



The Fly Navy Heritage Trust

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## PRESS RELEASE

### **Captain Eric 'Winkle' Brown The World's Greatest Naval Test Pilot - A Tribute**

**Captain Eric 'Winkle' Brown CBE DSC AFC FRAeS Royal Navy, one of the most celebrated aviators and test pilots in history, who flew a record 487 types of aircraft and carried out 2,407 aircraft carrier deck landings, died on 21 February 2016 aged 97.**

As an Ambassador for the Fly Navy Heritage Trust and a passionate supporter of the Nation's Naval Aviation Heritage, Captain Eric Winkle Brown was a great friend of the Fleet Air Arm and the whole aviation heritage community.

"The Fleet Air Arm has lost one of its finest and best known pilots, but British Aviation has lost something even greater," said Admiral Sir George Zambellas, First Sea Lord. "Eric Winkle Brown was one of the most accomplished test pilots of his generation, and perhaps of all time. He will be remembered forever as the first man to land a jet aircraft on a carrier; and through his heroic service in the Second World War and later as an innovator in both technology and skill, he was a practitioner, pioneer and advocate of maritime air power throughout his life."

Winkle's legendary career as naval test pilot spanned three decades during the most exciting and innovative period in aviation history. "As the Navy's Chief Test pilot he played a key role in the design and flight-testing of an entire generation of aircraft, pioneering many new technologies that gave the UK aviation industry a world leading reputation" said Sue Eagles, the Trust's Communications Director. "We have not only lost a truly remarkable man and dear friend but a last link to a vital chapter in our nation's history."

The birth of the Jet Age and the radical new designs it spawned, brought with it new levels of risk for the pilots who tested these aircraft but an aviation scientist at heart, Winkle relished problem-solving and finding ingenious ways to overcome difficulties. His fearlessness and ability to remain calm in the face of danger set him apart as he pushed the boundaries of landing faster and heavier aircraft on aircraft carriers. Within a few years, the advances in jet engine technology saw the top speed of military fighters rise from a 'sedate' 600 mph to a blistering 1400 mph.

Born in 1919 in Leith, near Edinburgh, 'Winkle' joined the Fleet Air Arm in 1939 as a fighter pilot, initially flying the Blackburn Skua and narrowly surviving an attack from a Messerschmitt Bf 109 in a Norwegian fjord. In early 1941 he joined 802 Squadron flying Martlets from the Navy's first auxiliary aircraft carrier, HMS Audacity, an 8,000 ton converted banana boat. He described landing on her tiny deck as 'challenging to say the least!'

Audacity's Martlets bravely fought off repeated attacks from heavily armed Focke-Wulf Condor bombers, using a courageous and death-defying combat tactic developed by Winkle to attack them head-on! On 21 December 1941 Winkle survived the sinking of HMS Audacity when she was hit by torpedoes from a German U boat with heavy loss of life. "I will never forget that fateful day" said Eric. "The ship reared up so steeply that the aircraft plunged down the wildly tilting deck. She sank taking all her aircraft with her. I had just landed on, so was still wearing my Mae West lifejacket. I lost many friends that day and was very lucky to survive."

In the early days of the Battle of the Atlantic desperate measures were sought to reduce the dreadful attrition rate to allied shipping by German U boat attacks and Winkle was soon back in the cockpit launching reinforced Hurricanes by rocket catapult from Catapult Armed Merchant Ships.

Testing up to eight different aircraft a day by 1944, word of this fearless flier began to spread, and towards the end of the War it had reached the ears of Winston Churchill, who singled him out for a special task.

Thus, in 1945 Eric was appointed as Chief Pilot on a joint UK/US mission to retrieve Germany's most closely guarded technological secrets, flying many captured German aircraft, including their top fighter, which was 125 mph faster than our equivalent! "It was exciting but hairy at times!" said Eric. "The Germans were developing highly sophisticated aircraft and the aerodynamics of the wing configuration for Concorde stemmed directly from that mission."

It was while on this mission, that Eric's War took quite a different turn. Fluent in German he was asked to accompany a medical unit to help liberate Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The experience was to affect him deeply for the rest of his life including interrogating Hermann Göering, founder of the Gestapo and other senior members of the Nazi regime. In 2015, he returned to Belsen with The Queen and found meeting former prisoners who he had helped to liberate profoundly moving.

Throughout his career, Winkle's bravery, ingenuity and indomitable spirit was matched only by his fierce commitment to keep the Navy's historic aircraft flying as an inspiration to future generations. "The innovative advances of so many of our aviation achievements came at a price. Flying from ships at sea is a hazardous business. It was like playing Russian roulette and test pilots were routinely killed. Keeping our heritage aircraft flying tells the story of the courage, endeavour and technological achievements of British naval aviation in a powerfully dynamic way" said Eric. "It would be an absolute travesty if all this was lost. After I am gone, I hope that the aircraft will be well looked after, and that the men who flew them and those who laid down their lives in them will never be forgotten."

The baton has been passed; the mantle conferred and we all owe it to this extraordinarily courageous and dedicated man to ensure that his great legacy to the nation is preserved.

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21 February 2016