



FIGHTER *Command*

Under the guidance of Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, Fighter Command was formed on May 1, 1936, at a time of dramatic change in the RAF.

Modernisation of its aircraft was increasing and the majority of biplane fighters were being replaced by advanced monoplane types such as the Supermarine Spitfire and Hawker Hurricane. Both would become synonymous with the Battle of Britain in 1940. By 1943, Fighter Command had been divided into two units – Air Defence of Great Britain, and the Second Tactical Air Force. It regained its former title post war, surviving until 1968 when, with the RAF downsizing, it merged with Bomber Command and Coastal Command to create Strike Command.

In this special edition of *FlyPast*, we present four features to commemorate the men and machines of Fighter Command, and the vital role played during World War Two and afterwards.

34 James Holland looks at the flying career of the French ace Pierre Clostermann, who flew for the RAF in the war, ending the conflict as one of the highest-scoring Hawker Tempest pilots.

42 The Battle of Britain saw many nations fight side by side in the RAF against a common foe. Many Souffan details the sterling work of the Free French airmen who escaped to Britain and fought during the campaign.

50 The post-war era saw the RAF equipped with its first supersonic fighter – the Canadair Sabre. Roger Lindsay examines the impact the aircraft made on Fighter Command and the reactions of the men who flew it.

58 The Bristol Blenheim proved to be an agile intruder aircraft in the opening stages of the war when flying with Fighter Command's 23 Squadron. Andy Thomas discovers there's more to a familiar type than meets the eye.

Above

A flight of pre-war Hawker Hurricane Mk.IIs from RAF Fighter Command's 56 Squadron, flying from North Weald. KEY



THE BIG

James Holland relates some of the exploits of gifted French pilot and famed author, *Pierre Clostermann*

Show



Above
'The Big Show' - Pierre Clostermann's war.
Artwork by Adam Tooby - this print is available to buy at
www.adamtooby.com



Climbing up through thick cloud southwest of Caen, seven Spitfire IXs of 602 Squadron were warned by the ground controller to keep their eyes open for unidentified aircraft nearby. Emerging through a layer of cloud, they spotted suspicious dots moving through the cumulus.

It was just before 4pm on Sunday July 2, 1944. The Spitfires were operating from Longues-sur-Mer in

Normandy. The flight commander, Flt Lt Frank Woolley, called out on the radio: "Look out chaps, prepare to break to port."

Of the seven pilots from the pre-war 'City of Glasgow' auxiliary squadron about to engage, one was Australian, another a New Zealander and three were Frenchmen.

Among the latter was Flt Lt Pierre Clostermann, flying MJ305. The

son of a French diplomat, he had been born in Brazil, adding further to 602's cosmopolitan nature.

Already an 'ace' with a DFC to his name, Clostermann had been with the unit since the previous October and prior to that with the Free French 341 Squadron.

As he and his fellow pilots entered a slight turn to port, Clostermann glanced up and was horrified to see not the odd enemy aircraft

Below
An informal shot of
Pierre Clostermann
during World War
Two.





Right
Pilots of 602 Squadron posing for a team shot around Spitfire IX MH709 at Detling. Pierre Clostermann is sitting in the cockpit. VIA DUGALD CAMERON

Below
Commandant René Mouchotte was Clostermann's CO in 341 Squadron through the summer of 1943 when he claimed his first victories. VIA ANDY THOMAS



Right
Spitfires of 602 Squadron at Skeabrae at the beginning of 1944. The nearest one is a rare high-altitude Mk.VII. IAN BLAIR VIA DUGALD CAMERON

reported but around 40 fighters emerging from the cloud above them. Whether they were Focke-Wulf Fw 190s or Messerschmitt Bf 109s, he couldn't yet tell, but he knew they were German. The nervous wagging of wings and the untidy nature of their formation were unmistakable.

Clostermann felt a familiar sensation of both elation and fear. Tightening his straps, he huddled down in his seat and adjusted his feet on the rudder bar. Fear was replaced by a sudden surge of adrenalin and confidence. He watched the enemy discard their auxiliary fuel tanks, spread out and begin diving towards the Spitfires. Woolley called: "Break port! Climbing!"

