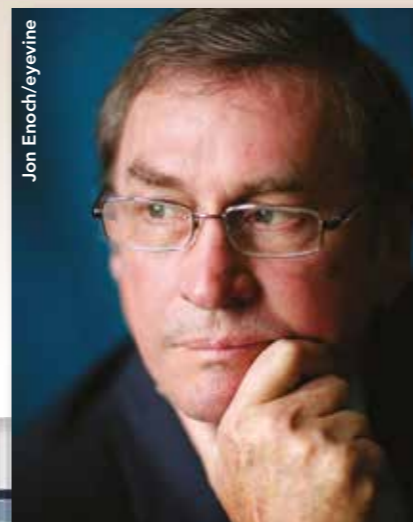




AIR COMMODORE ARTHUR "FATHER" WRAY DSO, MC, DFC & BAR, AFC

Arthur "Father" Wray was decorated five times for his gallantry, the span of his active service and the combination of his decorations amounting to a unique career in the annals of RAF history. In the latest in his series, Lord Ashcroft examines the service of Air Commodore Arthur Wray DSO, MC, DFC & Bar, AFC.

ABOVE: Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris KCB, OBE, AFC, Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Bomber Command (Centre), talking with Air Commodore Arthur Wray DSO, MC, DFC & Bar, AFC, (left) and Group Captain Hughie Edwards VC, DSO, DFC, during a visit to 460 Squadron RAAF at Binbrook, 16 September 1943. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; UK0551)



Jon Enoch/eyevine

Left with a permanent limp as a result of wounds received in the First World War, Wray was of a similar mould to the legendary Douglas Bader: nothing would stop him from flying.

Like Bader, too, Wray loathed red tape: he was unorthodox and prone to attracting his seniors' displeasure, though it is just such spirited warriors that win battles and wars, particularly when they take great care of their less experienced charges. Wray saw action during the Second World War, time and time again ignoring orders to remain grounded, so as to accompany his young bomber crews on their first operational sorties. At the same time, he knew full well that his First World War wounds would have prevented him from baling out of a stricken aircraft.

Arthur Mostyn Wray was born in Brighton, Sussex, in August 1896. The son of a pioneer missionary to central Africa, he was educated at Monkton Combe School in Bath. Aged eighteen, he left in mid-term to join the Army after the outbreak of the First World War. In February 1915, he was appointed a Temporary Second Lieutenant in the 9th (Service) Battalion, East Kent Regiment. In early 1917, he was seconded to the recently-formed Royal Flying Corps as a Flying Officer.

Having gained his pilot's "wings", Wray was posted in April 1917 to



ABOVE: A portrait of Arthur Wray with some of his medals on display. Wray's Distinguished Service Order, gazetted on 20 August 1943, has, for example, yet to be awarded. The citation for his DSO in the *London Gazette* included the following: "The value of the training he has imparted to the young crews with whom he has flown on operations is inestimable. His work both in the air and on the ground has been of the highest order." (Courtesy of the Lord Ashcroft Collection)

Lord Ashcroft's "Hero of the Month"



LEFT: An example of a Nieuport Scout, an aircraft flown by many British and French airmen on the Western Front during the First World War – including Wray during his time with 29 Squadron. In 1917 the type was one of the few machines which allowed British squadrons to fight back during the so-called “Bloody April”. Historians have found it difficult to identify how many of each Nieuport type were operated by the RFC as its surviving records tend to only specify “Nieuport Scout”. (US Library of Congress)

BELOW: A camp in Waziristan photographed from the air – an image that shows the kind of terrain over which Wray flew during his time with 28 Squadron.

BOTTOM: The pilot of this Bristol F2B, Mk.II J6647, is warming up the fighter's engine before taking off on a bombing sortie in North Waziristan during January or February 1923. (Imperial War Museum; HU89355)

France with 29 Squadron, which was equipped with Nieuport Scout aircraft. The average life expectancy for a flier at this time was just three weeks. Yet Wray, as was his wont, quickly made his mark with his aggressive flying, rarely missing an opportunity to attack enemy aircraft.

