



# *FlyPast* Spotlight

## Westland Whirlwind

19 Pages in detail

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- 80 In combat - the Whirlwind at war



This month, we focus our Spotlight on a World War Two RAF fighter that has almost been forgotten. Were it not for its troublesome Rolls-Royce Peregrine engines, the Westland Whirlwind might have lived up to its design's considerable potential. Popular with pilots due to its excellent visibility and handling, the Whirlwind was especially effective at low level, and packed a considerable punch with four nose-mounted cannon. With exclusive artwork and rarely seen images, we reflect on the wartime use of this promising but flawed fighter.

**Main picture**  
Westland Whirlwind Mk.I P7062 of 263 Squadron. This aircraft crashed during a training exercise on February 19, 1943, with the loss of F/Sgt Francis Hicks. KEY COLLECTION



# The Westland Whirlwind

**Above**  
The Whirlwind prototype, L6844, flew for the first time on October 11, 1938. BOTH KEYS

**M**any people regard the Westland Whirlwind as a complete failure. Due to the low numbers built (only 114, including prototypes), it is often forgotten by historians. Complicating matters is the fact that Westland reused the name Whirlwind when they licence-built the very successful Sikorsky S-55 helicopter in the 1950s and '60s. The fame of this much longer-lived Whirlwind has only diminished the perceived status of the original machine.

In fact, while the twin-engine fighter never came close to attaining the fame of the Mosquito, its wartime de Havilland contemporary, its failure may simply have been due to the lack of suitable engines. Had it been fitted with the far more effective Rolls-Royce Merlin (like the Mosquito), rather than the unreliable Peregrine, it might well have lived up to its promise.

### Potential

The aircraft was developed in response to a 1935 requirement for a 'cannon fighter'. Led by W E W 'Teddy' Petter, who went on to

design numerous successful aircraft, including the English Electric Canberra and Folland Gnat, the Whirlwind emerged as a potentially potent twin-engine fighter capable of accommodating four 20mm cannon grouped in the nose.

It was to be powered by Rolls-Royce's new Peregrine engine, a development of the successful Kestrel. Although there was no reason to suspect it at the time, the Peregrine turned out to be both unreliable to run and awkward to service. The engine was the fatal flaw in an otherwise outstanding design.

A pair of prototypes were ordered in February 1937, and the initial airframe, L6844, flew for the first time on October 11, 1938. With the pilot sitting high in one of the world's first full bubble canopies, visibility was superb. However, test pilot Harald Penrose almost lost control when one of the long, internal exhaust ducts broke, leading to an immediate change to more conventional, external exhausts.

Aside from this issue, the new fighter exhibited excellent handling characteristics. With the four cannon in the nose, its potential weight

of fire placed it among the most heavily armed aircraft of similar configuration in the world. By the time it entered service, other cannon-armed fighters were available, but the Whirlwind nevertheless packed a considerable punch.

Teething troubles with the Peregrine – the first of many – meant initial deliveries did not begin until June 1940. Both units (137 and 263 Squadron) to receive them were impressed with the fighter's performance, especially at low altitude, but they were sadly dogged with engine difficulties. Another problem was the machine's high landing speed which made it tricky to operate from the short grass airfields in use at the time.

### Flawed

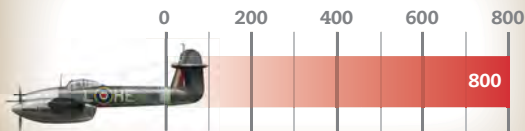
As the clearly superior Merlin engine was urgently needed by other aircraft already in service, the Whirlwind units had to soldier on with what they had. Both 137 and 263 Squadron initially used them as long-range escort fighters, accompanying daylight bombers over Europe. 25 Squadron received them for night-flying trials, but was

**SPOT FACT** It was the RAF's first cannon-armed, single-seat, twin-engine fighter

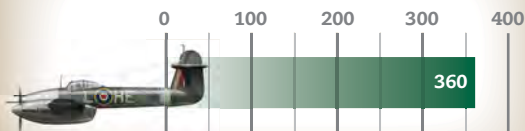
## Origin & history

### Westland Whirlwind

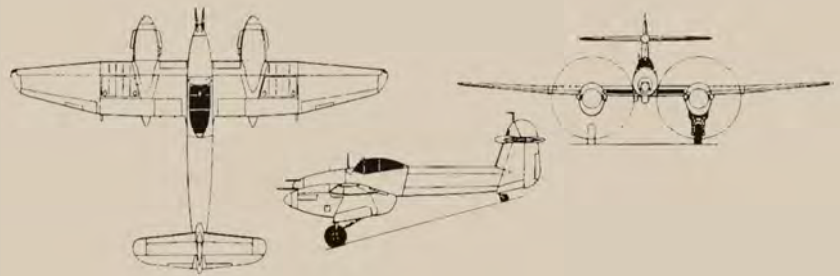
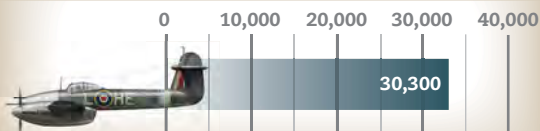
#### AT A GLANCE: RANGE (miles)



#### AT A GLANCE: SPEED (mph)

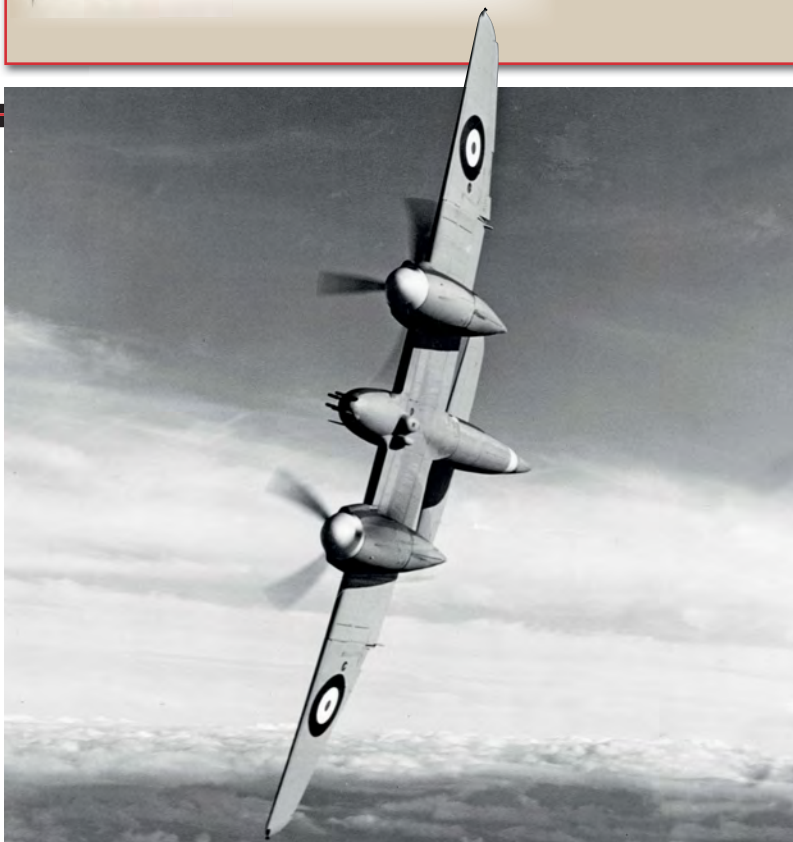


#### AT A GLANCE: CEILING (feet)



- Construction:** A total of 116 were made.  
**First Flight:** The first prototype, L6844, made its debut flight on October 11, 1938.  
**Powerplant:** Two Rolls-Royce Peregrine I liquid-cooled V12 engines, each developing 885hp (660kW).  
**Dimension:** Span 45ft 0in (13.7m). Length 32ft 3in. Height 11ft 0in. Wing area 250sq ft (23.2sq m).  
**Weight:** Empty 8,310lb (3,777kg). Loaded 10,356lb.  
**Performance:** Max speed 360mph (580km/h) at 15,000ft (4,570m). Service ceiling 30,300ft. Max range 800 miles (1,288km).  
**Armament:** Four Hispano 20mm cannon with 60 rounds per gun, and two 250lb (115kg) or 500lb bombs.  
**Crew:** One.

