



Squadron Leader Neville Duke

DSO OBE DFC AFC**

Farnborough Air Show, 6 September 1952: It was a lovely day for flying, he recalled later. His job was to display the prototype Hawker Hunter and take it supersonic over the crowd later that day. He was standing in the aircraft park area awaiting his turn when it happened.

Above right: Squadron Leader Neville Frederick Duke DSO OBE DFC & two Bars, AFC, Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service in the Air, War Cross (Czechoslovakia).

Tangmere Military Aviation Museum.

HE SAW HIS FRIEND, de Havilland test pilot John Derry, and navigator Anthony Richards, break the sound barrier in their black DH.110 during their low-level supersonic flypast. Following this, Derry banked left at about 450 knots toward the show's 120,000 spectators, and started to climb.

Then catastrophe.... The big jet suddenly disintegrated. Its crew had no chance and the spectators below were showered with flying wreckage – lethal shrapnel. Twenty-nine were killed.

Nevertheless, once the debris was cleared from the runway, the air display programme continued. The show had to go on. It was his turn...

Perhaps not yet realising the full extent of the tragedy, Neville Duke took the Hunter off and climbed away. Eight miles over Odiham, he pushed it into a 40-degree dive, descending at 50,000 feet per minute. Minutes later, the Hunter's sonic boom reverberated around Farnborough. The show had gone on.

Britain's Prime Minister wrote to him next day: "My dear Duke, It was characteristic of you to go up yesterday after the shocking accident. Accept my salute. Yours, in grief, Winston Churchill."

TAKING TO THE SKY

Neville Frederick Duke was born on 11 January 1922 at Tonbridge in Kent. He was educated at the Convent of St Mary and The Judd School in Tonbridge. Afterwards, he worked as an estate agent and auctioneer before applying to join the Fleet Air Arm on his 18th birthday. Rejected, in June 1940 he joined the RAF instead as a cadet.

After pilot training he was commissioned in February 1941, and posted to 92 Squadron at Biggin Hill in April. The squadron had reformed on

Curtiss P-40B Tomahawk IIB of 112 Squadron RAF before the distinctive shark's mouth adornment had been added. Reg Moore.





10 October 1939 at RAF Tangmere. Its Spitfire Mk.I's first saw action over the Dunkirk evacuation flying from RAF Croydon and it operated from RAF Biggin Hill during the latter stages of the Battle of Britain.

When Duke joined it was equipped with new Spitfire Vs. At times he flew as wingman to Biggin Hill's wing leader, Wng Cdr Adolph 'Sailor' Malan, in 1941 the RAF's highest scoring ace.

In June 1941, Fighter Command intensified its operations over occupied Europe, especially after the Germans invaded Russia on the 22nd. Three days later Duke was credited with destroying his first enemy aircraft.

During Circus No 23 on Wednesday, 25 June, about midday, a small force of Bristol Blenheims heavily escorted by Spitfires bombed Longuenesse airfield at St Omer. 92 Squadron was part of the top cover. Two Bf 109s attacked Duke from astern but he saw them in time and turned tightly just as tracer whistled past.

On the way back to England, he spotted a dogfight near Dunkirk and joined in. From about 50 yards range he fired several bursts of cannon and machine gun fire into a Bf 109F that was shooting at another Spitfire. It streamed glycol and started going down.

Flying just above the Messerschmitt, Duke looked down into the cockpit and saw the pilot crouched over the controls and not moving. Possibly he was hit. The German fighter descended in a gentle dive from 2,000 feet, struck the ground just east of Dunkirk and blew up.

Duke sped home at sea level. As he touched down back at Biggin Hill his engine stopped – he was out of fuel!

By August 1941, Duke had been credited with two Bf 109s shot down. In October, when 92 Squadron was withdrawn from the south of England, he was posted to finish his tour in the Middle East. He was told he would be there for only around six weeks. In fact, he would be away from home for over three years.

NORTH AFRICA

In North Africa in November, Duke joined 112 Squadron to fly Curtiss P-40 Tomahawks, which was something of a culture shock. After flying the latest Spitfires with 92 Squadron he found P-40s much "less agreeable." On his first familiarisation flight he crashed Tomahawk AM390 while attempting a three-point landing that was 'normal' in a Spitfire. He ground looped instead, fortunately escaping only with bruises.

