

Air Vice Marshal John Howe



It would take a book to recount the life of John Howe who died on January 27th at the age of 85, and indeed such a book has been written, 'Upward and Onward'. These two words describe so well John's long and distinguished career which we can only touch upon here. But we do have a fine photographic archive in the Association covering John's two years as CO of 74 Squadron, bringing the Lightning into operational

service with the RAF in 1960 and 1961 and a few are included below. But first a few words.

Born in South Africa, John's military flying career began with the South Africa Air Force. He learned to fly on Tiger Moths, then progressed to Harvards and Spitfire IXs. Aged just 21 and only a year after gaining his wings, John was in Korea flying Mustangs on low level strike missions. He was subsequently seconded to the US Army as a Forward Air Controller. After the war and dissatisfied with the political situation in South Africa in 1954 he resigned his commission with the SAAF having decided to pursue a career with the RAF and he moved to Britain. Over the following six years John was promoted from Flying Officer to Squadron Leader and served at CFS Little Rissington, No 4 FTS at Middleton St George and 229 OCU at Chivenor before joining 222 Squadron. at Leuchars flying Hawker Hunters. He had only been there six months when, thanks to his experience as an FAC in Korea, he was seconded to 40 Commando Royal Marines, also as an FAC, and landed on the beaches at Suez with them. That war was quickly over and back in the UK he moved from 222 to 43 Squadron, also at Leuchars. In June 1959 he was posted to a No 5 Day Fighter Combat School course at West Raynham and it was whilst there that he met his wife-to-be Annabelle and soon after they were married.

John, who was revelling in all the flying he was getting in the RAF, was given command of 74 Squadron in February 1960 which was at the time transitioning from the Hunter F.6 to Lightning F.1 at RAF Coltishall. The Lightning represented a quantum leap in capability which gave John what he always said afterwards was the 'greatest flying thrill of his life' although introducing the aircraft into operational service was a huge challenge. On 74 he was much loved and respected by all his men and at the same time Annabelle slotted seamlessly into the role of the Boss's wife.

One of John's enduring legacies from his time at Coltishall was the pivotal role he played in founding what was to become the NATO Tiger Association. On 25th November 1961 five members of the USAF's 79th Tactical Fighter Squadron were guests of honour in the

Officers' Mess. John was fully aware of the 79th, the American Tiger Squadron, for they were based only an hour's drive down the road at RAF Woodbridge - indeed the first contacts with them had been made a few years before John's arrival as CO. What made the 79th's proximity particularly significant for John was the fact that the squadron was commanded by Lt Col Ed Rackham, an old colleague from Korea. Keen to show off his new Lightnings John and some of his squadron flew down to Woodbridge. Legend has it that at the end of a very successful party Lieutenants Mike Dugan and Merrill McPeak of the 79th - both of whom went on to be USAF Chiefs of Staff - were instructed to find a French Air Force Tiger squadron to join them for a further operational and social get together. A directive had just gone out from C-in-C US European Command that every opportunity should be taken to further professional and social relationships between the two countries and with the RAF participating as well here was an ideal opportunity to do so. EC1/12 at Cambrai was the French tiger squadron that Dugan and McPeak identified and the first ever Tiger Meet was held on 19th July 1961 at Woodbridge with 74's Lightnings, the 79th's F-100 Super Sabres and EC1/12's Dassault Mysteres. Thus was born the NATO Tiger Association which still thrives today with 23 full members who participate in annual Tiger Meets throughout Europe, 10 honorary members who sometimes attend in a non-operational capacity and 7 disbanded members, the latter sadly including 74 of course.

It was with some sadness all round that John's leadership of the Tigers came to an end in December 1961 to take up a three year desk job at HQ Fighter Command at Stanmore followed by a year at the RAF Staff College at Bracknell. Promotion to Wing Commander preceded an exciting two year exchange with the USAF's HQ Air Defense Command at Colorado Springs where he flew all the current Century Series fighters and the F-4 Phantom. In the light of this experience, back in the UK he formed the first RAF Phantom unit at Coningsby, being appointed CO of 228 OCU. In 1969 he joined the Central Tactics and Trials Organisation at Upavon. Promotion to Group Captain was followed by a tour at the MoD as Deputy Director of Operational Requirements. He was back to flying Lightnings when he was appointed station commander at RAF Gutersloh in January 1973 before returning to the UK and the Royal College of Defence Studies in January 1975. Later that year John was at Bentley Priory as Group Captain Operations 11 Group. In April 1977 he became Commandant of the Royal Observer Corps. Promotion to Air Vice Marshal in 1980 led to command of the Southern Maritime Region at RAF Mount Batten and finally in August 1983 he was appointed the RAF's Director General of Security. John retired from the Royal Air Force in November 1985 and became a sheep farmer in Norfolk, a role which he took on with the same professional attention to detail that he had every aspect of his SAAF and RAF careers. As his granddaughter Isla so delightfully put it in a poem she wrote for her beloved grandfather:

So peacefully you went,
Resting in your sleep,
you'll now be reunited,
With all those blasted sheep!

RIP John.



