

## The Airmen's Stories - S/Ldr. H A Fenton

Air Commodore (Squadron Leader during the Battle) Harold Fenton, who has died aged 86, was appointed to command 238 Squadron, a Hurricane unit, in June 1940. This when he had only 15 hours operational training to his credit - and that in Spitfires. From 1928 to 1933 "Jim" Fenton held a RAF short service commission but then left to become a civil flying instructor. Immediately before the Second World War he was chief flying instructor at Air Service Training on the Hamble in Hampshire.

In later years it amused him to think of the future RAF aces who received such dismissive reports as '*This officer would make a perfect NCO*' and '*The only thing this officer is likely to pass is water*'.

In February 1940 Fenton was recalled to the RAF and posted to No 8 Flying Training School at Montrose as a flight commander in the Advanced Training Squadron. By June trained pilots were at a premium and Fenton was appointed to command 238. Fenton led the squadron throughout much of the Battle of Britain. On 8th August shipping in the Channel was subject to intense attacks and 238 was scrambled repeatedly.

In a lunchtime melee over the sea, Fenton's pilots shot down two Me109's, damaged a third and destroyed two Me110 twin-engined fighters. The squadron lost two Hurricanes and Fenton was "wave-hopping" for survivors when he spotted a Heinkel 59 seaplane. He attacked it successfully but was hit by return fire and had to ditch in the sea. In the course of his escape from the cockpit, Fenton's parachute broke free. It floated and he clung to it until he was picked up by the armed convoy escort trawler '*Basset*'. Fenton shared the skipper's cabin with a rescued German pilot.

After a spell in hospital Fenton returned to 238. Towards the end of September the squadron was reduced to five serviceable aircraft; Fenton's impassioned plea produced eight replacement Hurricanes.

By the end of the Battle of Britain he had destroyed a Dornier 17 bomber and a Me110.

In May 1941 238 was sent to the Middle East where fighter reinforcements were desperately needed. The Hurricanes and air crew were embarked in the carrier '*Victorious*' at Scapa Flow.

'*Victorious*' was diverted to hunt for the battleship 'Bismarck' and Fenton and his pilots had to kick their heels while the Fleet Air Arm went into action. After the German battleship had been sent to the bottom '*Victorious*' proceeded via Gibraltar to Majorca where 238's 24 Hurricanes made deck takeoffs. They staged at Malta, en route for Egypt.

Fenton distinguished himself with the Desert Air Force and in September 1941 received command of 243 Wing, comprising 238 and three further Hurricane squadrons. He celebrated the move in memorable fashion, flying in chrysanthemums and alcohol from Alexandria; his boss, Air Commodore "King" Cole removed his rank stripes lest anyone should feel inhibited. Under Fenton's command, the wing was credited with 100 enemy aircraft destroyed and 50 "probables".

A doctor's son, Harold Arthur Fenton (always known as "Jim") was born at Gallegos in Argentina on 9th February 1909. He was brought up in County Sligo and educated at Sandford Park School and Trinity College, Dublin. In 1928 he was accepted for pilot training. The next year he was posted to 4 Squadron at Farnborough, equipped with Bristol and Atlas fighters. Exercises with the Army on Salisbury Plain ended close to a pub called The Pheasant.

In 1930 Fenton sailed for India to join 5 Squadron, an Army Co-Operation Squadron re-equipping from Bristol fighters to Westland Wapitis. Fenton was stationed at Kohat on the North West Frontier and detached to join the Tochi scouts at Miranshah, a small fort south of the Khyber Pass, to quell dissident Afridis and other tribesmen. Fenton took riding lessons and hunted with the 17th Light Cavalry. Back in Britain, he towed targets for novice pilots and air gunners until placed on the Reserve in 1933.

In command of 243 Wing, Fenton gained a reputation for rustling up an unexpected feast. Churchill dropped in for lunch and was astonished to be treated to Red Sea prawns. When the Crusader campaign opened in November 1941, Fenton's wing fought doggedly in support of the 8th Army. The next July Fenton put up the four stripes of a group captain and took command of 212 Group, comprising 12 squadrons of Hurricanes, which supported the Army's pursuit of the Afrika Korps.

In 1943, Fenton returned the Britain to take command of the Kenley fighter sector. That summer he moved to the post of Group Captain Operations at 2nd Tactical Air Force, Bracknell. As preparations developed for D-Day, Fenton was successively commander of Nos 84 and 83 Group Control Centres. He was the first senior RAF officer to land in France on D-Day, and was appointed Senior Air Staff Officer, 83 Group.

Fenton found time to maintain his reputation as a supplier of delicacies and claimed to have invented "aerial mushroom hunting" - spotting mushroom rings from an Auster light aircraft. He also raided the Dutch coast and returned to the mess with barrels of oysters.

After refusing a regular commission he was released in late 1945 and the next year was appointed managing director of Deccan Airways. He was later general manager of Airways Training and Operations Manager of BOAC from 1949 to 1952, when he became managing director of Peter Jones.

He retired in 1958 and moved to Jersey where he created a splendid garden at his home at Saint Brelade.

Fenton was awarded the DFC in 1942, the DSO in 1943, and appointed CBE in 1946. He was mentioned in dispatches three times.

He married, in 1935, Helier de Carteret. There were no children of the marriage.

*With acknowledgments to the Daily Telegraph*