The recommendation for his Military Cross, his first decoration, described Wray, then 20, as a “very efficient and capable officer” and detailed four examples of his gallantry ending with the occasion when he was seriously injured. “On 28 May 1917, while on offensive patrol, he attacked a hostile two-seater biplane at close range south of Arras [France]. Almost immediately after attacking, he was severely wounded in the knee, and his thigh was fractured. In this state this gallant officer – though his machine fell for several thousand feet completely out of control – eventually managed to bring it to Wagnonlieu, where he was observed to make a perfect landing without damaging his machine.”

Wray's Military Cross was gazetted on 16 August 1917, while he was recovering from the serious injuries mentioned in this citation. Indeed, it was only after he landed from this mission that his left kneecap was, somewhat gruesomely, found in his flying boot. Surgeons gave

Wray a choice: with surgery, the knee joint could be repaired so that he would be able to walk relatively normally, but with a leg too stiff to pilot an aircraft – or, without surgery, his leg would retain a degree of flexibility that should make flying possible, but leave him lame for life. Wray elected to go for the latter: from then on he had a noticeable limp, which became worse as he got older.

After being invalided home, Wray's wound developed “serious septic complications” and he saw no more action for the rest of the war. However,



he was back in the air in April 1918 at 55 Training School after which he wrote: “First flip for ten months. O.K.” It was for his work later the same year, as a pilot instructor at the School of Aerial Fighting in Ayr, Scotland, that he was awarded his Air Force Cross on New Year's Day 1919.

By then, Wray was totally committed to a career in the newly-formed RAF. In January 1920, he was posted to India where he served a short stint with 114 Squadron in Ambala, flying Bristol fighters. Next, and by then with 28 Squadron, he became involved in the Waziristan operations. Between 1920-4, he took part in operational as well as photographic reconnaissance



missions, and bombing raids. It was for his courage in Waziristan, suppressing the revolt against British rule, that Wray was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for “distinguished services” on 30 May 1924.

By this time, he was back in Britain having joined 15 (B) Squadron in January 1924 operating from the Aircraft Experimental Establishment at RAF Martlesham Heath, Suffolk. This posting was followed by a long-standing commitment to become a pilot at the Armament and Gunnery School at RAF Eastchurch, Kent.

By his early thirties, Wray was commanding 407 Fleet Fighter Flight, based in Lee-on-Solent, Hampshire. Most pilots were at least a decade his junior and he was given the name “Father”, which stayed with him for the rest of his RAF career. Wray was promoted to

squadron leader in October 1933 and, during the same year, he flew to St Paul's Walden, Hertfordshire, for the funeral of one of his pilots, Rodney Clarkson, who had been killed in a road crash.

After the service, Wray met Clarkson's sister, Margaret for the first time. They were married at the same country church the following year. In 1935, Wray received his first squadron command: 43 Squadron, the famous



TOP: The Shuttleworth Aircraft Collection's Bristol F.2B Fighter. D8096 was built in 1918, but was too late to see service during the First World War.

ABOVE: An air-to-air shot of a 28 Squadron Bristol F.2B Fighter. After the war, Bristol Fighters continued to serve throughout the British Empire in army cooperation and light bombing roles with the last aircraft being withdrawn from service in 1932. Some 40 RFC/RAF squadrons operated the aircraft during its lifetime. (HMP)

LEFT: A photograph taken during the attack on Hamburg on the night of 24/25 July 1943 – the opening night of the Battle of Hamburg. The original caption states: “[It] revealed incendiary bombs outlining the camouflaged Binnen Alster (A) and burning on the bridge (B). Note the dummy bridge (C) over the Aussen Alster. Sticks of incendiaries are burning in the Altona and Dock districts (to the right of the photograph) while the approximate site of the gas works ... is indicated (arrow).” (HMP)

