

Wing Commander  
John Connell  
Freeborn  
DFC & Bar



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Freeborn, as a flight lieutenant, with the ribbon for his DFC on his uniform LORD ASHCROFT MEDAL COLLECTION/IWM



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: 74 Squadron pilots Poulton, Freeborn, Wood, Baker and Mould standing by a Spitfire Mk.IIA LORD ASHCROFT MEDAL COLLECTION/IWM

*“War stories can contain a mix of tragedy and triumph and Freeborn’s formidable record was also tinged with controversy and regret”*

Wing Commander John Freeborn held the distinction of flying more operational hours during the Battle of Britain than any other RAF pilot. However, as is so often the case, war stories can contain a mix of tragedy and triumph and Freeborn’s formidable record during World War Two was also tinged with controversy and regret.

The pilot had a general disdain for authority and this led to a series of clashes with his superiors during a distinguished career that twice saw his bravery being recognised with the award of a prestigious gallantry medal. Later in his life, he helped an author to co-write his biography.

Freeborn was undoubtedly one of those whom Winston Churchill was referring to in his famous speech of August 20, 1940, when he said: “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.” I feel privileged that, as part of my medal collection, I am the custodian of his medal group, for we must never forget the bravery of “the Few”.

Born on December 1, 1919, John Connell Freeborn was the son of a Leeds banker. Although bright, his dislike of petty regulations meant that he was relieved to leave his local grammar school. At 18, he joined the Reserve of Air Force Officers,

starting his pilot training and flying solo after just four hours and 28 minutes logged – a little over half the typical amount for trainee pilots. His accuracy at firing was also twice the average. Freeborn was duly granted a short service commission in the RAF in January 1939.

### **Barking Creek controversy**

Freeborn initially flew Gloster Gauntlets, but from February 1939, by then having joined 74 (Tiger) Squadron, he flew Spitfires. In July that year, Freeborn was one of the 74 Squadron pilots to fly Spitfires to France to celebrate Bastille Day with the French Armée de l’air.

However, on September 6, with World War Two only days old, he was involved in an action that was later dubbed the Battle of Barking Creek. In a tragic misunderstanding, two Hurricanes from 56 Squadron were intercepted and shot down by 74 Squadron, thereby becoming victims of Spitfire ‘friendly fire’.

One pilot survived his crash-landing but the other, Pilot Officer Montague Hulton-Harrop, was the first RAF pilot to die in the war. He was shot down by Freeborn.

He and a fellow pilot were court martialled but they were acquitted of any liability or blame despite their squadron commander,

the South African ‘Sailor’ Malan, testifying against them. In fact, Malan gave evidence that Freeborn had been irresponsible, impetuous and had not taken proper heed of vital communications. During the hearing, Freeborn’s counsel, Sir Patrick Hastings, called Malan “a bare-faced liar”.

Freeborn left the court martial relieved that he had been exonerated, but angry at what he saw as Malan’s determination to avoid responsibility for the accident. The relationship between Malan and Freeborn never fully recovered although they did fly together again. The incident led to an overhaul of Fighter Command’s system for tracking friendly and enemy aircraft.

Freeborn, who was only 19, was distraught by the accident but became all the more determined to cover himself in glory in the skies. He was heavily engaged in the air battles to cover the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force to Dunkirk in May 1940. In a six-day period, the squadron accounted for 19 enemy aircraft – including two shot down by Freeborn – for just four aircraft lost. The squadron also recorded ten probable ‘kills’.

During one combat, Freeborn’s Spitfire was damaged, and he crash-landed on a beach near Calais. Undaunted, he “hitched” a lift from a returning British aircraft and

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was soon back flying. During late May, he claimed a Bf 109 destroyed and three enemy aircraft as probables.

### **“Keen and courageous”**

However, it was during the Battle of Britain that Freeborn excelled, flying into action time and time again. On July 10, 1939, the opening day of the battle, he shot down a Bf 109 over Deal, Kent. Success after success followed in dogfights and on August 11, he claimed three ‘kills’ and a probable, flying four missions in just eight hours.

At the height of the Battle of Britain, on August 13, and in the rank of flying officer, he was awarded the DFC. His citation stated: “This officer has taken part in nearly all offensive patrols carried out by his squadron since the commencement of the war, including operations over the Low Countries and Dunkirk, and, more recently, over the Channel and southeast England. During this period of intensive air warfare, he has destroyed four enemy aircraft. His high courage and exceptional abilities as a leader have materially contributed to the notable successes and high standard of efficiency maintained by his squadron.”