**Note:** performance and weights varied according to role and configuration.



“The Westland Whirlwind was certainly one of the most distinctive looking British fighters of World War Two...”

eventually equipped with Bristol Beaufighters.

The Westland fighters were used effectively for ground attack ‘ops’ over France, destroying German trains, marshalling yards, and damaging airfields. While useful in this role, and apparently capable of holding their own against Messerschmitt Bf 109s at low level, the ongoing Peregrine issues limited production. The last Whirlwind mission was flown on November 29, 1943, by 263 Squadron.

One of that unit’s pilots, Sgt G L Buckwell, later summarised the fighter. It was: “great to fly – we were a privileged few...[but] a radical aircraft requires either prolonged development or widespread service to exploit its concept and eliminate its weaknesses”.

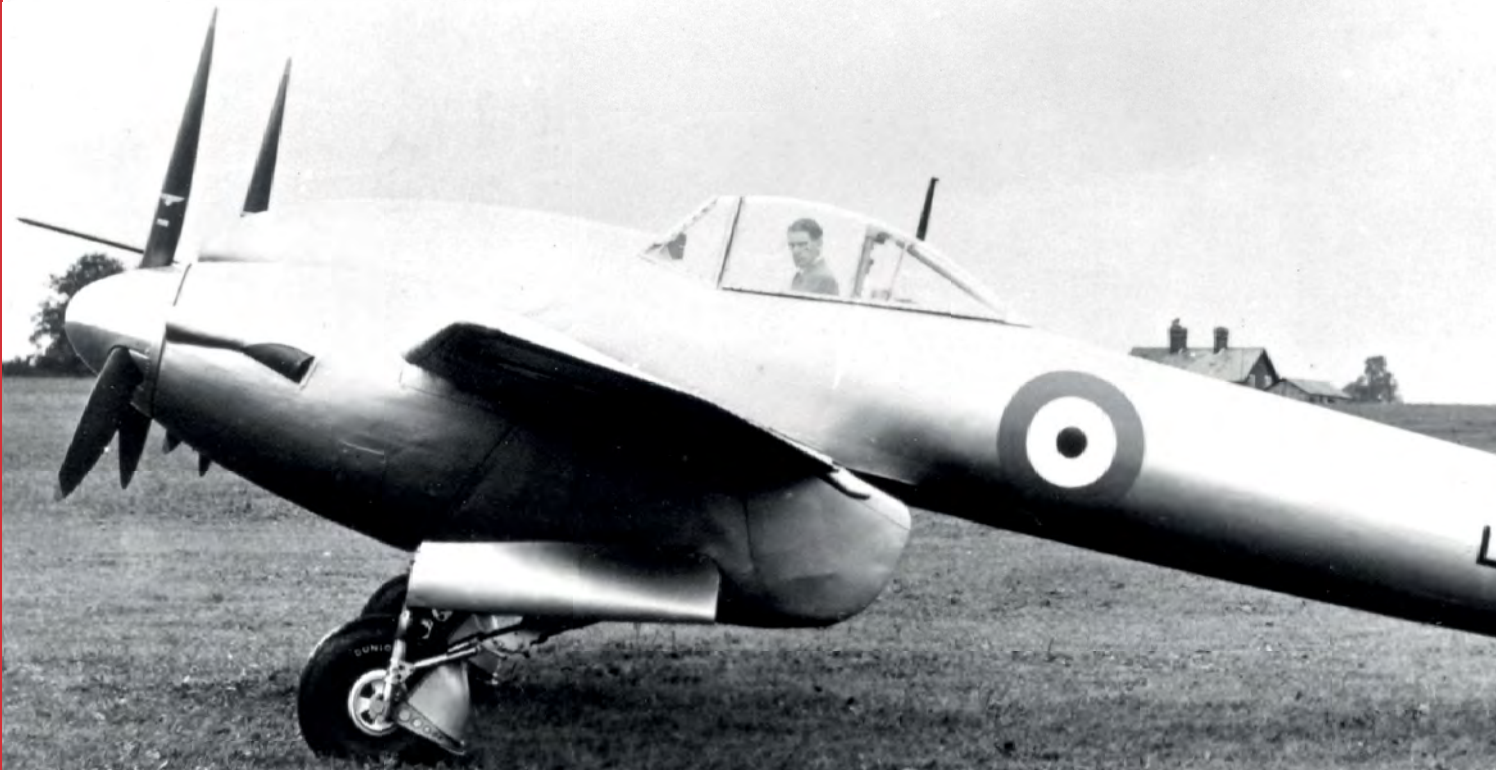
The Westland Whirlwind was certainly one of the most distinctive looking British fighters of World War Two, and was clearly effective when used to its best advantage. Had the dice of history fallen more kindly for Westland, it is not inconceivable that it could have gone on to make a huge impact. We will never know. ●

**Left**  
The aircraft turned out to be a potent adversary at low level, though its performance fell off at high altitude.



# Spotlight

## Westland Whirlwind



# Cutting Edge

Tom Spencer profiles some of the key individuals of the Whirlwind story

**Above**  
Harald Penrose  
in the cockpit the  
second prototype  
Whirlwind, L6845.  
ROLLS-ROYCE-KEC

**G**ifted, but by all accounts difficult to work with, William Edward Willoughby Petter was just 30 when the twin-engined fighter he had designed first took to the air.

'Teddy' was the eldest son of Sir Ernest Petter, who became the chairman of Petters Ltd, of which the Yeovil-based Westland was a sub-division until it became a separate company in 1935. With a 'First' in mechanical engineering from Cambridge, he joined the aircraft division of his family firm as an apprentice, working in every department.

He said of those days: "I looked on this as sheer drudgery at the time, but knew afterwards that without

workshop knowledge I would never have become a designer."

After a period as the assistant to the managing director in 1934, Teddy joined the board as technical director – aged only 26. The appointment was not welcomed by older members and led to several resignations, while Petter's inexperience made the Air Ministry reluctant to offer contracts to Westland.

But his innovative mind soon became apparent with the automatic slats fitted to the Westland PV.7 prototype. The ministry then offered Westland the chance to bid for the replacement for the new army co-operation aircraft, eventually accepting Petter's Lysander.

Buoyed by this success, when

Specification F37/37 was issued for a single-seat cannon-armed fighter capable of at least 330mph (531km/h) at 15,000ft, Westland was again invited to offer a design.

Petter and his team conceived the P.9, an elegant low-winged twin-engined monoplane with a 'T' tail incorporating the latest technology. For example, to minimise drag, its 885hp (660kW) Rolls-Royce Peregrines were fitted in closely streamlined nacelles with the radiators incorporated within the inboard wing sections. Another drag-reducing measure was to route the exhausts *through* the wing fuel tanks, but this changed after the first two prototypes.

The prototype P.9, L6844 – the type was named Whirlwind upon



idge

entering RAF service – took its maiden flight, in the hands of Harald Penrose, from Boscombe Down, Wiltshire, on October 11, 1938. Some of the advanced and novel features – and problems – with the Peregrines led to a protracted development period, which included night flying trials with 25 Squadron in May and June 1940.

When it entered service with 263 Squadron in early July 1940, the Whirlwind was by far the most heavily armed fighter in the RAF inventory, with four 20mm cannon in its sleek nose. Deliveries were slow, however, and its operational debut delayed.