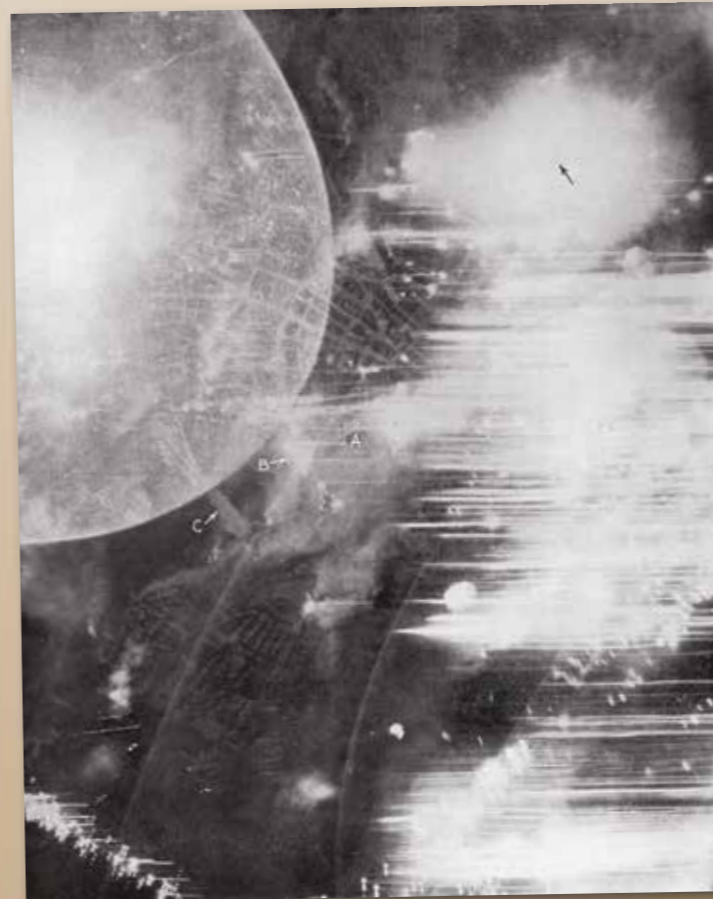
“Fighting Cocks”. Next Wray moved to Fighter Command headquarters and, after the outbreak of the Second World War, to bombing schools in Wales and Cumbria.

In November 1941, Wray was appointed as station commander of RAF Hemswell in Lincolnshire where, among other units, he was in charge of two Polish squadrons. By then, aged forty-five, and walking with a stick, he was protective of his young airmen – and had even less time for red tape. Survival rates for pilots were low and if morale dipped, Wray would fly with a young crew to their target and back without getting permission – on at least two occasions he was seriously reprimanded for his actions. Wray also learnt some Polish

words to encourage them, on one occasion bringing the house down when he read them a fighting speech from Winston Churchill that he had translated phonetically into Polish.

On 10 April 1942, Wray received a Bar to his DFC. He was praised in the recommendation for this award as “a very gallant officer, with a fine spirit of leadership”. On 24 July 1942, he was awarded the *Virtuti Militari* (5th class), Poland's highest military honour. “He was the finest kind of Englishman,” said one Polish pilot.

In May 1943, Wray became an Air Commodore and commander of 12 Base,





By 1944, the RAF was losing about 265 heavy bombers and nearly 2,000 men a month. Inexperienced crews were the most vulnerable and Wray continued to be hugely protective of them, often standing on the runway to see them off. At one point, Wray and a friend who commanded another squadron, flew with their men on a daylight raid, even though Wray had been refused permission to fly just hours earlier. His friend was shot down and, although Wray survived, he was "read the Riot Act", being told: "You know too much to risk being captured. No more operational flying."

which comprised the bomber stations of Binbrook, Waltham and Kelstern, all in Lincolnshire. From his headquarters at Binbrook, he was responsible for eighty Lancaster bombers. Binbrook was also the home of 460 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force. At a time when it was almost unheard of for a base commander – let alone one of his age – to fly on operations, Wray flew one of the 740 bombers which attacked Hamburg in one of the most devastating raids of the war. He won the admiration of the Australians – and the Distinguished Service Order. His decoration was announced on 24 August 1943, after the recommendation for his award stated: "By his keenness to operate against the enemy, his skill as a Captain of Aircraft, his personal courage and complete disregard of danger, he has set a very fine example to all the Squadrons under his command."

