

Flight Lieutenant Bob Barckley

Pilot who escaped to Spain after being shot down over France and later destroyed 12 V-1 flying bombs



Flight Lieutenant Bob Barckley, who has died aged 99, was shot down over France but managed to evade capture and escape to Spain. On his return he rejoined his squadron and destroyed 12 V-1 flying bombs, making him one of the leading “aces” against the terror weapon.

On the morning of June 2 1943 Barckley and a colleague took off from West Malling in Kent on an intruder mission in their Typhoons of No 3 Squadron, each loaded with two 500lb bombs. Near the French/Belgian border he attacked a stationary train with his cannons, when the locomotive blew up. He then attacked three trucks as he headed towards Dunkirk where he hoped to find a “worthwhile target” for his bombs.

Approaching Bergues, he saw a long goods train and decided to attack. As he started his dive, he encountered intense anti-aircraft fire from a flak wagon on the train. He dropped his bombs, but as he pulled away his aircraft was hit, part of the starboard wing was shot away and the control column ceased to function.

He managed to flatten out as he bounced off some trees,

missed some cottages and slammed into the ground at high speed; he was rendered unconscious. After recovering, he cleared the aircraft and escaped as German soldiers appeared.

He walked for 20 miles towards St Omer, and in a nearby village sought help at a church. A doctor attended to his wounds, and he was given food and clothing before being taken to a farm. After proving his identity to the local Resistance chief, he was taken to a “safe house” in Paris. Unknown to him, he was now in the hands of the Belgian-run “Comet” escape line.

After he had spent a few weeks in hiding, a young woman took him by train to a town near Biarritz before he cycled to a remote farmhouse near the Spanish border. He joined a party of other evaders and at nightfall the Basque guide “Florentino” led them across the Pyrenees to San Sebastian in Spain, where he was collected by car and taken to the British Embassy in Madrid.

He was moved to Gibraltar, and on August 16 he was flown to RAF Northolt in a Dakota. After debriefing in London he returned to his squadron and four days later resumed operational flying.

Flight Lieutenant Barckley Robert Edward Barckley was born on November 18 1920 in Brentford, Middlesex. In the summer of 1938 he joined a territorial battalion of the

Royal Fusiliers and served as a despatch rider with the British Expeditionary Force. He was evacuated from Dunkirk on June 2 1940.

In December of that year he volunteered to transfer to the RAF and train as a pilot. After gaining his “wings” he joined No 3 Squadron operating as both night- and day-fighters with their all-black Hurricane IIs. Their main task was dawn and dusk patrols over the North Sea convoys.

The first time Barckley fired his guns in anger was in August 1942 during Operation Jubilee, the ill-fated combined operation against Dieppe. The squadron’s task was to strafe the German gun positions overlooking the beach.

The following day he attacked German fast patrol boats (E-boats) harassing Allied shipping. Later he again attacked the guns, and his fourth and final sortie was to cover the withdrawal. He would subsequently describe the Dieppe raid as “a shambles”.

After a few weeks flying night intruder missions, the squadron was withdrawn from the front line to re-equip with the Typhoon. On May 18 1943 the squadron lost five pilots, including the CO, during an attack against the Luftwaffe airfield at Poix.

Barckley did not fly on that mission but later he recalled: “The atmosphere was very sombre and contemplative. I

had lost my closest friend on the squadron. But I remember also the 50-60 comrades lost before Poix and the two years that followed.” Two weeks later, Barckley was shot down near Dunkirk.

When he returned from Spain he found that his squadron had moved to Manston in Kent. On arrival he telephoned the CO, who refused to believe that it was him making the call. “No,” he responded, “it cannot be Bob Barckley, he was shot down, he is dead.”

Barckley managed to convince him that he was alive and waiting in the officer’s mess. There were celebrations to mark the squadron’s only pilot to be shot down and make it back to England.

Barckley was soon back flying sweeps over France until March 1944, when the squadron became the first to re-equip with the faster Tempest fighter-bomber. On May 8 he was flying an intruder mission over France when he spotted a bright light in the sky. He followed it and shot it down. He wrote in his log book: “chased airborne light from Evreux to Le Havre. Fired three bursts, went down in sea. Jet ship?” He later added: “Rather precognitive of me!”

The squadron moved to Newchurch on Romney Marsh in preparation for D-Day. After flying beachhead patrols, he later wrote: “The landing was an amazing sight – a

tremendous armada. The fact I had been with the Resistance made me feel it very deeply.”

Shortly after D-Day the Germans began their V-1 offensive against England. With their powerful Tempests, No 3 Squadron and two others provided the main fighter defence. Over the next three months No 3 shot down 305 of them, the most by any squadron.

Barckley opened his account on June 18, and a day later shot down two more over Kent. By the middle of July he had destroyed nine.

On July 14 he had used up all his ammunition shooting one down when he saw a second. He was able to accelerate and catch the V-1 when he placed his wing tip under the stubby wing of the flying bomb and immediately flipped his control column and banked. The weapon tipped over and crashed into a wood near Sevenoaks.

By the end of August Barckley had destroyed 12 V-1s and shared another. He was twice Mentioned in Despatches, and in November 1944 was awarded the DFC for “his high degree of courage.”

In September he left for Normandy to join No 122 Wing, which moved eastwards as the Allied armies advanced. In January, flying from Volkel in the Netherlands, Barckley was wounded attacking a German airfield and returned

to England to recover. When he was fit he was seconded to the Fleet Air Arm for test pilot and fighter instructor duties in Northern Ireland, before being released from the RAF. He was awarded the Territorial Efficiency Medal.

After the war Barckley worked in Northern Ireland and later became managing director of Coca-Cola Bottling. He retired to North Wales, where he enjoyed walking in the hills.

He was a long-standing and devoted member of the Aircrew Association, the RAF Escaping Society and its successor, the Escape Lines Memorial Society. He was a regular at annual conventions and he never forgot his gallant “helpers” of the Comet Line. He attended their reunions in Brussels and in 2014 made his last visit to meet the survivors.

Bob Barckley married Violet Craig in 1944. The marriage was dissolved. His second wife Eva predeceased him. A daughter from his first marriage survives him. A second daughter predeceased him.

Flight Lieutenant Bob Barckley, born November 18 1920, died March 28 2020

By
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