Such was Petter's frustration that he wrote to the C-in-C Fighter Command in November: "The Whirlwind is probably the most radically new aeroplane which has

ever gone into service... New ideas I am afraid, even with the greatest care, always mean a certain amount of teething trouble..."

Petter stayed with Westland until July 1944 when he joined the newly formed aviation department at English Electric, going on to design the RAF's first jet bomber, the Canberra. His final creation was the Gnat lightweight fighter for Folland which began development in 1954. W E W Petter died in France in 1968 aged just 60.

### Test pilot

Four years older than Teddy Petter, Harald Penrose became enthused by flight at an early age. Unable to find an aircraft industry apprenticeship, he began a course in aeronautical engineering during which he had placements with both Handley Page and Westland.

He found employment with the latter and first ➔

**Below**  
The head of the team that designed the Whirlwind: 'Teddy' Petter during his days with English Electric. KEC



**SPOT FACT** Some pilots were credited with several trains damaged or destroyed in a single mission



**Above**  
Westland chief test pilot Harald Penrose in the cockpit of a Lysander. PETER GREEN COLLECTION

**Above right**  
As OC 263 Squadron, Sqn Ldr Henry Eeles was tasked with introducing the Whirlwind to service. GP CAPT T EELES VIA P LISTEMANN

“...Penrose reported that the Whirlwind offered great potential and exhibited excellent handling characteristics”

worked on the factory floor, but was so keen he was soon airborne as a test observer. Taking unpaid leave in 1927 he learned to fly with the Reserve of Air Force Officers at Filton.

In 1928 he was appointed as manager for civil aircraft as well as the managing director's principal assistant. Three years later, following an accident involving chief test pilot Louis Paget, Penrose took over the post.

He conducted the maiden flight of the Lysander at Yeovil on June 15, 1935 and, with the high-performance P.9 on the horizon, he flew in the Bristol Blenheim, Fairey Battle and Supermarine Spitfire prototypes to gain experience.

Penrose was closely engaged with Petter on the design of the new fighter. From the first 20-minute excursion from Boscombe Down on October 11, 1938, and on subsequent flights, he noted inadequate directional control during take-off – eventually cured by increased rudder area.

He had vehemently opposed routing the exhausts through the fuel tanks, a view reinforced during a test flight in early 1939 when an exhaust burnt through a control rod. Petter argued for aerodynamic purity but the pilot's view prevailed and a redesign followed.

This and other concerns notwithstanding, Penrose reported that the Whirlwind offered great potential and exhibited excellent handling characteristics. It proved to be very easy to fly at all speeds, and trials by RAF pilots at Martlesham Heath in Suffolk concurred.

On the outbreak of war Penrose had expected to be called up for military service but his role at Westland was deemed more important and he tested Whirlwinds as they came off the production line. He did, however, encounter the Luftwaffe. Descending through cloud in an unarmed Whirlwind on test in the summer of 1940, as he emerged he found himself head to head with a Messerschmitt Bf 109 and promptly flew back into the cloud!

With Whirlwind production limited to just 112, Westland turned to building Spitfires and Seafires. While testing them, Penrose was also involved in the development of the Welkin high-altitude interceptor and, later, the Wyvern naval strike fighter – which he first flew in 1946.

Harald Penrose retired from test flying in 1953 to become sales manager for Westland, a post he held until 1966. He then concentrated on writing and boat design, and this grand old man of British aviation passed away in 1996, aged 92.



### First Commander

The radical Whirlwind would require particular expertise to introduce it to service and develop tactics to exploit its strengths – particularly the heavy cannon armament.

Having suffered heavy losses during the Norwegian campaign, the remains of 263 Squadron embarked on HMS *Glorious* – but the carrier was sunk on June 8, 1940, taking more than 1,000 souls and what was left of the 263's Gloster Gladiators to the bottom of the North Sea.

Re-formed at Drem in Scotland four days later and moving to Grangemouth on the 28th, the squadron was selected to introduce the new Westland type and partially equipped with Hawker Hurricanes to give it an immediate operational capability.

Its new CO, 30-year-old Sqn Ldr Henry Eeles, had graduated from the RAF College at Cranwell, Lincs, ten years earlier. After a course at the Air Armament School, Eastchurch, Kent, he became a weapons specialist well qualified to help with the Whirlwind's debut, and after refresher courses he assumed command of the squadron on June 24.

With few available aircraft, Eeles managed just 55 minutes' familiarisation on the new fighter at Martlesham Heath before flying 263's first Whirlwind, P6966, up to Grangemouth on July 6. The new aircraft were issued to 'C' Flight, under Flt Lt Wynford Smith, but by the end of the month only two had arrived.

As more slowly began to appear, Eeles and Smith supervised the



conversion of pilots to their new mounts: no easy task as few had previously flown twins.

Among other snags with the Whirlwind were difficulties with the retractable tailwheel, the CO suffering two collapses in a matter of weeks. The state of Grangemouth's runway did not help, and the squadron returned to Drem at the beginning of September.

Later that month, frustrating engine problems meant Eeles had to take a Whirlwind to Rolls-Royce at Derby. He voiced his concerns at first hand, which eventually led to some improvements.

### Fully functional

Despite the problems, training continued into the autumn, concentrating on low-level flying and firing the battery of 20mm cannon, meanwhile ironing out many of the minor glitches.

Eventually Fighter Command declared the Whirlwind operational. On November 28, Eeles led his ten available aircraft down to Exeter in Devon to join 9 Group. One aircraft flew most of the way from the intermediate stop at Sealand in North Wales on one engine – the other having seized!

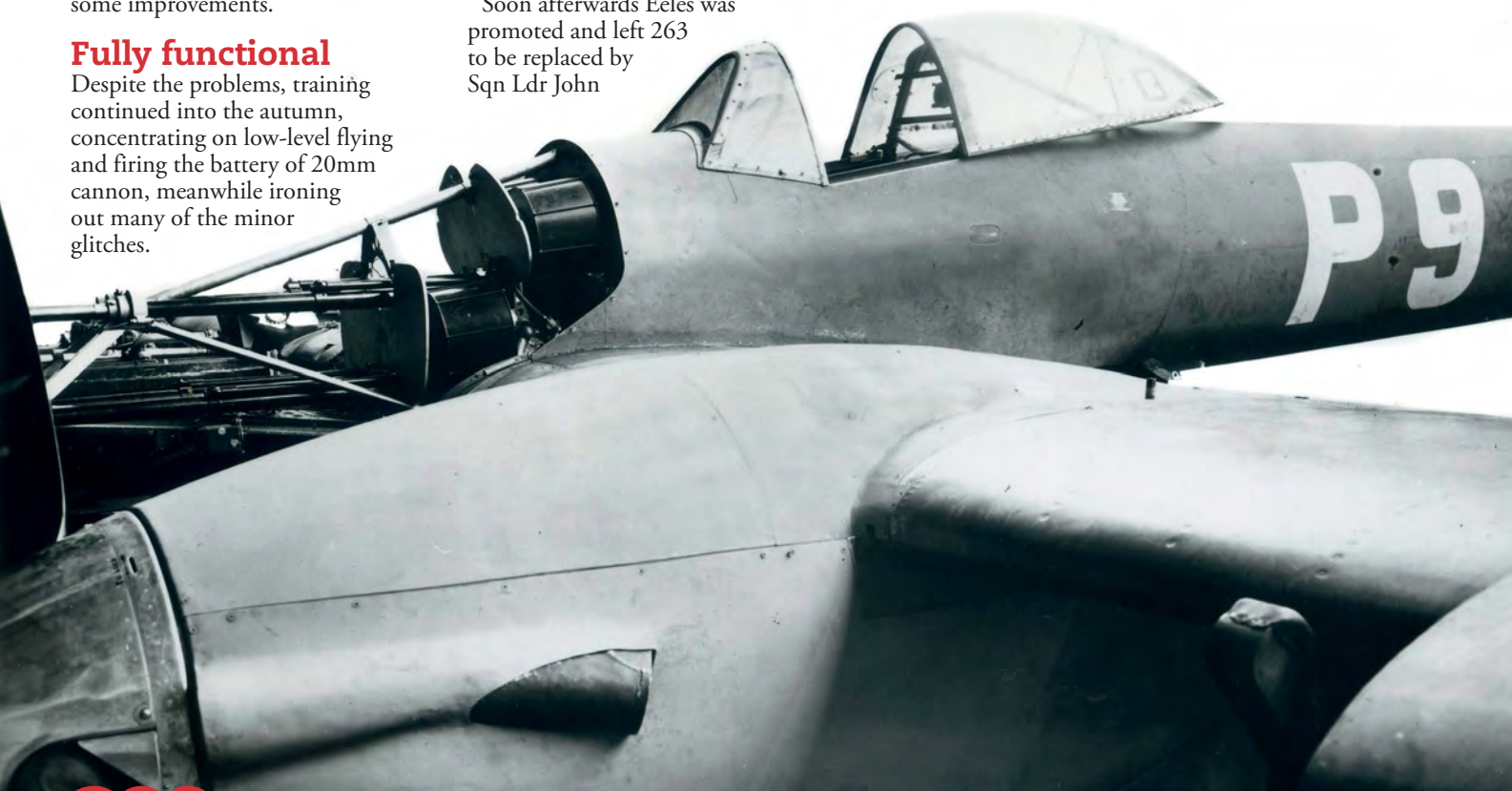
After settling in, on December 7, Eeles and Smith were among pilots who left Exeter for a patrol over Plymouth: five months after delivery to 263 Squadron, Westland's twin-engined cannon fighter was operational.

