

Eric Melrose (Winkle) Brown MBE, OBE, CBE, DSC, AFC, PhD, KCVSA, Hon FRAeS, RN,

Test Pilot

Born 21st January 1919, Leith

Died 21st February 2016, Redhill, Surrey

Eric Brown. A man with considerably more letters after his name than in it. But what did he do to deserve these accolades?

Quite a lot actually. There are three world records still in his name – the record for the greatest number of types of aircraft flown – 487 (most people don't even manage that many flights). The most decorated pilot of the Fleet Air Arm and still the record holder for the greatest number of Aircraft Carrier landings (2 407).

Flying was almost literally in Eric's blood. His father had been a member of the Royal Flying Corp during WWI and he took Eric up in a plane for the first time when Eric was only 8. The plane in question was a biplane, a Gloster Gauntlet that didn't actually have a second seat for a passenger so the 8 year old Eric simply sat on his father's lap for the whole flight, including a period when his father let Eric take over the controls of the plane!

In 1936 whilst still a pupil of The Royal High School Eric and his father visited Germany for the Olympics. Whilst there they made friends with many of the pilots of the newly founded Luftwaffe. In 1937 when Eric left RHS he went to Edinburgh University to read Modern languages (German). It was whilst at Edinburgh University that Eric started to learn to fly. Eric was able to raise money to help his studies working as a motorbike rider on the wall of death, sometimes accompanied by a passenger in the form of a lion! Eric was an exchange student in Germany when war broke out. Held by the SS for three days he was eventually escorted to the Swiss border and given a sports car to continue his journey home! Upon his return home Eric joined the war effort as a Fleet Air Arm pilot, initially working as an air escort for HMS Audacity. Eric was the only survivor when Audacity was sunk on the 21st of December 1941. For his efforts with Audacity Eric was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC). As well as the ship sinking Eric also survived 11 plane crashes. For the rest of the war Eric carried out various duties including training Canadian pilots, evaluating experimental and captured aircraft, flying operational missions and testing landings on aircraft hangers. In 1944 he was awarded MBE for his work on aircraft trials. At the end of the war his skill in German was used when he accidentally landed at a still functional Luftwaffe air field (the commander surrendered to Eric who held the base and all 2 000 men until the next day when Allied troops arrived) and also during interrogations of concentration camp officers. The airfield he landed at should have been captured by the time he arrived as he was supposed to organise the repatriation of a number of German fighter jets, he just got their quicker than the ground troops.

After the war Eric flew 53 different types of captured planes to evaluate them, including a rocket powered Messerschmitt which was pretty much labelled as too dangerous to fly. Eric took it up anyhow. He also found time to interview many high ranking Germans about aircraft prior to the start of the Nuremberg trials. In 1946 Eric was awarded his OBE for work on testing various planes.

Eric was nearly the first pilot to fly supersonic but the project was cancelled and the technology given to the Americans who used it to get Chuck Yeager to Mach one (Eric managed to get to Mach 0.985). Some experimentation with captured V2 rockets was going to lead to Eric being the pilot of the first manned spaceflight in 1949 but again cancellation of the project robbed Eric of this accolade.

Eric worked with the Americans during the Korean war in the 1950's, upon his return to the UK he became the commander of RNAS Brawdy, he stayed there until 1957 when he returned to Germany as Chief of British Naval Mission where he re-established Germany's naval aviation capability. After a stint as Deputy Director of naval warfare Eric became Captain of HMS Fulmar out of Lossiemouth. He retired from the Royal Navy in 1970 shortly after getting his CBE. Upon his retirement he became the Director general of the British Helicopter Advisory Group.

Eric's last flight as a pilot was in 1994 aged 75. Eric served time as president of the Royal Aeronautical Society and lectured on various aspects of flight throughout the world. In 2014 he was the subject of a BBC documentary Britain's Greatest Pilot and in the same year he was the guest of the 3 000th edition of Radio 4's Desert Island Discs. The presenter of Desert Island Discs commented "When you read through his life story, it makes James Bond seem like a bit of a slacker". In 2011 Eric spoke at the RHS prize giving and in 2012 he spoke to the RHS London Club. Eric clearly loved his time at RHS and in some of his TV appearances some old school photographs can be seen on his desk. Eric continued to collect awards and to carry on lecturing pretty much until his death, after a short illness, on the 21st of February, 2016. In 2018 a statue of him was unveiled at Edinburgh Airport. Some of the records that Eric collected over his life will never be beaten due to the unique circumstances prevailing at the time. The heroism and experiences he had over his long life were enough for several lives of people who we would admire for the work they had done.

I'm sure the RAF won't mind me borrowing their motto, Per Ardua Ad Astra.

And if you want to know more Eric was the author of nine books about his life and experiences. But one final thing – Eric Winkle Brown? Short for periwinkle, a nickname given to him because of his height of five foot seven.