In October 1940, having been promoted to acting flight lieutenant and appointed a



Pilot Officer Freeborn at the age of 18 LORD ASHCROFT MEDAL COLLECTION/TIGER SQUADRON ASSOCIATION

flight commander, his portrait was painted by the war artist, Cuthbert Orde. The Battle of Britain, which ended on the last day of that month, had resulted in the deaths of 544 British, Commonwealth and Allied aircrew – but the Luftwaffe had fared far worse, and the likelihood of invasion had been avoided.

Freeborn's successes continued and, on December 5, 1940, he shot down two Bf 109s, shared another and damaged a fourth. He was awarded a Bar to his DFC on February 25, 1941, when his citation stated: “This officer has continuously engaged in operations since the beginning of the war. He has destroyed at least 12 enemy aircraft and damaged many more. He is a keen and courageous leader.”

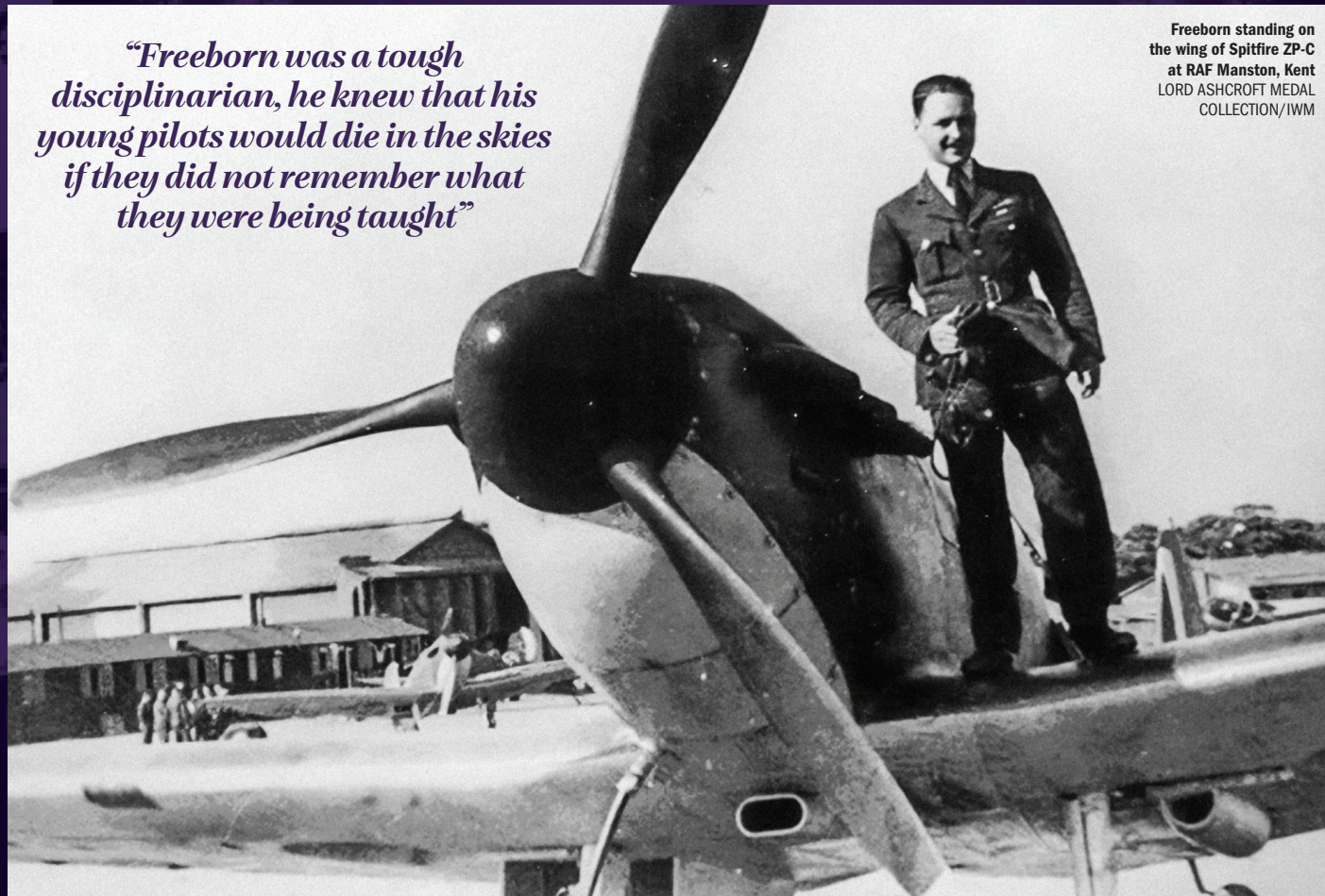
### **Tough disciplinarian**

In 1941, Freeborn married Rita Fielder. In June the same year, after a long period with 74 Squadron, he was posted to 57 Operational Training Unit at RAF Hawarden, Cheshire, training pilots from overseas to fly Spitfires. Following the United States' entry into the war in December 1941 he was posted there, instructing pilots and testing American-built fighter aircraft.