Soon afterwards Eeles was promoted and left 263 to be replaced by Sqn Ldr John

Munro who, having particular knowledge of the Hispano 20mm cannon, had been flying with the unit to help develop the weapon. Eeles, who had laid the foundations for 263 to become fully functional, left to become the station commander at Drem, where he managed to keep a Whirlwind as his personal mount. He later joined the Staff at HQ Fighter Command. Remaining in the RAF post-war he became the Commandant of the RAF College before retiring in 1959. He passed away in 1992. ➔

**Above**  
Whirlwind P7037 of 137 Squadron following an accident in October 1942.  
VIA J HALLEY

**Below**  
Mock-up of the Westland P.9 showing the drum feed of the heavy cannon armament. WESTLAND VIA T BUTTLER



**SPOT FACT** The aircraft's robust frame gave pilots a good degree of protection in the event of accidents

**Right**  
Plt Off Ralph Häggberg flew with 137 Squadron but was killed during the 'Channel Dash'.  
VIA HÅKEN GUSTAVSEN



**Below right**  
Whirlwind P7055 was flown by Sgt Charles Mercer on the 'Channel Dash' sortie. VIA J HALLEY

### Swedish ally

The contribution of the many exiled European pilots in the RAF is well known, but less recognised are aircrew from neutral countries. At least six Swedish pilots served the RAF, one of them flying Whirlwinds. Schooled in England, Ralph Häggberg volunteered in 1940, and on completion of training was posted on September 15, 1941 as a sergeant pilot to 263 Squadron, then based at Charmy Down, Somerset.

After two weeks with the pioneer Whirlwind squadron he was one of ten of its pilots posted on October 1 to the recently formed 137 Squadron, also flying the type, under Sqn Ldr John Sample.

From their bases in the southwest, both units flew patrols over the western Channel and ground attacks into Brittany. At the end of the month, 137 Squadron went into action when the CO led a pair from Predannack, Cornwall, and shot up a train. Häggberg flew P7094 as a reserve, but in the event, he was not needed.

Nicknamed 'Haggie', the young Swede continued to build his experience and by mid-November was considered ready for operations. By then, 137 had moved to Coltishall in Norfolk from where, on the 15th, he set off on his first operation in company with two other debutants, Sgts John Luing and Jack Maddocks, in a four-ship led by Plt Off Mike Bryan.

Six days later, along with Plt Off Lawton, Häggberg flew another North Sea patrol at the controls of P7036. On November 24, led by a new CO, Sqn Ldr Humphrey Coghlan, he flew P7050 in a search for E-boats.

The squadron moved the short distance to Matlaske at the beginning of December. During Häggberg's first full month on operations he flew nine patrols or scrambles, all without real

incident. Poor weather precluded most operational flying through January 1942, Häggberg managing just six sorties.

### Channel Dash

The situation livened up in early February: within the first ten days, the newly commissioned Plt Off Häggberg flew ten sorties, including convoy escorts off the East Coast. On the 12th, the German battle cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, under cover of thick cloud and very heavy escort, sailed through

Oberleutnant Egon Mayer of 7/JG 2 who had scored the 29th of his eventual 102 victories. Plt Off Ralph Häggberg, who has no known grave, was one month short of his 20th birthday.

### No two-seater

Nicknamed 'Curly' on account of his unruly shock of dark hair, James Coyne hailed from Manitoba, Canada. He joined the Royal Canadian Air Force and received his 'wings' in June 1941 alongside Sgt John Gillespie Magee, writer of the



"Häggberg and three others were recalled from local training flights and briefed to provide escort for the Royal Navy – but not told they were to attack the German fleet!"

the Channel into the North Sea, heading for Germany.

During the morning Häggberg and three others were recalled from local training flights and briefed to provide escort for the Royal Navy – but not told they were to attack the German fleet!

W/O Basil Robinson and Sgt Charles Mercer formed Red Section with Plt Off Joe de Houx and Haggie (in P7093) making up Blue Section. The Swede led all four off at about 12:50 hours in poor weather.

Off the Belgian coast at around 13:30, they spotted ships through a hole in the cloud and descended to investigate, only to be immediately bounced by around 20 Bf 109s. The Whirlwind pilots were soon fighting for their lives; Mercer had a Messerschmitt in his sights but his cannon jammed while de Houx expended all his ammunition without apparent effect.

Both Robinson and Häggberg failed to return, one of them probably falling victim to Knight's Cross holder

famed poem *High Flight*.

Sent to England, Coyne joined 263 Squadron at Charmy Down at the beginning of September. He first flew a Whirlwind on October 12, recalling: "It was scary to fly for those first few flights. There was no two-seat version for dual instruction, no way of learning to manage an aircraft with two engines or become familiar with any odd characteristics."

Promoted to flight sergeant, he flew his first operation on December 12. Two months later the squadron moved to Fairwood Common near Swansea where, three days after moving in, the wheels of Coyne's Whirlwind sank into the soft surface of the newly laid runway and his aircraft overturned; fortunately, he was not seriously injured.

To be closer to the action 263 regularly mounted operations from Cornish airfields. During one of these, Coyne, by then a pilot officer, flew as part of Red Section in a 'Ramrod' to Lannion and Morlaix airfields in Brittany. Escorted by Spitfires of 234



Squadron, the Whirlwinds were led by their CO, Sqn Ldr Bob Woodward.

In July, 'A' Flight detached to Predannack for operations over Brittany, and on the 23rd Jim Coyne flew as the CO's wingman for a 'Rhubarb' – a harassment raid – to Landivisiau where they attacked the airfield and a trawler on the way back.

## Turning the tables

These sorties continued into the autumn and increased following a move to Warmwell in Dorset in mid-September. The Whirlwinds had

– the first time the Whirlwind had encountered the much feared 'Butcher Bird'.

Shipping strikes and armed reces occupied the unit throughout the winter months – ops that were often abortive because of bad weather. Such was the case on March 19, 1943 when a dozen Whirlwinds went after a convoy reported south of Guernsey. Frustratingly, it could not be found in the thick haze and the now Flying Officer Coyle and the others returned to base.

