

CAPT ERIC BROWN

21 January 1919-21 February 2016

WORDS: NICHOLAS JONES



On 17 September 1939, the captain of HMS *Courageous* ordered that his boat be turned into wind so its aircraft could take off. Unknowingly, he put himself across the bow of U29, lurking nearby under the Irish Sea. The U-boat captain seized the moment. Twenty minutes later, *Courageous* had sunk, leaving the Fleet Air Arm desperately short of pilots.

A few days later a 20-year-old RAF officer saw a notice inviting pilots to transfer to the FAA to make up its shortfall. Champing at the bit for some action during the tedium of the ‘phoney war’, he volunteered. Thus began the naval flying career of Capt Eric Melrose Brown CBE DSC AFC RN.

Like so many, I am stunned to learn of his death, for Eric seemed indestructible. My job as a film-maker enabled my introduction to him but I realise now there was something different about this great man. At the risk of sounding immodest, I have filmed quite a few distinguished people, but Eric was the only one who seemed to want to stay in touch after the filming was over. If he liked you, he took you into his confidence, and the fact that he accorded me this privilege makes me feel very humble.

The many obituaries have stressed his feats, yet they reveal little in the way of background. I’d like to try and put that right.

I filmed Eric three times, the last being for the 2014 feature-length documentary ‘Eric Brown — A Pilot’s Story’. We spent a whole day in his company, securing the material to make a film that will, I hope, serve as his audiovisual biography. Yet I first met Eric in 1996, when he read a poem at the memorial service for Sir Frank Whittle in Westminster Abbey. We were shooting the occasion for a BBC2 ‘Horizon’ programme, perched perilously on a pillar. A decade later, I filmed Eric himself at the Science Museum, for my documentary ‘Whittle — The Jet Pioneer’. Standing by the Gloster E28/39 he once flew, he recalled eloquently a friend whose invention shrank the world.

It was almost surreal. As Eric described the day he quizzed a morose German prisoner in the quest to unmask him as Heinrich Himmler, a family of Orthodox Jews looked at an exhibit just below us. They were speaking German. If you put that in a drama, would anyone believe it?

We all know the records and statistics Eric created — the 2,407 deck landings,

the 487 different types of aircraft flown. But it was during the many relaxed meals we shared in-between the filming days that I began to learn more about the man behind the records. These lunches quickly established a pattern. The venue was usually the RAF Club’s Running Horse Tavern, the best-value pub in London. Eric habitually ordered a Spanish omelette while I had the scampi, having wondered beforehand which further astonishing stories he would divulge.

And he never failed to divulge, for his memory was always outstanding. Once, while lamenting the terrible news from Syria that played on the bar’s television that day, he suddenly told me how he got to know Erich Raeder when he was in West Germany to integrate its naval air arm into NATO. It astounded me to find myself just one degree of separation away from the former commander of a feared navy. Yet Eric — whose modern languages degree, specialising in German, at the University of Edinburgh held him in good stead for



both the testing of captured German aircraft and the interrogation of senior Nazi prisoners — said that he had been bemused to learn that Grand Admirals Raeder and Dönitz squabbled in Spandau jail over who had seniority behind bars.

Another time he said that he had flown both the Handley Page Victor and the Boeing 707, although he wasn’t much taken with the latter — “the ‘Connie’ was far more enjoyable”. I said, “Neither aeroplane is on the list of types you flew”. We came to a surprise conclusion: Eric actually flew more than the 487 types with which he is officially credited.

Most surprisingly of all, when we discussed his meeting with Himmler, Eric went into some detail as to what followed, once his question about the arrest of Wernher von Braun had unmasked the SS monster. Did Eric therefore know where Himmler was buried? “Yes!”, he replied — but this was one detail he would not divulge. One might get people knocking on the door, asking for directions to the grave — and Eric always kept his address and telephone number in his ‘Who’s Who’ entry.

That was so typically Eric. There was a time when many famous people still had their numbers in the telephone book. To speak to Eric was to return to a different era, where ‘celebrities’ didn’t hide behind a wall. Indeed, filming Eric revisited an era where Britain was still a great power, with numerous carriers and ocean-specific fleets — and an aviation industry confident in its world leadership. Hence what most satisfied him when he flew off from RAF Ford on 3 December 1945 to land a turbojet, de Havilland Vampire LZ551, on a carrier for the first time (see *Aeroplane* January 2016) was the satisfaction of knowing he would “beat the Americans.”

