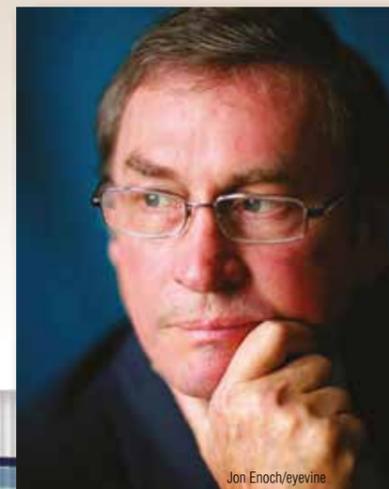




AIR VICE MARSHAL JAMES "JOHNNIE" JOHNSON CB, CBE, DSO & Two Bars, DFC & Bar

Against all the odds, "Johnnie" Johnson survived the Second World War as the highest-scoring RAF ace of the conflict. In the latest article in his "Hero of the Month" series, Lord Ashcroft tells the story of a remarkable man who was also a great team player.



Jon Enoch/eyevine

"Johnnie" Johnson not only flew in more than 700 Spitfire combat missions during the Second World War but he was also the top-scoring RAF flying ace of the conflict with thirty-eight confirmed victories. Furthermore, he was awarded a staggering three DSOs and two DFCs, as well as other decorations both from home and abroad. Unlike many top fighter pilots who preferred to concentrate on their own flying, Johnson was an inspirational leader of men and trained, encouraged and led scores of Allied pilots.

The son of a policeman, James Edgar Johnson was born on 9 March 1915 in Barrow upon Soar, Leicestershire, and educated at nearby Loughborough Grammar School. Later he attended Nottingham University, where he graduated as a qualified civil engineer in 1938. Despite starting flying lessons at his own expense, he applied, albeit unsuccessfully, for the part-time Auxiliary Air Force (AAF).

His second application to the AAF was also unsuccessful, as was his initial application to the Royal Air Force Voluntary Reserve (RAFVR). As tensions mounted in Europe, Johnson enlisted in the Leicestershire Yeomanry. However, the RAFVR began to expand in early 1939 and his earlier application was reactivated.

In December 1940, after his flying career was interrupted by an aggravated rugby injury, Johnson returned to 616 Squadron based at RAF Kirton in Lindsey, Lincolnshire, joining 'A' Flight and often flying as Hugh "Cocky" Dundas's wingman. In a combat with an enemy Dornier, Johnson initially fired too soon but he learnt from his mistake and played his part, along with >>



TOP: Johnnie Johnson pictured in 1941 sat in the cockpit of his 616 Squadron, Tangmere-based, Spitfire, an aircraft he famously had embellished with the words "Bader's Bus Co. Still Running". (ww2images)

ABOVE: A portrait of Wing Commander James Edgar Johnson DSO, DFC. (ww2images)

Lord Ashcroft's "Hero of the Month"



ABOVE: A group photograph of personnel from Nos. 610 and 616 squadrons: Douglas Bader can be seen in the centre of the front row. Johnnie Johnson is sitting in the second row, third from the right. (Courtesy of Chris Goss)



LEFT: Wing Commander J.E. Johnson, wing leader of No. 144 (Canadian) Wing, sitting in the cockpit of his Supermarine Spitfire Mark IX at Ford, Sussex, in May 1944. (Imperial War Museum; CH13127)

In May and June 1941, 616 Squadron flew *Rhubarb* operations, the name originating from the low-level at which they were flown. Bader's search for the perfect flying formation saw him adopt the "Finger Four" in which Johnson was largely responsible for protecting Dundas. This restricted Johnson's personal score but on 26 June 1941 he achieved his first "kill" in a dogfight with a Messerschmitt Bf 109. Johnson later wrote: "I was dead line astern of the Messerschmitt and hit him behind the cockpit with

Dundas, in damaging the aircraft during a further attack, sending it limping back to Holland. In February 1941, 616 Squadron was posted back to 11 Group, joining 145 and 610 Spitfire Squadrons at RAF Tangmere, Sussex. The following month, the legendary Douglas Bader was appointed Wing Leader and he chose Johnson to fly alongside him.

the eight machine-guns. As the range closed I contrived to spray the 109 with bullets and the Pilot half rolled on to his back and jettisoned his hood ... I hammered him once more." When Johnson started flying regular sweeps – one of nine pilots chosen for the role (as opposed to flying point patrols or convoy duties) – his score soon escalated. Johnson

destroyed two enemy aircraft on 6 and 14 July 1941, having already damaged one on 4 July. On 21 July, he claimed a shared "kill" but on the same day he lost his wingman, Sergeant Sydney Mabbett, a tragedy that affected him greatly.