He recalled later that the Tomahawk was "...very robust and was more sophisticated than contemporary British fighters, but as a result, was heavier and consequently not so manoeuvrable or fast-climbing. The armament of the Tomahawk was not heavy but a large supply of ammunition was carried and the nose-mounted.

"50-in. machine guns were conveniently situated for stoppages to be cleared from within the cockpit. The old fashioned ring-and-bead sight which was fitted in addition to the reflector sight could sometimes be used to advantage..."

He did use it to advantage on at least one occasion when the reflector sight failed and brought down an Italian fighter!

The standard German tactics in their superior-performing Bf 109Es and Fs working in pairs were to dive and climb, or to dive, fire, and continue down through the British formations. Only rarely did a 109 pilot turn with an opponent. Fortunately they used tracer ammunition which made it possible for Allied pilots to see where the ropes of tracer fire were going and tighten or slacken their evasive turns as a result. The German teamwork was very effective.

The Italian pilots were much more inclined to engage in dogfights but the lower performance and greater manoeuvrability of their aircraft were the reasons for this. They were fine acrobatic pilots and fought more in the spirit of a medieval joust than life and death combat. >>>

Above: The Luftwaffe grave at Gambut in North Africa showing the wreckage of a Messerschmitt Bf 109F and a Junkers Ju 88 in the foreground, and a parked Kittyhawk in the background. Reg Moore

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Above: January 1943: Neville Duke climbing out of the cockpit of his Spitfire VC somewhere in Tripolitania, just before the start of his second tour of operations. The 'kill markings' under the windscreen refer to his claims during his first tour in the UK and over the North African desert.

Reg Moore

Above right: Painting of Neville Duke's Spitfire VC ER220/QJ-R of 92 Squadron RAF over Tunisia. Duke emerged as the highest scoring Allied pilot in the Tunisian air war. *Bryan Philpott*



Duke opened his North African account by sharing a Fiat CR.42 with two other pilots on 21 November, and next day he shot down a Bf 109F from which the pilot bailed out in Axis lines. He waved to the downed German on the ground.

On the 30th, he destroyed a Fiat G.50 but was shot up by a 109 after a long chase and managed to force land. The German pilot was Oberfeldwebel Otto Schulz who strafed the Tomahawk, setting it on fire after Duke was in the clear. Schulz would achieve 51 victories before being killed in action in June 1942.

None the worse for his experience, Duke claimed an MC.200 and a Ju 87 probable on 4 December, but next day the 109s hit his Tomahawk (AN337) again and he had to crash land in Tobruk slightly injured. After being downed twice in five days, he had earned some leave in Cairo.

In January 1942 the squadron swapped its Tomahawks for new Kittyhawk Is. Armed with six 0.50 inch calibre machine guns in the wings, the Kittyhawk was an improvement but like the Tomahawk it could not really cope with the Bf 109 in speed or climb, or in the initial stages of a dive. However, in a sustained dive it was capable of catching or outdistancing the German fighter.

By February 1942, Duke had at least eight victories to his credit, and was awarded a DFC in March. He also completed his first tour of operations and lodged an application with his CO, Sqn Ldr Clive 'Killer' Caldwell, to return to operations with 92 Squadron in England, or go to Rhodesia or South Africa. What he did not know was that 92 Squadron was already on its way to North Africa!

TUNISIA

Neville Duke spent the next six months instructing at the fighter school in the Canal Zone. Then his wish was granted in part. He rejoined 92 Squadron at Gambut West in November.

It was almost a month after the British breakthrough at El Alamein, and the Germans and Italians were in retreat amid heavy fighting on the ground and in the air. Further west, there were the Anglo-American landings in Morocco and Algiers – Operation Torch.

To his delight, Duke found 92 Squadron was still equipped with Spitfires, initially Mk.VBs and then tropicalised VCs. After getting some “good shots” at Bf 109s as the year closed, he reopened his account on 8 January 1943 by claiming a Macchi 202, and three days later, on his 21st birthday, he shot down two more. Both pilots bailed out and were captured.

One of the downed Italians was Maggiore Gustavo Garretto, the CO of 18 Gruppo, 3rd Stormo, who expressed his appreciation of Duke's sportsmanship for not strafing him on the ground.

