

# *Eric Brown, Record-Breaking British Pilot and World War II Hero, Dies at 97*

By ROBERT D. McFADDEN FEB. 22, 2016



Capt. Eric Melrose Brown at the University of Edinburgh last year. He died on Sunday after a short illness, his family said in a statement. Credit Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images Advertisement

Eric Melrose Brown, a renowned British Navy test pilot who shattered records and made history with exploits that advanced Allied fighter power in World War II and quests for jet propulsion and supersonic speeds in postwar aviation, died on Sunday in southern England. He was 97.

His family said he died at East Surrey Hospital, in Redhill, south of London.

Captain Brown's test flights established the North American P-51 Mustang as the fast and maneuverable fighter-escort that smothered the Luftwaffe in dogfights over the Continent late in the war, and gave top cover for Allied bombing runs into Germany.

His work also demonstrated that aircraft carriers escorting Allied shipping could successfully protect convoys from enemy air attacks, if not from U-boats. And he amassed information that influenced the designs of many Western aircraft, and of aircraft carriers, during and after the war.

In a career that spanned an era from biplanes to the threshold of spaceflight, Captain Brown, by his own accounts and Royal Navy records, flew 487 distinct types of aircraft, more than any pilot in history, and set a world record of 2,407 landings on aircraft carriers,



Lieutenant Commander Eric M. Brown in an undated photo. Credit Imperial War Museum

He was also the most decorated pilot in the history of the Fleet Air Arm, Britain's naval aviation service.

“Not you again!” King George VI quipped in 1947, when the 28-year-old Captain Brown appeared at Buckingham Palace for a fourth royal recognition in a roll of honors that eventually included his designation by Queen Elizabeth II as a Commander of the British Empire, the rank just below a knighthood.

Captain Brown, a Scot who flew combat missions over Britain, Continental Europe and the Atlantic, and who was the Royal Navy’s chief test pilot for many years, retired from active duty in 1970, after 31 years of service, a hero to generations of military and aviation enthusiasts. His exploits were recounted in a half-dozen books, including a memoir, “Wings on My Sleeve.”

His experiences often bordered on the improbable. He was caught in Germany and arrested by the Gestapo as the war began in 1939, but after several days of interrogation he was released at the Swiss border as a harmless exchange student — only to become a major asset to the Allies as a combat and test pilot.

He was no daredevil. Relying on superb flying skills and careful estimates of the dangers, he performed screaming power dives, breathtaking pull-ups, acrobatic rolls, high-altitude climbs and chases into the unknown to discover the speed limits and flight characteristics of warplanes. He also trained hundreds of pilots to land on the decks of aircraft carriers.

Captain Brown survived the sinking of his first escort carrier, H.M.S. Audacity, which was torpedoed off Brittany by U-boats on the night of Dec. 21, 1941. He bobbed in the icy Atlantic with a life jacket for three hours before being rescued.

He rarely bailed out, but said he survived 11 crashes — mostly hard landings on carrier decks as his plane broke through arresting wires, lost its landing gear and skidded to a jolting halt with crumpled wings and nose. There were also splashdowns at sea, including one low-altitude stall that sent his plane spinning into the Firth of Forth as Prime Minister Winston Churchill looked on.

With the war nearly over, Captain Brown flew to a major Nazi base in Denmark to test-fly a German jet bomber. He expected the Germans to be gone, but he landed at a still-operational Luftwaffe base. He had only a pistol, but the base commander offered to surrender, and the captain took charge of the base and of 2,000 prisoners until Allied ground forces arrived the next day.

In April 1945, he went to the just-liberated concentration camp at Belsen, Germany, where he saw acres of unburied corpses and “shuffling ghosts of men.” He was fluent in German, and a British

Brigadier medical officer asked him to interrogate the captured camp commandant, Josef Kramer, who was later hanged for war crimes.

After V-E Day, the captain, because of his language and aviation expertise, was assigned to interrogate the rocket scientist Wernher von Braun, the Luftwaffe commander Hermann Göring, the aircraft designers Willy Messerschmitt and Ernst Heinkel, and many Nazi fliers.

Captain Brown flew about 50 captured German aircraft, including a jet bomber and an experimental rocket plane, exploring many advanced German technologies that were used in postwar aviation designs. In the 1950s, he helped rebuild West Germany's air power, which was integrated into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Sent to the United States, he proposed British innovations for aircraft carriers that proved useful to the American Navy, including catapults and upturned decks for easier takeoffs.

Only 5 feet 7 inches tall — colleagues called him “Winkle,” for periwinkle — the captain was a compact man who radiated quiet confidence. In television interviews, lectures and public appearances, he was often asked about his fears and feelings in an airplane.

“I don't frighten easily,” he told BAE Systems in a 2012 interview. “If a pilot has this perfect harmony of control, you feel you're bonded with it, really. You've got into it and the airplane welcomes you and says ‘Thank God you've come, you're part of me anyway,’ and to fly like that is a sheer delight.”

Eric Melrose Brown was born in Leith, Scotland, on Jan. 21, 1919. His father, Robert, had been a pilot in World War I, and the boy was raised on tales of aviation. By 8, he was flying with his father. In 1936, they attended the Swastika-draped Olympic Games in Berlin and met Ernst Udet, a fighter ace, who took the youth up in a two-seat Bucker Jungmann.

He said that he never forgot the flight — terrifying, exhilarating loops and dives, ending with an upside-down final approach and a roll upright at touchdown.

A year later, after graduating from high school, Eric enrolled at the University of Edinburgh, joined its air squadron and learned the basics of flying. He joined the Fleet Air Arm, and by 1940 was flying sorties in the Battle of Britain.

During and after the war, he flew every major Allied and Axis prop plane, jet and helicopter, and most minor ones as well. His tests for

Gen. James Doolittle in 1944 established the P-51 Mustang as the war's dominant fighter-escort. In late 1945, Captain Brown made the first jet landing on an aircraft carrier — a de Havilland Sea Vampire on the deck of H.M.S. Ocean. It heralded a new age of jet-propelled carrier aviation.

In 1946, he achieved a speed of 750 miles per hour in a jet power dive from 45,000 feet. He might have been the first to break the sound barrier as chief test pilot for the Miles M.52, a bulletlike jet designed to fly 1,000 m.p.h. But Britain canceled the project and gave its research to the United States. The American Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier, Mach 1, on Oct. 14, 1947, flying the Bell X-1 rocket plane at about 760 m.p.h.

Britain was virtually bankrupt, but surrendering the project was divisive. Captain Brown wrote about it in "Miles M. 52: Gateway to Supersonic Flight." His other books include "Wings of the Luftwaffe" and "Wings of the Navy."

After retiring, he became an aviation trade group executive and president of the Royal Aeronautical Society. He quit flying in the 1990s, but continued to write and lecture, living in Copthorne, England.

Information on survivors was not immediately available.