Later in the month Coyne led Plt

on an armed recce at dusk to catch German E-boats leaving Cherbourg to attack Channel shipping, but none were found. The following night the Whirlwinds of 263 similarly drew a blank. Often, shipping was reported but before attacking vessels were identified as French fishing boats and usually left unmolested.

During a shipping recce led by the CO on May 16 a pair of Fw 190s attempted to engage, but Coyne managed to turn the tables, claiming one as damaged. At the end of the month another convoy reported off Le



**Left centre**  
Sgt Jim Coyne of 263 Squadron flew the Whirlwind from September 1941 to June 1943. J P COYNE VIA LARRY MILBERRY

**Left**  
A rare colour image of a Whirlwind - this is P7007 of 263 Squadron at Wellesbourne Mountford in December 1941. F PRATTLE

**Below left**  
Flt Lt Jim Coyne at the controls of Whirlwind P7094 in the spring of 1943. J P COYNE VIA LARRY MILBERRY

**Below**  
With the airfield still under construction, a pair of Whirlwinds leave Fairwood Common in March 1942. 263 SQUADRON RECORDS



Havre again turned out to be a group of trawlers.

Promoted to flight lieutenant, Coyne became OC 'A' Flight that month and was also awarded a DFC, his citation saying he had "completed numerous sorties involving low-level attacks on airfields, dock installations and rail communications. His courageous leadership, tenacity and keenness have been inspiring."

It was a fitting tribute to one of the longest serving Whirlwind pilots who, on June 20, finally left 263 Squadron, having flown 137 operational sorties. He later completed a second tour flying Mosquitos on night intruder operations and remained in the RCAF post-war until retiring to become a teacher in 1965. One of the last surviving Whirlwind pilots, Jim Coyne died in February 2013. ●

seen little of the Luftwaffe for more than 18 months, but that changed on December 14 when Coyne was flying P7057 in company with Australian Sgt Max Cotton.

Off St Aldhelm's Head, they were bounced by two Focke-Wulf Fw 190s of 10/JG 2 and a dogfight ensued. Coyne got a burst of cannon fire on one and was credited with a 'damaged'

Off Jocelyn Yates in an attack on lock gates at Ouistreham, west of Le Havre. Having damaged the target with cannon fire, as Coyne pulled away in P7108 he was hit by flak just behind the cockpit, which left a gaping three-foot wide hole in the fuselage; nonetheless the return flight was uneventful.

On April 16, Coyne led four aircraft



**1** aircraft - P6994 - was sent to the US for trials in 1942

# False Alarm

**Andy Hay** artwork of a Whirlwind that took part in an operation designed to deceive the enemy

**Artwork**  
Westland Whirlwind  
Mk.1 P7097 of 263  
Squadron in the  
markings it wore for  
Operation Starkey  
in September 1943.  
ANDY HAY-2017

**T**he last unit to operate the Westland Whirlwind was 263 Squadron, which received its first examples in the late summer of 1940 and retained them until December 1943.

It spent two years flying from airfields around Dorset, Wiltshire, and Gloucestershire, six months in south Wales, and six months in Devon and Cornwall. Pilots were frequently engaged in attacking enemy airfields,

roads and railways in France. The unit also flew strikes against enemy shipping, usually E-boats and armed trawlers, and provided escorts to bombers and convoys.

On September 8/9, 1943, our subject P7097 was one of 16 Whirlwinds used on Operation Starkey, an attempt to deceive the enemy into believing an amphibious assault was about to take place in northern France. Starkey was a sham British and Canadian

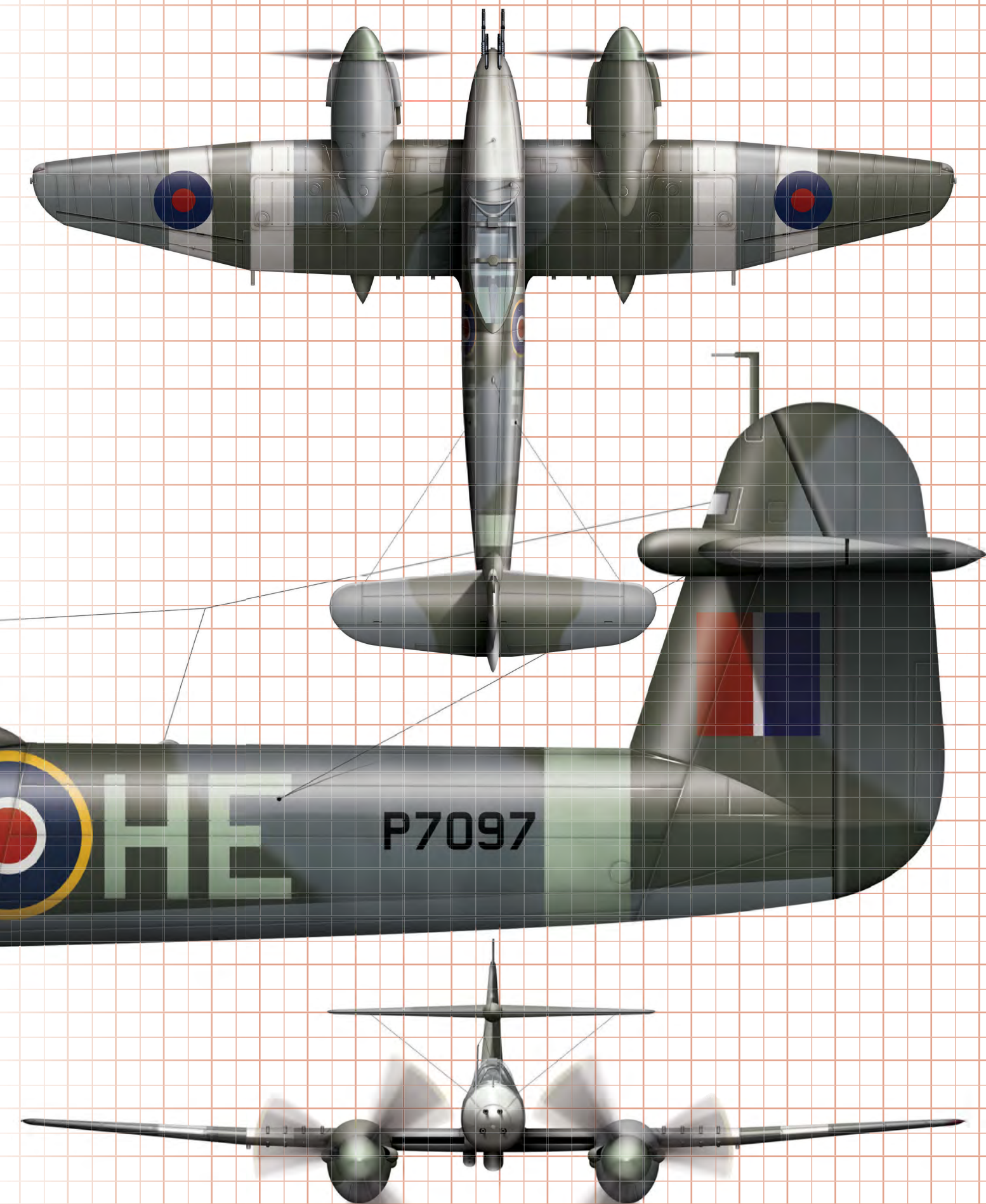
invasion near Boulogne, backed by air support. The Whirlwinds received special 'invasion' markings to add to the illusion.