As a teacher, Freeborn was a tough disciplinarian, taking such a stance because he knew that his young pilots would die in the skies if they did not remember what they were being taught. He even built some ‘stocks’ for young pilots who misbehaved but, unsurprisingly, he was ordered to remove them.

Freeborn briefly returned to operational flying in 1943, flying Spitfires with 602

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Freeborn standing on the wing of Spitfire ZP-C at RAF Manston, Kent LORD ASHCROFT MEDAL COLLECTION/IWM



Freeborn's DFC & Bar, 1939-45 Star (with Battle of Britain clasp), Air Crew Europe Star, Italy Star, Defence Medal, 1939-45 War Medal, Polish War Order of Virtuti Militari and US Air Medal with Oak Leaf clusters LORD ASHCROFT MEDAL COLLECTION/IWM

Squadron. This role involved providing escort to bombers attacking shipping and port installations. On June 1, he was given command of 118 Squadron, where he had a similar role. For the rest of the war, he held several key training and operational roles, the latter including service as Wing Commander (Flying) – also known as ‘Wing Leader’ – of No.286 Wing, in Italy between June-December 1944 and where he was one of the RAF's youngest wing commanders. He ended the war in Britain and departed the RAF in 1946, claiming it was run by ‘nincompoops’.

After qualifying as a driving instructor, Freeborn later joined Tetley Walker as regional director of one of their soft drinks brands. He took early retirement and, following the death of his wife in 1979, moved to Spain in the early 1980s. Freeborn married his second wife, Peta, in 1983. In 2000, the couple retired to North Wales, but Peta died only a year later.

### “Dear friend and hero”

His biography, which he co-wrote with Christopher Yeoman, was published for the first time in 2009. Called *Tiger Cub: A 74 Squadron Fighter Pilot in World War II, The Story of John Connell Freeborn DFC\**, it contained a foreword written by his friend Bob Cossey.

Cossey wrote: “I have had the privilege of knowing Wing Commander John Freeborn for at least 15 years... Despite his connections with other squadrons (including command of 118) during the wartime years, 74 – the legendary Tigers – is the squadron to which John always feels he owes the greatest allegiance. He is extremely proud to have flown and fought for it when he did.

“Today all members of the very active squadron association recognise that in John they have in their midst one of the great



Freeborn with his mother Jean, shortly after he received the DFC LORD ASHCROFT MEDAL COLLECTION/IWM

names of the Battle of Britain. Each year at the squadron reunion (which John always attends) they demonstrate that by their absolute pleasure at his being there. They are inestimably proud of him and as proud of the fact that he is proud of the squadron! When a few years ago he was asked to speak after the dinner, he was given a standing ovation. This is a measure of the respect in which he is held.”

Cossey ended with the words: “Read this book and appreciate once again what we owe to all those who fought in the Battle of Britain and beyond. They were young men who sacrificed their youth – and very often their lives – in defence of their country. Furthermore, the telling of John's story is also the story of a great squadron during one of its finest periods. Chris [co-author] has done a fine job in recreating for us how it was to have been a Tiger from 1938-41. Enjoy.”

Christopher ended his epilogue to *Tiger Cub* with the words: “This work has been an absolute labour of love and I am greatly honoured to have been given the opportunity to write about my dear friend and hero, John Freeborn. It is with my greatest hopes that the reader is made aware of the many sacrifices made by those valiant young men who served their country in order to preserve the freedoms that we enjoy today.”

Shortly before his death, Freeborn, who was a proud Yorkshireman with a fondness for a pint of beer from his native county, said that the British pilot he had accidentally killed more than half a century earlier remained in his thoughts. “I think about him nearly every day,” he said, “I always have done. I've had a good life – and he should have had a good life too.”

By the time his biography was published in 2009, Freeborn was one of the last surviving members of “the Few”. Indeed, the publication of the book was well timed – Wing Commander John Freeborn, twice married and with a grown-up daughter from his first marriage – died the following year, on August 28, 2010, aged 90. **BW**

## HEROES OF THE SKIES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Heroes of the Skies*, was published in hardback in 2012 and is also available in paperback. For more information, visit [heroesoftheskies.com](http://heroesoftheskies.com). Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London. For more information, visit [iwm.org.uk/heroes](http://iwm.org.uk/heroes) and details about his VC collection may be found at [lordashcroftmedals.com](http://lordashcroftmedals.com). For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit [lordashcroft.com](http://lordashcroft.com). Follow him on X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook: @LordAshcroft