Wray retired at fifty in 1946. He settled with his wife and their three children in Pitney, Somerset, where he spent the next decade running a small farm. However, it was always a financial struggle and he was forced to give it up. Wray next worked with ex-servicemen through local branches of the Royal Air Forces Association and the Royal British Legion.

His love of flying remained with him but it was too expensive a hobby to pursue. However, in 1961, he discovered the Devon and Somerset Gliding Club at Dunkeswell, near Exeter. Despite being sixty-five, he took to the skies for the first time in fifteen years and became enchanted with silent flight. He embraced his new hobby and was a regular at the club in his battered tweed hat and corduroy trousers. In 1964, he became one of the oldest pilots to earn the international "Silver C" badge. He then became determined to get his "Gold C" qualification, which required a 300 kilometre (186 miles) cross-country flight. Time and again he failed in his quest to make the distance until he finally succeeded in 1972, aged seventy-five. He died in April 1985.

The year after Wray's death a tribute to him appeared in *Reader's Digest* in which Squadron Leader Douglas Sutton, DFC, recalled a flight he had made with Wray to bomb Stuttgart, one of Germany's most heavily defended cities, on 15 March 1944. At the time, Sutton was a young sergeant pilot with only seven hours' flying experience. With Wray at the controls, the navigator misread the flight plan and got them lost but he insisted on completing the mission through a barrage of intense flak, teaching his young crew various techniques to avoid being hit.

"By the time we landed back at Waltham that night, I had decided that Air Commodore Wray was the most remarkable man I had ever known," said



ABOVE LEFT: The aftermath of the Battle of Hamburg. Again, the original caption states: "Two large gas holders (A) were destroyed. Many warehouses near the Sandthor Hafen (B) and the Binnen Hafen (C) were completely destroyed and throughout the area photographed there is evidence of the great destruction by fire and high explosive bombs." (HMP)

ABOVE: An aerial view of the damage to Stuttgart after a number of visits by Bomber Command and the USAAF. This was a target that Wray flew to on 15 March 1944. A force of 863 aircraft – 617 Lancasters, 230 Halifaxes and sixteen Mosquitoes – was despatched on the raid. However, adverse winds were experienced over the city, which delayed the start of the attack and disrupted the bombing, which no doubt led at least one inexperienced crew to be grateful for Wray's presence. (HMP)

BELOW LEFT: Air Commodore Arthur Wray DSO, MC, DFC & Bar, AFC pictured beside a glider at the Devon and Somerset Gliding Club at Dunkeswell, near Exeter. (Courtesy of the Wray family, via Malcolm Barrass; www.rafweb.org)

Sutton. "I was not alone. For so many of us who flew with Bomber Command in the Second World War, 'Father' Wray was unforgettable. Repeatedly risking his own life to shepherd novice crews half his age through their baptism of fire, he increased immeasurably our chances of returning from raids. Beyond doubt, I owed him my own survival."

There is an adage within the RAF: "There are old pilots, and bold pilots, but no old, bold pilots." "Father" Wray was the exception to the rule, and I am immensely proud to own this remarkable man's gallantry and service medals. ■



HEROES OF THE SKIES

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist and author. The story of Arthur "Father" Wray's life appears in his book *Heroes of the Skies*. For more information visit:

www.heroesoftheskies.com
Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum. For more information visit:

www.iwm.org.uk/heroes
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