CLEAR SHOT

The attackers were Fw 190s. Clostermann intercepted the first

"...the cockpit, gleaming in sunlight one moment, shattered into fragments the next. Sparks spat from the engine, then flames and thick, dark smoke"



group which was concentrating on attacking Woolley's section. He opened up on his flight commander's attacker and saw his burst hurtle past.

Two '190s headed straight for Clostermann; long bright streaks of tracer sped towards him but safely flashed underneath. As they swept through, suddenly he was in the thick of a swirling melee.

In such circumstances, Clostermann was aware that he tended to sense rather than clearly

see any of the aircraft before his eyes naturally settled on one. On this occasion, he picked up a Focke-Wulf circling, its cockpit glistening in sunlight shining through the cloud.

Framing him in his sights, Clostermann waited, closing in, but his opponent spotted him and fell away to starboard and into a tight turn, before climbing once more, fast and almost vertically. The Fw 190 flipped over on its back and in so doing gave Clostermann a clear shot at its belly.





Pressing his thumb down on the gun button, Clostermann felt the Spitfire judder with the recoil of his two cannons. With a slight movement of the stick, he made the luminous spot of his gun sight move along the enemy machine.

The Frenchman was now so close he could see everything in vivid detail: the blue flames of the Focke-Wulf's exhausts, the emerald green of the fuselage and pale underside. Suddenly this clear image shook and disintegrated; the cockpit, a safe refuge one moment, shattered into fragments the next. Sparks spat from the engine, then flames and thick, dark smoke. A split second later, Clostermann was taking evasive action, turning clear as the broken German fighter plummeted like a comet.

Clostermann wrote: "Never before had I felt to the same extent the sudden panic that grips your throat after you have destroyed an enemy aircraft. All your pent-up energy is suddenly relaxed and the only feeling left is one of lassitude. Your confidence in yourself vanishes."

POINT-BLANK

But the mad, swirling dogfight was not over yet. Pulling himself together, Clostermann sharpened his mind once more and felt himself become as one with his aircraft. Quickly he spotted Argentine-born Ken Charney diving on another Focke-Wulf and went into a spiral dive himself, covering his friend as he did so.

A shadow swept over his cockpit and looking up the Frenchman

saw the oil-stained belly of another '190 just 100ft above and roaring overhead. Throttling back, Clostermann got the German in his sights and at almost point-blank range opened fire.

Machine-gun bullets and cannon shells smacked into the Focke-Wulf's starboard wing root. The fighter skidded violently, then the wing folded up in a shower of sparks, ripped clear of the fuselage, smashed into the tail and the '190 fell from the sky.

A moment later, six more attacked him, but Clostermann managed to dive and turn. After pumping his guns at a third and then his remaining ammunition at a fourth, the enemy decided to break away and disappeared to the south.

Clostermann headed for cloud and home: "I indulged in the luxury of two victory rolls over Longues, to the joy of the country folk." He had reason to celebrate, he claimed one Fw 190 'kill' and four damaged.

FIRST COMBAT

When war broke out, Clostermann was in Rio de Janeiro. It was not until late 1942 that he started operational training, learning to fly and fight in Spitfires.

After the Free French 341 Squadron was formed in Turnhouse, near Edinburgh, on January 15, 1943 it was posted south in mid-March to join the Biggin Hill Wing under Wg Cdr 'Al' Deere. Sgt Clostermann flew his first combat sortie on the 28th. He was thrilled to be wingman to their



revered squadron leader, 28-year-old Commandant René Mouchotte, an aristocratic pre-war French pilot.

It proved to be a chastening experience: 'bounced' by 20 Focke-Wulfs they spotted their attackers only in the nick of time. Clostermann found tracer hurtling frighteningly close to his wings and called out for help over the radio.

On their safe return to Biggin, Mouchotte consoled the youngster by telling him not to worry about his plea: "We've all been there in the early days."

