

The magnificent man in the flying machine

A respected Newport optician had a deadly eye for flying bombs and German jets. MIKE BUCKINGHAM recalls the life of Robert Cole, who died last week

THE first RAF pilot to shoot down a German jet in the Second World War, who was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross before becoming a well-known optician in Newport, died aged 95.

Robert Walter Cole was born in Gloucestershire and did a variety of jobs before being called up into the RAF and selected for flying training in California, USA.

After winning his 'wings' he was sent back to the United Kingdom via Canada on the *Queen Mary*, then in use as a troop ship, and posted to 3 Squadron RAF equipped with Typhoon fighters which was tasked, among other things, with shooting down German rocket-propelled V1 flying bombs aimed at London.

It was while undertaking this hazardous duty - the pilot often found himself caught by the blast of the exploded bomb - that he honed his skills as a serial marksman.

This skill was later put to deadly effect when during missions over Germany Mr Cole - who by that time had been commissioned - shot down a Messerschmitt 262 fighter, becoming the first pilot of a piston-engine aircraft to do so.

A mission shortly afterwards was to have a less fortunate outcome.

Having made an initial bombing and strafing run on German troops but still finding that he had some ammunition left, he turned to make another attack and was caught in the fire of a mobile anti-aircraft gun.



LOOKING BACK: Robert Cole in his service days



AFTERMATH: Flight Sergeant Robert Cole inspecting the damaged tail to his aircraft after he had destroyed a V1

Climbing his damaged aircraft at the best rate it could achieve, he inverted the Typhoon at the top of its climb and tumbled from the cockpit, watching during his parachute landing as the aircraft crashed several miles away.

Injuring his foot during the landing, the British pilot hobbled into cover and, using the countryman's skills learned in and around his Gloucestershire



TRIBUTE: Former RAF pilot Robert Walter Cole, who was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions during the Second World War WL 8216

village, hid from German soldiers who at one point passed within touching distance.

The only practicable way back to Allied lines lay in crossing a river, across which he waded and swam before taking shelter in a barn, where he lay, wet, cold, desperately tired and with an injured ankle.

As he attempted to continue the journey he was spotted by a girl on a bicycle who alerted the German

Home Guard, and they arrested him and took him to a farmhouse where his clothes were dried out and he was given soup by the friendly family. At a nearby German Army camp he was interviewed by officers, giving only his number, rank and name.

Together with other Allied aircrew prisoners he was put on a train for the prisoner-of-war camp at Sagen, a two-day journey in a closed cattle wagon, dur-

ing which the Allied airmen were given only one bucket of water among them to drink.

This water was supplied by a railway station sentry who took pity on them, and Flt Lt Cole was later to say: "It was the sweetest drink of water I've ever had."

In the final months of the war in Europe the prisoners knew that Allied soldiers were advancing towards their camps. One morning they awoke to find

that the German guards had fled. Shortly afterwards two Russian Cossack troopers on ponies entered the camp in advance of a larger Russian force and announced that the Allied airmen were free, "but would you please stay where you are".

Any fears that the Russians would be less than hospitable were dispelled when the British airmen were provided with food and entertainment.

Once repatriated, Flt Lt Cole was demobilised but asked to resume flying duties when it was realised that with the end of the war RAF machines were dispersed all over the globe.

With eventual demobilisation he trained as an ophthalmic optician, and upon qualification established a business in Newport with his wife, Isobel.

The practice became virtually a Newport institution and Mr Cole worked there until retiring at the age of 73.

A natural flier, he continued to fly long after the war as a member of Cardiff Aero Club (later Cardiff Wales Flying Club) with Isobel as navigator in their own Bolekow aeroplane - ironically, a German-built machine.

"I did the map-reading, held the check-list and poured the coffee," she was to say.

Despite his prowess in the air, Mr Cole cheerfully admitted to being a terrible driver.

"It was a family joke," Mrs Cole recalls.

"He didn't even learn to reverse properly."

In that respect Mr Cole was like many young airmen who learned to fly before they could drive or afford to drive a car.

Flight Lieutenant Cole, DFC, who died at Nevill Hall Hospital, Aberystwyth, is survived by his widow, Isobel, and two grand-daughters, Isanene and Phoebe.

The funeral is to be held at St Mary's Church, Usk, at 2pm on Wednesday, November 12.