It was one of three deception plots but the initiative was later branded a complete failure. The Germans did not fall for the trick and there was no Luftwaffe or naval response to Starkey. They instead moved ten divisions out of northern France to be used in other theatres. ●



**SPOT FACT** A plan to build 600 at Castle Bromwich was dropped for producing Spitfires

## Whirlwind in profile



believed to have attacked the German vessel *Münsterland*, docked at Cherbourg

# Reaping the W

**Andrew Thomas** relates some of the exploits of those who piloted the Westland twin

**Right**  
A trio of 263 Squadron Westland Whirlwinds in flight during World War Two. ALL 263 SQUADRON RECORDS UNLESS NOTED

**A**gainst all the odds, Sgt H H 'Kitch' Kitchener of 263 Squadron had achieved a couple of victories over the invading Germans during Britain's futile defence of Norway. The unit's Gloster Gladiators flew operations from a frozen lake at Lesjaskog from late April 1940 but they had taken a mauling. During the withdrawal, the last stragglers of 263 embarked upon the aircraft carrier HMS *Glorious*, only for it to be sunk on June 8.

Under Sqn Ldr Harry Eeles, 263 Squadron was reborn as the first unit to put the Westland Whirlwind into action. Eeles had a few of the experienced 263 Squadron Norway veterans as the core of his unit, including Kitchener.

By the end of November 1940, 263 moved to Exeter in Devon to start operations with the type. The first 'op' took place on December 7

when Eeles (in P6974) with Flt Lt W O L Smith (P6975) and Plt Off J G Hughes (P6976) flew a patrol off the south coast.

Just over a week later Sqn Ldr John Munro arrived as CO. After uneventful patrols the Whirlwind first encountered the Luftwaffe on December 23 when Smith in P6970 sighted a Junkers Ju 88 during a patrol off Start Point, Devon. It disappeared into the thick cloud before he could engage it.

### First contact

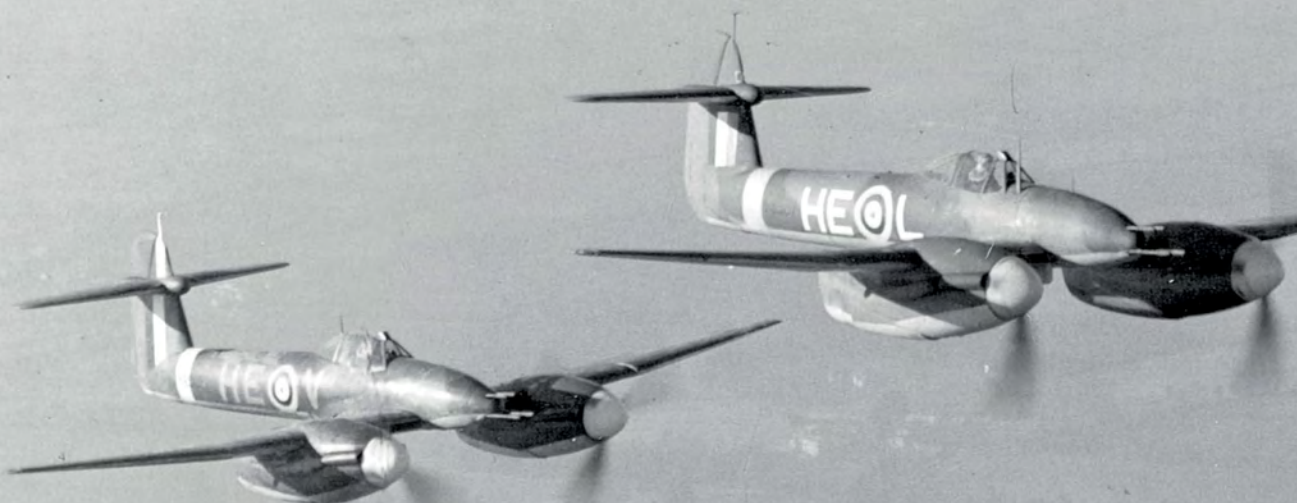
The New Year of 1941 opened promisingly when, on January 2, Fg Off David Crooks and Sgt Morton scrambled after a 'plot' that was in the event intercepted and damaged by a Supermarine Spitfire from 234 Squadron. It was not long until the Whirlwind saw action.

On January 12 while on detachment at St Eval on the rugged coast of north Cornwall, Plt Off

David Stein, at the controls of P6972, and Sgt Mason in P6968 took off at 0940hrs. Southwest of the Isles of Scilly they spotted a Ju 88, as Stein described in his report: "After approx 10 minutes flying intercepted one Ju 88. I chased the E/A [enemy aircraft] and eventually came at him from front quarter. As attack developed into full beam, I opened fire and gave him a four-second burst. The enemy top gunner opened fire simultaneously, but stopped immediately.

"I saw my shells hit top of fuselage about two-thirds distance from tail and a minor explosion occur. The E/A went into a spiral dive into cloud – which was 10/10 – and, though I searched above and below, I did not see him again."

It was claimed as probably destroyed and later radio intercepts seemed to confirm its loss. Either way, the RAF's latest fighter had been blooded.



# Whirlwind

The following day Plt Off Pat Thornton-Brown (P6972) with Kitchener as his No.2 in P6988 were patrolling at 19,000ft south of Land's End when they spotted a Heinkel He 111 slightly above and some distance ahead and the pair immediately gave chase.

The unit diary described: "South of the Scillies, Pink 2 [Kitchener] found himself short of petrol, according to his petrol gauge, and opened fire from astern, firing a 4 to 5 second burst. The E/A took violent evasive action and Pink 2 closed to 300 yards but had only two shells left in the magazine and had to break off the engagement. The E/A did not open fire.

"Pink 1's petrol was also running low and he fired a short burst from astern



at 800 to 500 yards range. E/A, which had been diving, now entered a patch of cloud at 3,000 feet, flying southwards. Towards the latter end of the engagement one of the E/A's rear gunners fired tracer ineffectively.

"Pink 1 followed E/A down into the cloud with 440mph showing on the clock. He levelled out and came out of cloud base at approximately 200 feet."

The bomber escaped, and on return it transpired that both Whirlwinds had sufficient fuel. It was the fuel gauges that were faulty!

## Raid 139

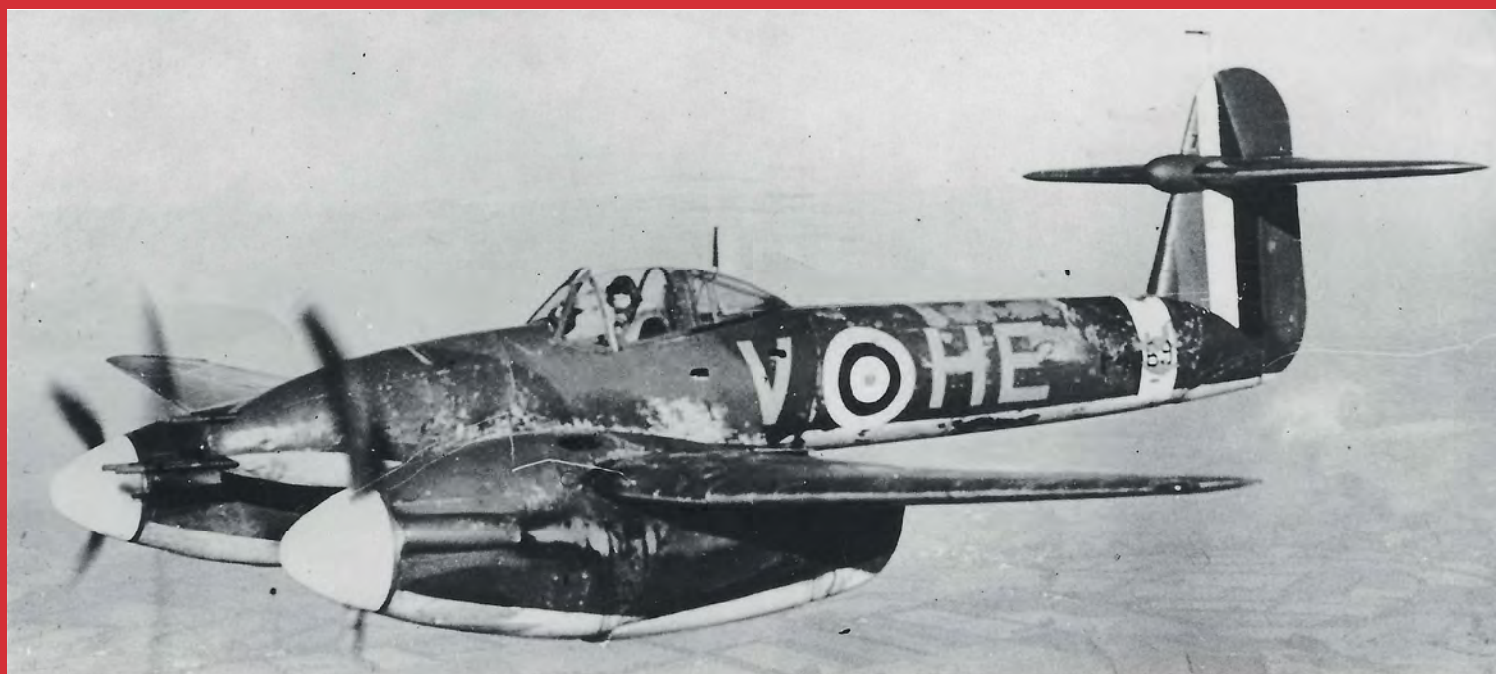
Soon after breakfast on February 8, 1941 Blue Section comprising Hughes (P6991) and Sgt Cliff Rudland (P6989) left Exeter for a training sortie. They were diverted to investigate an unidentified radar plot designated as 'Raid 139' after being airborne for 20 minutes.