Although Churchill had already portrayed the Torch landings as “the beginning of the end,” Germans reinforcements poured into Tunisia and bitter fighting ensued.

Neville Duke recalled: “I flew Spitfires throughout the Tunisian campaign and was very happy indeed with this equipment. Of the Spitfire V, the Mark VC had the advantage of being able to carry a greater quantity of 20mm ammunition with its belt feed mechanism, compared with the Vs with the drum feed system.

“Each Mark was equipped with four 0.303 inch machine guns and two 20mm cannon, but I recall occasions when I deleted two of the machine guns and other items of equipment in an attempt to improve the performance of the Mark V. We felt we lacked climb and altitude performance compared with the 109....”

Neville was made a flight commander in February and he received a DSO in March. He and several others flew to Algiers in a Hudson on 23 March to collect the first Mark IXs. Each Spitfire squadron (Nos 92 and 145) had a limited number of these new aircraft.

“Whilst we were reasonably effective with the Mark V, the advent of the Mark IX was a revelation and a source of very great joy. For the first time one felt on at least equal terms with anything the enemy had to offer....”

Both squadrons operated mixed formation of Vs and IXs with the Vs leading because of their lower performance and the IXs flying a high top cover. By June, at the end of his second tour, Neville had added 14 more victories to his total and was awarded a bar



to his DFC. He was the highest-scoring Allied pilot of the Tunisian campaign.

On leaving 92 Squadron, he again hoped that he would be returned to England, but that did not happen. Middle East Command wanted him to pass on his expertise to new incoming pilots. Promoted to Squadron Leader, he was posted to 73 OTU at Abu Sueir, much to his chagrin. He became chief flying instructor before returning to operations in March 1944 for his third tour of operations.

ITALY

The war had moved on. Sicily was in Allied hands and the Allied armies were slogging their way up the Italian mainland, but an Anglo/American landing made at Anzio on 21 January was wallowing in a stalemate. In the air, the Luftwaffe had been almost beaten out of the skies.

Neville's new position was commanding officer of 145 Squadron in Italy, flying Spitfire VIIIs over the Anzio beachhead. 145 Squadron had been the first unit to receive this new version of the Spitfire, some considering it to be better than the IX which had actually preceded it into combat.

On the rare occasions German aircraft appeared, Neville soon showed he had lost none of his skills. He shot down a Bf 109G over the Perugia area on 13 May 1944 and followed this with another over Cassino the next day.

A week later, on the 21st, he was at the head of eight Spitfires which unexpectedly encountered twenty plus bomb-carrying Focke Wulf 190s escorted overhead by four Bf 109s. When the Spitfires attacked head-on, most of the Fw 190s jettisoned their bomb. In the ensuing running battle, eight Fw 190s were destroyed, another was probably destroyed and one damaged for one Spitfire lost.

Neville's share was two, one of which plunged into the ground and exploded. The pilot of the other bailed out but his parachute was not seen to open. This encounter was one of the most one-sided successes of the Italian air war. The Luftwaffe's Schlachtgeschwader 4 recorded the loss of seven pilots killed.

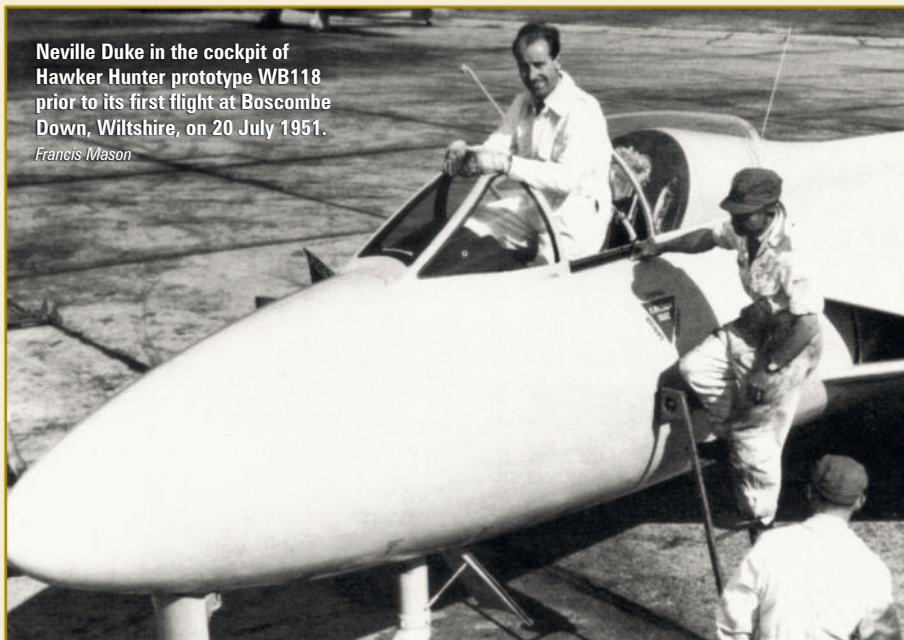
Neville was on the receiving end on 7 June. While strafing trucks in the Rieti area his engine was hit and flames erupted from the exhaust stubs. With the engine vibrating badly he set course for the Allied lines but he had to bail out into Lake Bracciano and almost drowned- before he could slip out of his parachute harness.