On 9 August 1941, Johnson was flying in an operation when Bader was shot out of the sky. Five days later the news arrived that Bader was a PoW. Johnson wanted to show the wing was still very much up for the fight, embellishing his Spitfire with the words: "BADER'S BUS Co. STILL RUNNING."

On 30 September 1941, Johnson's DFC was

RIGHT: Johnnie Johnson, on the far left, pictured with other officers at his billet at Rushmans in Oving – an image taken during his time at Tangmere. (Courtesy of Chris Goss)

MAIN PICTURE BELOW: Johnnie Johnson pictured beside his personal Spitfire, Mk.IX EN398 JE-J, in 1943. He selected this Spitfire after a fifty-minute test flight on 22 March 1943, it going on to be the aircraft in which he scored a large number of his thirty-eight victories. (ww2images)

announced, his recommendation stating: "Pilot Officer Johnson has taken part in 46 sweeps over enemy territory. He has at all times by his cheerful courage been a great asset to the Squadron. He has the following enemy aircraft to his credit: 4.5 Destroyed, 2 Probables, 1.5 Damaged." At the same time, Johnson was appointed as Commander of 'B' Flight.

By now, the character of 616 Squadron was changing: there were many young, foreign pilots in its ranks and Johnson was the sole survivor from the 1940 pilots. The Bar to Johnson's DFC was announced on 26 June 1942, when his recommendation concluded that he "has been an inspiration to the Pilots under his command, and his cheerful countenance at all times has done much to foster a high morale in the Squadron."

Johnson was appointed to the command of 610 (County of Chester) Squadron, based at RAF Coltishall, Norfolk, in July 1942 and was given the rank of acting squadron leader. At this time 610 Squadron was part of 12 Group, but Johnson wanted it to be part of 11 Group for the combat "season".

Initially, Johnson and the men under his command had to accept shipping reconnaissance and convoy patrols but then came the opportunity for them to make their mark: the Dieppe Raid, codenamed Operation *Jubilee*.

Early on 19 August 1942, the squadron took off to provide top cover for Nos. 411 (Royal Canadian Air Force) and 486 (Royal



New Zealand Air Force) squadrons, which had been tasked with preventing enemy aircraft from attacking the Allied ground forces. For Johnson and others involved in the thick of the fighting, it was to be an unforgettable day of relentless and daring aerial combat action, which included what he later assessed was his hardest dog-fight of the war: "We sparred for about a minute and I tried my usual tactic of trying to turn inside the enemy, but after a couple of turns I was making no headway, and, in fact, he was gaining on me!" Eventually, both pilots lived to fight another day.

By early 1943, Johnson was due to be rested but, instead, he was promoted to wing commander and given command of the Kenley Wing (Nos. 403 and 416 (Royal Canadian Air Force) squadrons), which were re-equipped with Spitfire IXs. At this stage, he also adopted the call sign "Greycap" and, despite expert advice that it would be safer to change it periodically, kept it for the rest

of the war. As a wing commander, he took up the privilege of substituting the Spitfire's three initials for his own "JE-J", even though he was again warned that this would attract unwanted "attention" from the enemy.

Johnson's DSO was announced on 4 June 1943, when his recommendation concluded: "He is an outstanding Wing Leader and in my opinion his leadership expressed in his cheerful, forceful personality is largely responsible for the high morale and success of the Kenley Wing. Wing Commander Johnson puts the success of his Wing first on all occasions."

