

Profile – W/Cdr Frederick Desmond Hughes - 604 Squadron – by Ian White



Hughes as W/Cdr with 604 Squadron 'via the 604 Squadron Association'.

Usually known as Desmond Hughes - was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, on the 6th June 1919 and educated at Campbell College, Belfast, and Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he read law. He learned to fly with the Cambridge University Air Squadron before being commissioned into the RAF as a P/O on the 29th October 1939 and posted to No.1 Initial Training Wing (ITW) at Cambridge the following month. He undertook his initial flying training at Cranwell on the second wartime course and completed his training at No.5 Flying Training School (FTS), Sealand, before moving to the School of Army Co-operation at Old Sarum, Wilts. A week later, on the 10th June 1940, he was posted to No.5 Operational Training Unit (OTU), Aston Down, to convert to the Boulton Paul Defiant and was posted again to No.264 Squadron at Duxford, Cambs, on the 19th.

At 264 he was teamed-up with Sgt Fred Gash as his gunner, with the pair claiming their first enemy aircraft (e/a) when they destroyed a pair of Dornier Do 17Zs on the 26th August 1940, by which time the Squadron had moved to Hornchurch, Essex. Their first night-kill occurred on the night of the 15th/16th October when a Heinkel He 111H-4 of Kampfgruppe 126 (KGr126) engaged on minelaying was shot down over the Thames estuary during the early hours of the 16th and crashed at Hutton, near Billericay, Essex, at 0200 hours. The pair damaged another He 111 on the 23rd/24th November. By March 1941 264 had moved to Biggin Hill, Kent, from where Hughes & Gash took-off to intercept their next victim, an He 111P-4 of Kampfgeschwader 55 (KG 55) that was on its way to bomb Birmingham. The aircraft caught fire and exploded before hitting the ground near Ockley, Surrey, at 2130 hours on the evening of the 12th March. Another He 111 was claimed as a probable on the 8th/9th April. On the night of the 10th/11th April, Hughes and Gash destroyed another He 111 during an attack on the West Midlands. For their work with 264 F/O Hughes and Sgt Gash were awarded the DFC and DFM respectively on the 18th April 1941.

On the 3rd October 1941 Hughes was promoted to F/Lt and posted as a flight commander (and acting

S/Ldr) to No.125 Squadron in January 1942, who were shortly to convert from Defiants to Merlin-powered Beaufighter Mk.IIs at Colerne, Wilts, and then move to Fairwood Common, near Swansea, during May. Sgt Gash did not accompany F/Lt Hughes to Colerne, his place as Hughes regular radar operator (R/O) being taken by P/O Laurie Dixon later in the year. Hughes first kill with 125 occurred on the 27th June when he claimed a Junkers Ju 88 destroyed. His first claim with Dixon was made on the 4th November, when another Ju 88 was destroyed.

On the 19th January 1943 S/Ldr Hughes and F/O Dixon left 125 on posting to 600 Squadron that was then stationed at Setif, Algeria, following the Allied landings in North Africa the previous November (Operation Torch). - Hughes & Dixon's record in North Africa with 600 is covered in Appendix IV of Gentlemen in Blue - Hughes was awarded a bar to his DFC on the 13th April 1943 and second bar on the 28th September 1943. At the end of 1943 Hughes was posted back to the UK to a staff appointment at HQ Fighter Command, before being promoted to acting W/Cdr in February 1944 and posted to HQ No.85 Group, Tactical Air Force, where he remained until he was appointed to command 604 Squadron on the 19th July 1944.

When W/Cdr Hughes and Dixon joined 604 Squadron they were stationed at Colerne, but engaged on preparing to move to the Continent of Europe, a move that was made that month when a detachment crossed the Channel to occupy Manpertus (Airfield A.15) on the Cherbourg Peninsular. By August the Squadron had moved to Picauville (A.8) a few miles inland. It was from Picauville that Hughes and Dixon intercepted and destroyed a Ju 88 near Avaranches on the night of the 6th/7th. The pair's final victory occurred on the night of the 14th/15th January 1945, when another Ju 88 was despatched to the south of Rotterdam. For his work in commanding 604, W/Cdr Hughes was awarded the DSO on 23rd March 1945. Hughes was destined to be 604's last wartime CO, when the Squadron was formally disbanded at Lille/Vendeville (B.51) on the 15th April 1945 - see also Chapters 7 & 8 of If You Want Peace, Prepare for War, for more details of Hughes time with 604. At the war's end Hughes was credited with eighteen e/a destroyed, one shared, one probably destroyed and one damaged.

S/Ldr Hughes remained in the RAF after the war and was granted a permanent commission as a F/Lt (his wartime commissions were all VR) in April 1945 before being promoted back to S/Ldr on the 1st August 1947. His post-war career began after the war when he was posted back to the Fighter Command staff. By 1954 he was a member of the directing staff at the RAF Staff College, Bracknell, and later the Personal Staff Officer (PSO) to the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS). In 1959 he was appointed to command RAF Geilenkirchen as a G/Capt. During the 1960s he returned to the CAS Staff in 1961/62 and to the Directorate of Air Plans in January 1963. He was promoted to A/Cdre that year and appointed as an ADC to HMQ in September. In September 1966 he was appointed as AOC Flying Training Command, and promoted to AVM on the 1st July 1967. As an AVM he became AOC No.18 Group and the AOC Scotland & Northern Ireland. Following two years as the Senior Air Staff Officer (SASO) Near East Air Force, Cyprus, AVM Hughes retired on the 6th June 1974.

In 1982 AVM Hughes was made the Hon A/Cdre of No.2503 Squadron, RAF Regiment, and was made a Deputy Lieutenant of the County of Lincoln in 1983. He was awarded the AFC on the 1st January 1954, made a CBE on the 1st January 1963, and CB in 1972. AVM Frederick Desmond Hughes, CB, CBE, DFC**, AFC, died on the 11th January 1992.

Sources:

If You Want Peace, Prepare For War, Ian White, 2005.

Gentlemen in Blue, Hans

Men of the Battle of Britain, Kenneth G.Wynn, 1999.

RAF Squadrons, Jeff Jefford, 2001.

The Blitz, Then & Now, Volumes 1 & 2, Winston Ramsey [Ed], 1987 & 1988.

www.thesoutheastecho.co.uk/Pilots/Hughes.htm