After 20 minutes in the water he was picked up by two boys in a boat. He was eventually taken to a lakeside house and hidden in case there were German soldiers about. Next day advanced US troops arrived and he was eventually transported to Rome and back to the squadron.

Neville scored his final victories on the fifth anniversary of the start of the war, 3 September 1944, when he and his wingman intercepted three Bf 109s north of Rimini. He shot down two, both times opening fire from long range and causing both pilots to bail out. The third escaped, possibly damaged by his wingman. >>>

Neville Duke in the cockpit of Hawker Hunter prototype WB118 prior to its first flight at Boscombe Down, Wiltshire, on 20 July 1951.

Francis Mason



Hunter prototype WB118 with Neville Duke at the controls.

Francis Mason



The Hunter prototype WB118 was transformed into the high speed Hunter Mk.3 for the successful World Absolute Speed Record of 727.63 mph (1,170.76 km/hr) set on 7 September 1953, again with Neville Duke at the controls. It is shown on display at Tangmere Military Aviation Museum, West Sussex. Author's collection



Just under three weeks later, his third tour ended and he handed the squadron over to Sqn Ldr Stephen Daniel. Then it finally happened. On the last day of October 1945 he boarded a Dakota and left Italy, destination England. He was going home at long last!

SQUADRON LEADER NEVILLE FREDERICK DUKE DSO DFC** AFC COMBAT CLAIMS

DATE	TYPE	LOCALITY	RESULT	AIRCRAFT/RAF UNIT
25/6/41	Bf 109F	off Dunkirk	Destroyed	Spitfire VB R6904/Y 92 Sqn
9/8/41	Bf 109F	Boulogne	Destroyed	Spitfire VB W3319/X 92 Sqn
21/11/41	CR.42	Tobruk	Shared	Tomahawk IIB AK402/F 112 Sqn
22/11/41	Bf 109F	Tobruk	Destroyed	Tomahawk IIB AK402/F 112 Sqn
30/11/41	G.50	El Gobi area	Destroyed	Tomahawk IIB AK402/F 112 Sqn
4/12/41	MC.200	Tobruk	Destroyed	Tomahawk IIB AN337/F 112 Sqn
14/2/42	MC.200	Acroma	Destroyed	Kittyhawk IA AK578/V 112 Sqn
14/2/42	MC.200	Gazala	Shared	Kittyhawk IA AK578/V 112 Sqn
8/1/43	MC.202	Tunisia	Destroyed	Spitfire V ER220/R 92 Sqn
11/1/43	MC.202	Tunisia	Destroyed	Spitfire V ER336/S 92 Sqn
11/1/43	MC.202	Tunisia	Destroyed	Spitfire V ER336/S 92 Sqn
21/1/43	Ju 87	Tunisia	Destroyed	Spitfire V ER220/R 92 Sqn
1/3/43	MC.202	Medenine	Destroyed	Spitfire V ER281/R 92 Sqn
1/3/43	MC.202	Medenine	Destroyed	Spitfire V ER281/R 92 Sqn
3/3/43	Bf 109F	Gabes	Destroyed	Spitfire V ER281/R 92 Sqn
4/3/43	Bf 109F	Tunisia	Destroyed	Spitfire V ER281/R 92 Sqn
4/3/43	Bf 109F	Tunisia	Destroyed	Spitfire V ER281/R 92 Sqn
7/3/43	Bf 109F	Medenine	Destroyed	Spitfire V ER281/R 92 Sqn
7/3/43	Bf 109F	Medenine	Destroyed	Spitfire V ER281/R 92 Sqn
29/3/43	Bf 109G	Gabes area	Destroyed	Spitfire V ER121/R 92 Sqn
16/4/43	SM.82	Cap Bon	Destroyed	Spitfire IX EN333 92 Sqn
16/4/43	SM.82	Cap Bon	Destroyed	Spitfire IX EN333 92 Sqn
13/5/44	Bf 109G	Perugia	Destroyed	Spitfire VIII JG241/J 145 Sqn
14/5/44	Bf 109G	Velletri	Destroyed	Spitfire VIII JG241/J 145 Sqn
21/5/44	Fw 190	Velletri	Destroyed	Spitfire VIII JG241/J 145 Sqn
21/5/44	Fw 190	Velletri	Destroyed	Spitfire VIII JG241/J 145 Sqn
3/9/44	Bf 109G	Rimini	Destroyed	Spitfire VIII MT775/J 145 Sqn
3/9/44	Bf 109G	Rimini	Destroyed	Spitfire VIII MT775/J 145 Sqn