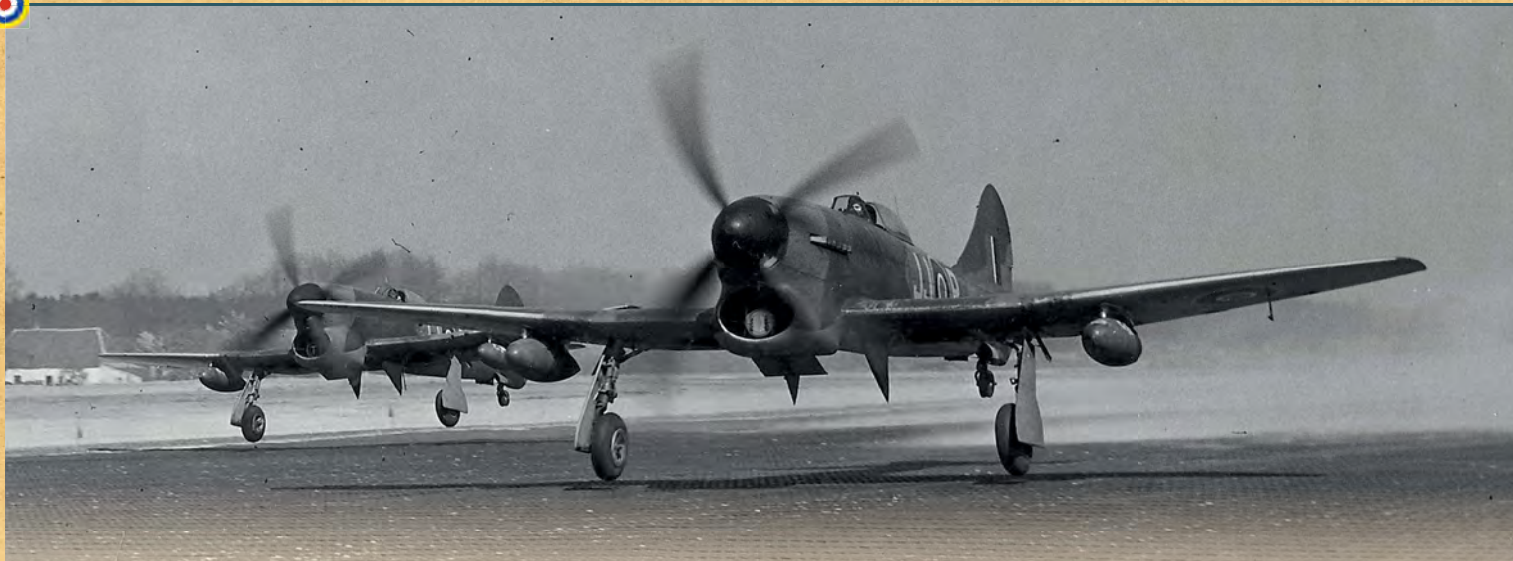
As spring gave way to early summer and the days lengthened and the weather improved, so the amount of flying increased. By the middle of May he and the squadron were staging sweeps and escorts for US bombers almost every day.

On May 17 Clostermann saved Mouchotte's life by spotting two climbing Fw 190s about to attack the commandant, and intercepting both. He had become a trusted wingman. →

Above
Pierre's impressive personal tally under the windscreen of Spitfire IX M.J.586.
PIERRE CLOSTERMANN VIA C H THOMAS

Below
Wearing a 602 Squadron badge on the nose, Spitfire IX M.J.586 was the mount of Pierre Clostermann. PIERRE CLOSTERMANN VIA C H THOMAS





Above

A pair of Tempest Vs of 274 Squadron lift off from the pierced steel planking surfaced runway, spring 1945.

VIA ANDY THOMAS

FIVE-NIL

Clostermann did not have to wait too much longer for his own first 'kill'. On July 27, the squadron had been ordered to escort USAAF B-26 Marauders on a mission to bomb the Luftwaffe airfield at Triqueville, near le Havre. Clostermann had not been slated for the sortie but he was 'hungry' to fly whenever he could and managed to get himself added to the list.