The Canadian pilots thrived under Johnson's leadership >>



RIGHT: Air Vice Marshal James "Johnnie" Johnson's medal group which includes no less than three DSOs and two DFCs, as well as other decorations both from home and abroad. (Courtesy of the Lord Ashcroft Collection)

BELOW LEFT: Wing Commander J.E. Johnson, leader of No. 144 (Canadian) Wing RAF, rests on the wing of his Spitfire Mk.IX, with his Labrador retriever Sally, between sorties at B2/Bazenville, Normandy, on 31 July 1944. (ww2images)

BELOW RIGHT: Air Vice Marshal Johnnie Johnson recreates the 1944 scene by posing on the wing of a Spitfire at the Imperial War Museum Duxford in July 2000. (Stefan Rousseau/PA Archive)



and over that spring and summer shot down more than 100 enemy aircraft on fourteen missions over North-West Europe. As a mark of their respect for their Wing Commander, Johnson complied with their request to sport "CANADA" shoulder-flashes.

The first Bar to Johnson's DSO was announced on 24 September 1943 when his recommendation stated: "Since the citation of the award of the D.S.O. to this Officer on 17 May, he has completed 41 offensive sorties, during which he has personally destroyed a further 7.5 enemy aircraft while damaging another. During the same period the Wing under his leadership has destroyed 27, probably destroyed 3 and damaged 30. This is considered to be a magnificent effort for [a] two months period and is due in large part to the skilful leadership and relentless determination to engage the enemy displayed by this Wing Leader."

That September Johnson was also ordered off operations to undertake a staff role at Uxbridge, north-west London. Here he worked with the USAAF co-ordinating escorts, but he continued to "keep his eye in" by occasionally flying with Spitfire IX and Spitfire XII combat units.

March 1944 saw Johnson appointed wing commander flying of 144 Wing, which comprised of Nos. 441, 442 and 443 squadrons, Royal Canadian Air Force. By now, with twenty-five official victories, his score was closing in on the record total of "Sailor" Malan, who was no longer flying operationally. On 5 June 1944, the day before the D-Day landings, his Wing was instructed to protect

part to the invading force's eastern flank from air attack. On D-Day itself, Johnson led his men on several sorties over the invasion beaches.

Johnson's second Bar to his DSO was announced on 7 July 1944. His recommendation described him as "a leader who combines the complete confidence and respect of his Pilots, combined with an untiring patience and energy on his part".

By 23 August 1944, Johnson's official tally had drawn equal with Malan's thirty-two "kills". He destroyed two more Bf 109s on 5 July and was feted by the Press. With typical generosity, Johnson suggested Malan's achievements were superior since he had flown from 1940-1 when he had less protection in the air and was frequently outnumbered by the enemy. By now Johnson, and his faithful Labrador, Sally, were enjoying great public acclaim.

On 27 September 1944, Johnson claimed his final victory, shooting down a Bf 109 at Rees on Rhine. In March 1945 he was promoted to group captain and was also given the command of 125 Wing that had been equipped with new Spitfire Mk.IVs. Johnson's verdict on the aircraft was that it was a "nice, fast flying machine ... but it's not a Spitfire any more".

Before and after the end of hostilities, Johnson was given numerous decorations by other Allied countries. He was awarded the American DFC on 18 January 1944, as well as the Belgian Order of Leopold and *Croix de Guerre* in January 1947. After the war, Johnson was given the task of organising a victory show over Denmark. He then

continued to serve in Germany until 1946 before serving in

Canada and the US, and completing a three-month tour of active service in the Korean War.

The 1950s saw him become an author too: in 1956 he published his autobiography *Wing Leader*. The 1960s saw more promotions – to air commodore in 1960 and to air vice marshal in 1963 when he was posted to Aden as Air Officer Commanding (AOC) Air Forces Middle East. Furthermore, Johnson was awarded the Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB) in June 1965, on top of his earlier Commander of the British Empire (CBE) announced on New Year's Day 1960.

Johnson retired in 1966 and, afterwards, worked for various British, Canadian and South African companies, as well as founding the Johnnie Johnson Housing Trust to provide homes for thousands of elderly and disabled people. Johnson died from cancer on 30 January 2001, aged eight-five. I purchased his medals in December 2001 for a hammer price of £241,500, then the world record price for an RAF group at auction. ■

HEROES OF THE SKIES

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist and author. The story of Johnson'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 in London. For more information visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. For details about his VC collection, visit: www.lordashcroftmedals.com

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