Of course, Eric saw sooner than most that, post-war, we no longer did beat the Americans. His life is naturally presented as a series of triumphs, but there was also a degree of sadness and life-long regret. As a combat and test pilot, he experienced the death of colleagues regularly. The first time he and his 802 Squadron comrades went into combat with Grumman Martlets to protect the crucial Liverpool-Gibraltar convoys, their CO was shot down and killed.

I never saw him show any emotion but could feel it was there, not least when he described the traumatic sinking of his carrier HMS *Audacity*, just before Christmas 1941. In the freezing Atlantic, he and his flight leader used the lifebelt cords to rope together themselves and 24 sailors in a bid to survive. Hypothermia slowly took all 24 and they drowned. When the corvettes found Eric they also tried to rescue its captain, Douglas McKendrick, from the sea, but his rope snapped and he was never seen again. I edited into ‘Eric Brown — A Pilot’s Story’ a picture of McKendrick and asked Eric if he had seen his skipper’s image since then. “Not since he briefed the pilots on the morning of the day we were sunk”, he said.

It was a poignant moment.

ABOVE LEFT: With his father Robert and mother Euphemia. The latter died while Eric was still at school.

OPPOSITE: Capt Eric Brown pictured with Naval Aviation Ltd’s Sea Fury T20 at Yeovilton in the summer of 2014.

NEIL GODWIN-STUBBERT



ABOVE: As a newly-fledged Flying Officer on Edinburgh University Air Squadron.

ABOVE RIGHT: Flying training on Miles Magister P6458 at Sydenham near Belfast in 1940. He met his first wife Lynn on 7 April that year, just a fortnight before the end of the course. They were married for 56 years, until her death in 1996.

RIGHT: As an RAE test pilot, Eric gained quite a lot of experience on the Arado Ar 234B-2 jet, ferrying several examples from mainland Europe to Farnborough, and subsequently evaluating them.

AEROPLANE



The main regret in Eric's life was the fact he never became the first pilot to break the sound barrier. He was, of course, selected to fly the Miles M52, for which Whittle built the W2/700 engine. When we discussed this, Eric

concluded that our main wartime ally was most likely the problem. Eric believed that Gen 'Hap' Arnold needed a PR coup to announce the launch of the US Air Force. What better than to have his service fly supersonic first, to

show that the USA was now global top dog? His problem was, of course, the British lead. Eric felt that Washington probably forced a broken Britain to quit the race and hand over its data to the Americans, in return for a few dollars.





LEFT: Another of the captured German types Eric flew with the RAE was Heinkel He 177A-5/R6 TS439, formerly Werknummer 550062.

AEROPLANE

SECOND FROM TOP LEFT: On tour in Germany with his MG N-type Magnette sports car during 1939. He was an exchange student at the Schule Schloss Salem in Baden-Württemberg and was there when war was declared, leading to a few days' incarceration by the SS before being allowed to leave for home.

THIRD FROM TOP LEFT: Eric and his father in the German town of Freiburg im Breisgau. They first visited Germany together in 1936 for the Berlin Olympics, meeting several members of the fledgling Luftwaffe including Ernst Udet.

MIDDLE LEFT: Serving with 802 Squadron on the Grumman Martlet, always a favourite aircraft.

ABOVE LEFT: Flying past HMS Ocean in Vampire LZ551 on the day of the world's first jet carrier landing and take-off, 3 December 1945.



Yet Eric loved the USA — although latterly, he told me, the tedious airport security there made it too much trouble to fly over. A high point was the time he was admitted to the Society of Experimental Test Pilots. Gen Jimmy Doolittle did the honours because of Eric's role in dive tests with the Merlin-powered Mustang, which helped convince the Eighth Air Force that it was the best fighter to escort its hitherto vulnerable B-17s and B-24s. Doolittle thanked Eric profusely. Clearly, the 'special relationship' existed for him.

