 Squadron included night fighting and escorting Turbin lights convoys. He returned to 151 in July 1943 to complete his Mosquito conversion. Based at Colerne, he covered some of the Baedeker raids and at Predannack helped Coastal Command on long range patrols.

[The Mosquito was] very nice. A lovely aeroplane, I mean, it wasn't as tight manoeuvring but it was a good stable aeroplane with plenty of fuel.

John joined 487 Squadron. Some of these pilots had been instructors in Canada and had completed over 2,000 hours flying - with no blackout, so it seemed a very experienced and confident squadron. In the summer of 1944, they assisted the ground forces to proceed through the Falaise Gap dropping bombs and flares over targets on the route ahead, towards the River Loire. John could see some of his cannon shells exploding on the men below and with four Mosquitos they could hit about a hundred vehicles:

[the road] 'was choked. I mean there were bodies as well. So the road was blocked and they would try to pull off the roads and, you know, it was pretty horrendous. I mean, that is where the hatred would come out and you would say "Got them all, those bastards!" ... you had your four machine guns, four cannons, which was a hell of a



blast, and you would just go down ... I hated bloody Germans and all of us had that sort of attitude. We had all had so many of our friends killed.

Interviewer "Was there a feeling on the squadron that you were kind of all doomed?"

No. It was always going to be the other bugger. Not me.

They attacked airfields, trains on railway lines and sometimes general 'targets of opportunity'. In July 1944, information from the SAS suggested 2,000 SS troops were moving into barracks in Poitiers and the RAF was briefed accordingly. Three squadrons, 24 Mosquitos, were to attack.

I had a section of four and I was leading the second section... as [we] attacked, they were three storey buildings, you could see the whole bloody thing just collapse, and strangely enough, I flew over there a year, no, two years later, and they hadn't even dug the bloody bodies out. This was an attack on the SS, who we knew were absolute bastards.

John completed 37 sorties with 487. In October 1944 he moved to Number 30 Operational Training Unit at Finmere, then to Middleton St George until he was posted to Headquarters 12 Group in August 1945. On VE Day, he was ill with measles and missed 'the best party of the lot.'

Although the RAF reduced its staff after the War, John was very pleased to receive a permanent commission.

Well, I wanted to stay in the RAF because it was a very good life. Very pleasant people, a good chance to fly in all sorts of exciting aeroplanes and the sort of atmosphere. We knew that Russia was a problem and forces were going to be required, and it was a very good life.

John Ellacombe was awarded a DFC on the 7 April 1942 and a Bar to his DFC on 29 December 1944.