A little after 6pm they ran into a waiting gaggle of Fw 190s. The enemy fighters pounced on the New Zealand 485 Squadron first and the Frenchmen dived into the fray as well. Clostermann barely had time to feel

frightened as the fighters dived and swirled over le Havre, but he stayed doggedly on the tail of his flight commander, Capitaine Pierre Martell (also known as Pierre Montet).

Two Fw 190s were on Martell's tail and so Clostermann opened fire. He was too far away to hit them, but it made them break off their attack and turn on him instead. Climbing steeply, Clostermann did a half roll and before the enemy could complete their manoeuvre was behind the second of the '190s and well within range. Pressing down on the gun button, Clostermann saw strikes all along the German's fuselage, then it caught fire and moments later exploded.

Finding himself just above a second Focke-Wulf and diving down, Clostermann watched the enemy fighter grow ever larger in his gunsight until he saw the pale

outline of the pilot's face looking up at him.

He opened fire again, so close he could hardly miss – and nor did he. Pulling away, he saw his victim gliding downwards on its back, trailing thick smoke, before the pilot baled out and his parachute bloomed.

Clostermann was flabbergasted. He had shot down two in as many minutes. Martell had also got two and another pilot a fifth. The squadron diarist noted: "Result – a 5-0 victory. Everyone elated."

While there were days of triumph there were also, inevitably, days of tragedy. On August 27, 1943 Commandant René Mouchotte DFC was shot down and killed. In late September, Clostermann was transferred to 602 Squadron.

CLOSE CALL

On December 20, 1943, operating from Detling in Kent, 602

Squadron was involved in its second

Below

Pierre Clostermann congratulating Flt Lt Ken Charney on becoming an 'ace' after they had each shot down an Fw 190 in combat on July 2.

VIA DUGALD CAMERON





escort patrol for Hurricanes involved in 'No-Ball' raids against V-1 flying-bomb launch sites. After watching the Hurricanes flying straight into a box-barrage of intense flak, Clostermann was horrified to hear his flight being ordered to strafe the site as well.

They dived down, skimming the ground, only to find the light flak already had a bead on them. Tracers sped towards him and Clostermann was convinced he would be hit at any moment and crash into the ground.

He flung his Spitfire from side to side and too late saw a row of poplars directly ahead of him. Pulling hard on the stick, the starboard wing hit the treetops and only the momentum

wing, on his ailerons and elevator and a bullet through his propeller. Somehow, he managed to nurse his stricken Spitfire back to Detling. Clostermann had had a very lucky escape: it would not be his last.

BACK HOME

After being briefly posted to Skeabrae in the Orkneys from mid-January 1944 and training as dive-bombers – a concept that was not pursued, much to the relief of Clostermann and his fellows – 602 was back in the south, at Ford in Sussex, in time for the build-up to the invasion.

On D-Day itself, the squadron was active: taking off at 03:55 hours, at 09:00, at midday and finally

Clostermann was soon sent back to England. Five days after his victory roll over Longues-sur-Mer on July 2, he and his great friend in 602, Jacques Remlinger, were on a strafing sortie around Saint-Lô.

They had met with intense flak and a 20mm cannon shell exploded against the armour plate under Clostermann's seat, while the fuselage of Remlinger's Spitfire had been turned into a sieve. Both made it back in one piece.

Clostermann was exhausted, physically and mentally, and he had lost weight. That evening, he was told he had been awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross and was then posted home by the medical



"A few flights in the Tempest V convinced Clostermann he was in a superb combat machine... In dives, he saw the airspeed indicator top nearly 600mph"

around 17:30. Clostermann flew the latter two 'ops', swooping over the congested mass of warships, landing craft, freighters and minesweepers in the Channel.

On June 17 all of 602 Squadron moved across to France to its new base at Longues-sur-Mer. While it was true that the Luftwaffe flew barely a hundred sorties on D-Day itself that soon changed as units were brought closer to the front.

Over 200 fighters were flown in from Germany in the first 36 hours and a further 100 by D+4. By the end of June there were over 400 over the Western Front and while that was a hugely inferior number compared with the Allies, it was enough to ensure that it was no picnic for Allied fighters over France.

Having returned to his homeland,

the 23-year-old was being operationally rested; his time as a Spitfire pilot was over.