Another navy man, James Callaghan, called his memoirs 'Time and Chance'. It often struck me how this applied to Eric's life. Had *Courageous* not been sunk, would he ever have joined the Fleet Air Arm? Certainly, if it had not been for bad weather, two highlights of his life would have never have arisen. One was when the elements forced him to land at RAF Topcliffe in the North Riding. "There was a DC-3 ahead of me. It turned out the Glenn Miller Orchestra were aboard". In the mess, Eric found himself among its members. "I couldn't believe my luck."

By chance, he was at reception when Miller enquired after a rehearsal room. Eric seized the moment: could he

listen? "Of course", Miller replied. A marvellous experience followed. What was Miller like? "A hard taskmaster. He didn't suffer fools gladly. When he left the room, the mood relaxed". Once he did, Eric was soon singing 'At Last', accompanied by the band.

Three years earlier, storms over Lincoln had forced Eric to abort his flight in a Martlet from Scotland to Croydon and land at Cranwell. On the ground, something was odd: civilians were everywhere. Quartered with an RAF technical officer, Geoffrey Bone, Eric quizzed the latter to no avail. That evening they went to see a film. Over the years I asked both of these men which film it was, but neither could

up. With Eric's death, we lose the last witness to and participant in the first flight of the Gloster E28/39.

Maybe Eric was born to fly. Photos of his father Robert much interest me. Eric recalls the oil painting of him in RFC uniform that dominated the lounge at home. "My father indoctrinated me into flying", he said — he took Eric, aged eight, up in a Gloster Gamecock. By contrast, even in his last years, Eric was still being consulted on key aviation defence policies, such as the forthcoming carriers — and before she died, Margaret Thatcher summoned him to her Belgravia lair to tell her what the state of play was regarding these ships. "You can't say no to someone like

'With Eric's death, we lose the last witness to the first flight of the E28/39'

remember. Maybe that's because of what happened the next day. Eric was asked to perform weather checks. In the control tower, Gloster's test pilot Gerry Sayer quizzed him and decided to fly.

Back on the ground, Eric watched in amazement as an aircraft with no propeller emerged — and Sayer took it

her", he told me. The way successive governments were depleting our military naturally troubled Eric. He mentioned a prime example: he was told by Admiral 'Sandy' Woodward that had we not scrapped the *Ark Royal* and its Phantoms, the Falklands campaign would have been over in weeks. Eric had



ABOVE: With fellow members of Aerodynamics Flight at Farnborough in 1948, Sea Hornet F20 TT191 providing the backdrop.

RIGHT: At his desk as Commander (Air) at RNAS Brawdy, Pembrokeshire, a post he held from 1954-57. Later he was CO of RNAS Lossiemouth. His last appointment in the Navy was as an aide-de-camp to the Queen, from which he retired on 27 January 1970.

FAR RIGHT: Dancing with his wife Lynn at a German military ball during Eric's posting to Bonn as chief of the British Naval Mission to Germany in the late 1950s. He was pivotal in establishing West German naval aviation, and later returned to Bonn as British naval attaché.


RIGHT: In 2014 the 3,000th edition of BBC Radio 4's 'Desert Island Discs' welcomed Eric as its guest. Here he is with presenter Kirsty Young. BBC

helped select the Phantom for the Navy while at the MoD, and its withdrawal from operating carriers ranked.

Yet defence cuts — and the rituals of Navy life — also inspired a wry joke he told. It concerns an elderly man who gets a job in a supermarket, where he does a splendid job stacking shelves. However, he is always 10 minutes late for work. Eventually his manager raises

the issue. "You are a great employee, but why are you always 10 minutes late?" "In my last job", replies the older man, "I was always 10 minutes late". Surprised, the manager asks, "Well, what did they say when you turned up late each day?" "Oh, they just said 'Good morning, Admiral!'"

What else can I say about Eric? He loved song and dance — as his photo

albums, from which many of the accompanying images were taken, show. Like so many, I shall miss him terribly. Britain is a lesser place without Capt Eric Brown RN. 

'Eric Brown — A Pilot's Story' is available on DVD from Quanta Films Ltd (www.quantafilms.com or telephone 01908 560674).