The controller vectored them over the sea and, when orbiting south of Start Point, Rudland spotted the distinctive shape of an Arado Ar 196

**Below**  
A 263 Squadron Whirlwind in the snow at Exeter, February 1941.



**SPOT FACT** *Low production rates of the Peregrine engine caused delays in delivery for squadron use*



**Above**  
The Whirlwind's first confirmed victory was achieved on February 8, 1941 by Plt Off Ken Graham flying P6969 when he shot down an Arado Ar 196.

**Right**  
Whirlwind P6976 of 263 Squadron crashed on landing after an interception patrol on January 13 1941.

**Below**  
One of 263's Whirlwinds taxiing at Exeter in early 1941.  
J W MUNRO VIA R C B ASHWORTH

floatplane. The intruder flew into cloud, but Hughes spotted it again about half a mile off to his left. He turned immediately and made a beam attack, opening fire with a five-second burst from 450 yards (411m), keeping the fusillade going as he closed to 200 yards. Hughes saw no result before the floatplane once again disappeared into the murk.

Meanwhile, Red Section, Crooks in P6968 and Plt Off Ken Graham (P6969) had been scrambled from St Eval and initially ordered to patrol Dodman Point off the village of Mevagissey. At about 0940hrs the pair split up, with Crooks flying above the cloud and Graham below. Having seen nothing, Crooks descended and just as he emerged through the cloud base he spotted P6969 heading west and turned slowly left to join up, just as the Whirlwind disappeared in the low cloud.

Remaining clear of the cloud, two minutes later Crooks saw a seaplane dive inverted from out of the cloud



and crash into the sea with its floats uppermost and the black crosses clearly visible. At the same time, the local coastguard reported the sighting of two aircraft crashing into the sea south of Dodman Point, one of them in flames.

Sadly, the 20-year-old Ken Graham did not return, but was credited with the Whirlwind's first 'scalp.' His victim was Ar 196A '6W+ON of

5/Bordflieger Gruppe 196 flown by the Staffelführer, Oblt Adolf Berge.

### **Evasive action**

Later in February 1941, the CO left for the Aircraft Gun Mounting Establishment at Duxford, Cambridgeshire, and Sqd Ldr Arthur Donaldson took over command of 263 Squadron. Ironically, he was the brother of 263's first CO, J W 'Baldy'



Donaldson who had been lost in HMS *Glorious*.

Throughout March, 263's Whirlwinds regularly encountered the Luftwaffe over the Western Approaches such as on the morning of the 1st when Plt Offs Thornton-Brown (P6989) and Kitchener (P6996) spotted a Ju 88 ahead, south of Land's End. The bomber turned and fled and in the ensuing long chase the pair managed to get close enough to open fire, but they were only able to claim it damaged.

These two pilots were also involved in an incident on the morning of the 5th. They left Predannack, Cornwall with Kitchener leading and to the south they again spotted a Ju 88, at 19,000ft. Thornton-Brown became lost in cloud while positioning to open fire.

outboard of the engine. It was as if a mat had been blown up by the wind. I cannot describe it more accurately. I imagine that an HE (high explosive) shell exploded in the wing. E/A then entered thick cloud.

"When I emerged, E/A was five miles to starboard still diving. At 200 feet it levelled off. I gave chase and within 5 minutes closed to 350 yards. I gave five short bursts exhausting all my ammunition and saw E/A go down at appreciable speed and turn for home. I noticed that he turned very gently and took no evasive action. I think this may have been due to the damaged wing."

### Back on one

Six days later, on March 5, 1941, Kitchener was scrambled once more in P6985 at 16:40 and climbed to

port engine, which was streaming glycol, and so I had to feather it.

"I headed back towards Predannack, flying on my starboard engine, but this too must have been damaged because as I approached the airfield I saw that it was on fire and it eventually stopped just before the runway and I spun in and crashed."

Kitchener was badly injured, suffering a fractured skull and a broken arm and was dragged from the blazing wreck just before it exploded. He spent a long period in hospital before returning to service, but his flying days were over. He left the RAF after the war and passed away aged 95 on July 7, 2010.

### Leaning into France

Sqn Ldr Donaldson, 263's CO (P6998) and Flt Lt David Crooks



**"Crooks saw a seaplane dive inverted from out of the cloud and crash into the sea with its floats uppermost and the black crosses clearly visible"**

Kitchener closed on the enemy alone: "I approached for a port quarter attack, but when I was within 300 yards E/A dived slightly towards cloud. I followed immediately astern at full throttle. Although E/A was kept in sight and the chase was started approximately over Land's End, it was not until we reached the Scillies that I was able to close to 400 yds.

"There was light cirrus cloud all the way down to 4,000 feet, a slight break at 4,000 but below this there was a thick black rain cloud. At 5,000 feet I gave a short burst as E/A was approaching a thick bank of cloud.

"I saw damage to the port wing just

23,000ft to the south of the Lizard Peninsula. After an hour, he spotted an aircraft and later described the events:

"Coming up from the area of the Scillies was a Ju 88 again, similar to the one that I had chased a few days earlier. He must have spotted me too as his nose went down and he opened up to full throttle with me diving flat out after him.

"At about 10,000 feet I had closed to about 400 yards and opened up at the same time as his rear gunner did. Just before he went into cloud I fired another burst and saw pieces coming off the top just behind the canopy. I couldn't follow as his fire had hit my



**Left centre**  
Sqn Ldr John Munro (centre) was CO of 263 for a short time in early 1941. He was succeeded by Sqn Ldr Tommy Pugh (on right). On the left is Flt Lt David Crooks.  
VIA P LISTEMANN

**Left**  
Sgt Cliff Rudland had the distinction of shooting down two Bf 109s in one day.  
64 SQUADRON RECORDS

DFC (P6989) flew an evening patrol on April 1, 1941. North of the Lizard they spotted a Dornier Do 215 that Donaldson attacked and damaged.

Tragically, on return P6989 crashed in flames near Helston, Cornwall, killing Crooks. Although Donaldson did not hear a call from Crooks, it was assumed that the Canadian also engaged the bomber but was hit by return fire and shot down. The 28-year-old from Toronto was laid to rest in Illogan churchyard, near Redruth.

By the spring, Fighter Command was firmly on the offensive as it adopted the policy of 'leaning into France'. The switch of German focus east to the Balkans and Russia meant a considerable reduction of activity against Britain.