ABSOLUTE BRUTES

By the beginning of December 1944, Clostermann had had enough of second-line duties and he managed to get a posting to 122 Wing, about to be sent to the continent to fly Tempest Vs. He was destined for 274 Squadron as a supernumerary flight lieutenant after a conversion course on Hawker Typhoons and Tempest Vs.

Tempests had only been operational since the spring, but both they and the Typhoon were absolute brutes: strong, very fast, and heavily armed. A few flights in the Tempest V convinced Clostermann he was in a superb

Above
Tempest V EJ721 of 56 Squadron in early 1945. VIA ANDY THOMAS

Left
Pierre's CO in 274 Squadron was Sqn Ldr David 'Foob' Fairbanks who became the most successful pilot on the Tempest. VIA ANDY THOMAS

of travelling at more than 350mph (563km/h) saw him through.

He was not out of danger: "I avoided a high-tension cable by a hair's breadth – passing like a flash under the gleaming steel wire."

Climbing towards cloud he was vulnerable again to the flak and during the next few seconds was hit no less than *five* times – in the



CLOSTERMANN IN PRINT

Pierre Clostermann wrote up the wartime journal he had kept for his parents and published it as *Le Grand Cirque* in French and *The Big Show* in English in 1948. It was deservedly a huge hit and remains a powerfully moving memoir. It is no longer in print and richly deserves to find a new audience. He also wrote a compilation of wartime flying exploits, *Feux du Ciel (Flames in the Sky)* in 1957.

He went on to live a long and full life, as a politician, engineer, writer and sporting fisherman. His passion for fishing in exotic locations resulted in another best-seller, *Des Poissons si Grands (Giant Fish)* in 1963. Pierre Clostermann died in 2006, aged 85. In his journal he praised the Spitfire: "How beautiful the machine seemed to me, and how alive!" And the Tempest: "Its acceleration was phenomenal".



Above
Flying Tempest V NV994 of 3 Squadron near Hamburg on April 20, 1945, Pierre Clostermann claimed two Fw 190s destroyed.

VIA ANDY THOMAS

Above right
A group of Allied pilots of assorted nationalities. Pierre Clostermann is fourth from left on the back row. WW2IMAGES

combat machine. It had an emergency over-boost of around 3,000hp (2,238kW) and he managed to get 460mph when he applied it. In dives, he saw the airspeed indicator top nearly 600mph. It was pretty tricky at first, but he soon got the hang of it.

Clostermann arrived at Volkfel in the Netherlands in early January 1945, joining the Tempest-equipped 274 Squadron. Only 15 miles from the German border, the base had been built by the Luftwaffe in 1940. Everyone at Volkfel was still recovering from the shattering Luftwaffe attack on New Year's Day – Operation 'Bodenplatte' – that had wreaked havoc on Belgian and Dutch forward airfields.

Although the outcome of the war was not in doubt, in that first month of 1945 there was still no sign of the Germans giving in, especially not the Luftwaffe. There were still plenty of fighters defending German skies: new, faster, improved 'long-nose' Fw 190D-9s, Bf 109Gs and the new Me 262 jets.

And there was lots of flak, masses of it. In Normandy, there had been just

32 heavy guns of 88mm calibre or greater. In Germany itself, there were some 15,000 and even more light flak guns.

RAT-CATCHING

The air battles of the last months of the war in Europe have been almost entirely airbrushed from history, yet there can hardly have been a more brutal and lethal period in which to be a fighter pilot. Losses were horrendous.

Shortly after Clostermann's 24th birthday on February 28, 1945, he was posted to 56 Squadron, also at Volkfel, on Tempest Vs and appointed a flight commander. This was short-lived as he took command of 3 Squadron's 'A' Flight by mid-April at Hopsten, Germany. There he took possession of Tempest NV724 which he named *Le Grand Charles* after General de Gaulle and added a Cross of Lorraine to the cowling.