TOTAL: 26 and 2 shared destroyed.

NOTE: Because of space restrictions, not shown are his 1 probably destroyed and 6 damaged, plus 2 shared destroyed and 1 shared probably destroyed on the ground. *Claimed destroyed in his logbook but credited as a probable.

EPILOGUE

After his return to the UK, Neville took a position for a year as test pilot for Hawker in January 1945. In 1946, he attended No 4 Course at the Empire Test Pilots' School at Cranfield and then joined the RAF's High Speed Flight unit. He married Gwendoline Fellows in 1947 and for his test flying at the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment at Boscombe Down 1947-1948, he was awarded the AFC.

Neville resigned from the RAF in August 1948, but joined the RAuxAF to fly Spitfires and Meteors from Biggin Hill. During 1950-51, he was CO of 615 Squadron, whose honorary Air Commodore was Winston Churchill.

In the meantime, he rejoined Hawker as an assistant chief test pilot in 1948, and became the company's chief test pilot in 1951. He was appointed an Officer British Empire (OBE) in January 1953 for his contribution to supersonic flight, particularly with developing the Hawker Hunter.

On 7 September 1953, flying Hunter WB188, Neville set a new world's air speed record of 727.63 mph (1,170.76 km/h).

In August 1955 while carrying out a gun firing test, his Hunter's engine suffered a turbine blade failure but instead of ejecting he managed to land safely and save the aircraft. For this he was awarded the Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service in the Air, but a couple of days later a loss of power in a Hunter resulted in a forced landing at Thorney Island in which his back was injured.

After time out on his back and in plaster, he returned to the Hunter development programme but another heavy landing in May 1956 resulted in a crushed disc and he was eventually forced to resign the following October after being immobilised for months.

Neville continued in aviation with consultancy work until 1960 when he formed Duke Aviation Limited. For much of the 1960s and 1970s he was the personal pilot of Sir George Dowty and in 1982 he sold his company. His flying career continued as a test pilot for Edgley Aircraft and later Brooklands Aircraft.

In between he wrote of his experiences. Test Pilot, his autobiography, was published in 1953 and reprinted in 1992. His other works included The Sound Barrier (1953), The Crowded Sky anthology (1959) and The War Diaries of Neville Duke (1995).

He was awarded the Royal Aero Club's Gold Medal, and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society in 1993. In 2002, he received the Air League's Jeffrey Quill Medal and the Award of Honour from the Guild of Air Pilots and Navigators. He became Honorary President of Tangmere Military Aviation Museum, where his record-breaking Hunter WB188 is on display.

On 7 April 2007, Neville and Gwen were flying their private aircraft when he became ill. He landed safely at Popham Airfield, but collapsed leaving the aircraft. Taken by ambulance to hospital in Basingstoke, he was diagnosed as suffering an aneurysm. He was transferred to St Peter's Hospital, Chertsey in Surrey, but died later the same evening. He was aged 85.