The Whirlwinds of 263 Squadron began venturing over western France, strafing airfields on the Cherbourg Peninsula in mid-June, for example. The range and heavy armament of the Whirlwind made it highly suitable ➔

## SPOT FACT Building a Whirlwind consumed three times as much alloy as a Spitfire

**Right**  
Whirlwinds of 137 Squadron lined up at Matlaske, Norfolk, in early 1942. J GATES

for the attack role upon which 263 started to concentrate.

As the unit diarist noted, August was a "mensis memorabilis" (memorable month). On the 5th, the CO led a strike on Maupertus airfield where several aircraft were hit.

On the following day four Whirlwinds strafed an E-boat offshore. At midday another quartet headed towards Maupertus where they surprised Bf 109s of JG 2's training unit as they took off. Flying P7002, promoted Plt Off Rudland shot down the '109 flown by Uffz Helmut Rainer, who was killed. On the way out, two tankers were strafed just outside Cherbourg harbour with the cluster of 20mms doing considerable damage.

Donaldson's squadron returned to the area for a third time to go after the tankers again. However, the Luftwaffe was alerted by radar and, as about 20 Bf 109s intercepted the four Whirlwinds and the escorting Spitfires of 118 Squadron, a sharp dogfight ensued.

Spotting a Messerschmitt on the tail of P7001, the CO fired a short burst, saw it dive away and fired as he followed it down, seeing a panel fly away as the enemy headed inland. Meanwhile Rudland had two '109s on his tail and F/Sgt Brackley in P6983 flew to help, taking on one of the fighters.

Rudland turned on the other Messerschmitt and, as it crossed his nose, fired a devastating burst. He saw it crash into the sea; Fw Bach having baled out; as witnessed by 118's CO, Sqn Ldr Frank Howell.

In this most intensive fight involving Whirlwinds, Brackley may also have shot down a Bf 109, although it is possible that this was confused with Bach's aircraft.

Assaults on western France continued through August 1941, such as on the 26th when two formations, each with Spitfire escort, hit Maupertus and Lannion airfields. At the former, Sqn Ldr Tommy Pugh, appointed CO a few days earlier, wreaked havoc. At Lannion, the Whirlwinds destroyed or damaged five Do 217s and Ju 88s.

### Another unit

The RAF had received sufficient Whirlwinds by September 1941 to enable the formation of a second unit. Under Sqn Ldr John Sample, 137 Squadron was initially based alongside 263 at Charmy Down, Somerset, becoming operational in October.



Sadly, later that month Sample died in a flying accident when two Whirlwinds collided and was replaced by Sqn Ldr Humphrey Coghlan from 263 who led the unit east to Coltishall, Norfolk, during November.

Thus the two Whirlwind units never operated together as a wing, but one covered the western Channel and the other the North Sea. Their roles were similar, with 137 carrying out ground attacks and anti-shipping patrols off the Belgian and Dutch coasts as did 263 over western France.

Both units suffered steady losses. The worst day for 137 was on February 12, 1942 during the infamous 'Channel Dash'. Four aircraft were tasked to escort destroyers unaware of the breakout of German warships and were surprised by Bf 109s of JG 2. The enemy shot down two and accounted for two of the replacement section that had been sent out.

On a convoy patrol off Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, on July 27 Plt Off John McClure (P7104) and W/O Bob Smith (P7012) finally broke 137's 'duck' by downing a Ju 88. Near the Smith's Knoll lightship McClure and Smith sighted a Ju 88 at sea level.

After initial attacks from both, during which McClure's aircraft was hit by return fire, the pair re-engaged.

Closing from astern, Smith expended all his ammunition, hitting the starboard engine before pulling away. McClure moved in, firing two more bursts into '8H+KL' of 3(F)/122 before it crashed into the sea.

Four days later, during another

convoy patrol in the late evening to the north east of Happisburgh off the Norfolk coast, Flt Sgt John Rebbetoy (P7058) and Sgt Leo O'Neill (P7005) spotted another reconnaissance Ju 88 which, as they approached, began violent evasive action. Despite accurate return fire that struck O'Neill's aircraft the pair closed in and their fire sent Ju 88D 'F6+EL' of 3(F)/122 crashing into the sea.

On the morning of August 19, Fg Off Mike Bryan and Sgt Des Roberts were scrambled after a radar contact over the North Sea and, after about 50 miles, spotted a Do 217. Making the first pass, Bryan's cannon shells struck all over the Dornier causing pieces to break off. Roberts moved in and his three-second burst struck home, forcing the crew to bale out of the doomed bomber.

### 'Whirlybombers'

As 263's role became involved with more offensive work, in late 1941 the CO, Sqn Ldr Pugh, suggested fitting the Whirlwind with underwing racks to enable the carriage of bombs. This idea was not taken up initially, but in August 1942 Fighter Command issued the instruction that made Whirlwinds into fighter-bombers, soon nicknamed 'Whirlybombers'. One long-serving pilot lamented: "If I had wanted to drop bombs I would have flown a Lancaster!"

As the only fighter-bomber unit in the South West, 263's services were in demand. The first action came on September 9 when a quartet led by



## A Squadron and its dog



Whirlwind I P7002 of 137 Squadron providing a backdrop for a 'team photo' at Manston, Kent, on March 5, 1943. Among those pictured are: Plt Off Smith, Fg Off Musgrave, Plt Off Roberts, Flt Sgt Barclay, W/O Brunet, Flt Lt Bryan; Fg Off DeHoux, Sgt Smith; Fg Off McClure, Sgt Dugdale, Sgt Sutherland, Sgt Bolster, Fg Off Hadow, Sqn Ldr Coghlan, Sgt Woodhouse. In the foreground is Lynn, Flt Lt Bryan's dog. J B WRAY

Sqn Ldr Robert Woodward struck at four vessels off the Channel Islands and sank the 350-ton motor vessel *Henca* and the escort V-207.

It was a successful start to a new career for the Westland fighter, albeit a highly dangerous one as losses increased. Fighter-bomber attacks against transport on land and shipping at sea continued for the rest of the year and into 1943.

Enemy fighters were still sometimes encountered, such as on December 19 when Bryan and Rebbetoy were

on patrol over the Channel when they were engaged by Fw 190s and a turning fight developed. Rebbetoy described a close shave: "He passed over my head missing me by about 15 feet. I turned to port and attacked him from astern firing a 1½-second burst. Black smoke started to pour from the engine and both made for home at slow speed." They were credited with a 'probable'.

As 1943 progressed the Whirlwind was seen as increasingly obsolescent. The final sortie for 137 Squadron was

staged on June 21 when four attacked the airfield at Poix, France. A fifth machine, unable to locate the target, let loose its cannon on a train.

In the Southwest, 263 Squadron claimed the type's last air combat victory on the night of August 14. Having shot up and sunk an E-boat off Jersey, Sqn Ldr Reg Baker, flying P7113, spotted a Ju 88 north of Guernsey. Closing slowly from below, he fired a short burst that set the port engine on fire and a second sent it crashing into the sea. The squadron diarist noted the sortie as: "...quite simply a most remarkable individual achievement".

The unit's last month on operations was dominated by the presence of the blockade-runner *Münsterland* in dry dock at Cherbourg. The final Whirlwind operation was on November 29 when the CO led a sortie to intercept minesweeping Ju 52s off Cherbourg, but thick cloud and heavy rain prevented any sightings.

Just 114 of this innovative fighter were built and they equipped only two squadrons. When first devised, the Whirlwind was highly advanced and, had its introduction into operational service not been delayed by engine problems, it might have been available for the Battle of Britain. It would doubtless have made its mark against the massed bomber formations. As it is, this elegant aircraft has largely been forgotten. ●

## Below

Groundcrew loading 250lb bombs under the wings of Whirlwind P7012 of 137 Squadron at Manston, Kent, in May 1943. J B WRAY