Among his first tasks was to try to destroy Me 262s which were becoming an increasing menace. The Luftwaffe seemed to be using them for armed reconnaissance, flying them too

low to be picked up by radar and too fast to be intercepted. The solution was for the Tempests to take off the moment an Me 262 was spotted and head for Rheine, where the jets were based.

Fast they may have been, but while recovering to base the jets were vulnerable. This tactic was called 'rat-catching' and for a brief period it worked, with eight '262s brought down. The Germans changed tactics, returning low and fast and only slowing once they were in the flak lane approaching Rheine. It was the turn of the Tempests to be exposed and a strict ban was imposed on going within 6 miles of the base.

EXHAUSTION

From March 23 to April 1, the Tempests were involved in providing support for the Rhine crossing. During one sortie, Clostermann's flight of two four-Tempest sections was first inadvertently targeted by American flak and then confronted by a dozen Me 262s and 20 Fw 190D-9s escorting Arado Ar 234 jet bombers. They all managed to get away from



that tussle, but Clostermann got caught in a spin and only just managed to recover in time. He burst a tyre on landing.

A regular task was using the Tempest's four 20mm cannon, particularly on railways. All trains had flak wagons and if the locomotive came to a halt, the anti-aircraft fire was often lethal. On one attack, Clostermann watched call-sign *Red 4* get hit, turn over and plough straight into the line beside the train.

Returning to base, there was a further tragedy. Clostermann's No.3 had been hit in the wing and so was landing first. On approach an Avro Anson came in underneath him – the ground controller had been frantically calling *Red 3* but with no response. The two aircraft collided, killing all, including five new pilots being brought over from England.

On April 13, an Fw 190 cannon shell smashed Clostermann's instrument panel and another whammed into the armour plate behind him. He'd been pumelled by a 'D-9.

It began to snow and before long it was a blizzard and freezing cold. Shivering with cold and fear, he headed back to base in his badly damaged Tempest, struggling to spot any landmarks. Twice crossing the Rhine, he was pursued by flak and finally touched down without flaps on a USAAF airfield much further south, having skimmed a rooftop and nearly collided with a P-38 Lightning. He was so exhausted that the American mechanics had to hoist him from the cockpit.

RANDOM FLAK

Even within a few days of the German surrender, the Allies were still losing pilots and aircraft. Clostermann wrote in his journal: "For some time I had been feeling as if I had only temporarily escaped that mad, seemingly endless world between life and death, constantly teetering on the high wire of chance, with no safety net and only courage, fear and nearly three years of combat experience to keep me balanced."

All of the Tempest pilots were

becoming obsessed with the density of the flak over Germany. Against another fighter, there was always a chance and skill and experience played a massive part; with flak it was so random.

Clostermann's last combat took place on May 4, 1945, four days before VE-Day. He was with 3 Squadron by then based at Fassberg, north of Hanover. Along with 56 Squadron, also stationed at Fassberg, the Tempests attacked a naval air base near Schleswig-Holstein, in southern Denmark. He destroyed two Dornier Do 18 flying boats at their moorings.

With the war over, he applied for immediate demobilization and had it granted. On August 27, he flew *Le Grand Charles* for the last time, taking it high over Schleswig on a final dance across the summer sky. He wrote: "And in that narrow cockpit I wept, as I shall never weep again, when I felt the concrete brush against his wheels and, with a great sweep of the wrist, dropped him on the ground like a cut flower."

Some have questioned his claims of 33 victories, but they were certainly credited to him at the time, the crosses carefully painted onto his fuselage, and really, there is no need to quibble over precise numbers.

The length of Clostermann's wartime service and his awards – the Croix de Guerre, DFC and Bar, DSC and Silver Star – cannot be argued with. He was a fine aviator, a phenomenally brave man and he has left us with one of the best memoirs ever written by a fighter pilot. ●

Left

Clostermann in the cockpit of his Tempest 'Le Grand Charles' while serving with 3 Squadron in May 1945. WW2IMAGES

Below

Clostermann's beloved 'Le Grand Charles', with a Mitchell in the background. WW2IMAGES



"The air battles of the last months of the war in Europe have been almost entirely airbrushed from history, yet there can hardly have been a more brutal and lethal period in which to be a fighter pilot"