

Profile - W/Cdr Michael Constable Maxwell, DSO, DFC - 604 Squadron - by Ian White



(IWM Neg No.CH14100 via 604 Squadron Archive)

Wing Commander Michael Constable Maxwell, DFC, took command of 604 Squadron at Scorton in late April 1943 and remained as CO until July 1944, when he was succeeded by Wing Commander Desmond Hughes.

Michael, Hugh, Constable Maxwell (usually known as Mike Maxwell) was born on the 3rd June 1917 at Beaulieu, Invernessshire. His father, Bernard, was the fourth son of the tenth Lord Herries and Alice Fraser, the second daughter of the thirteenth Lord Lovat and his elder brother served with distinction in the Royal Flying Corps during the First World War. Maxwell was educated by monks at Ampleforth College, Yorks, and later at Hertford College, Oxford, where he read Modern History and joined the University Air Squadron (UAS) despite holding a Territorial Army (TA) commission in the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders. Learning to fly on Avro Tutors at nearby Abingdon, Maxwell attended TA and UAS summer camps, before applying for a university direct entry permanent commission in the RAF in March 1939. His application was granted and he was awarded a pilot officer's commission on the 7th November 1939.

Mobilised as an Army officer on the outbreak of war, Maxwell spent a few months with his battalion (the 4th) before resigning his commission and reporting for flying training at No.9 Flying Training School (FTS) at Hullavington, Wilts, on the 10th October, where he undertook his instruction on North American Harvards. On the completion of his course, Maxwell was posted to No.7 Bombing & Gunnery School (BGS) at Stormy Down, Glam, for air-to-air gunnery instruction, after which he reported on the 20th April 1940 to No.56 Squadron flying Mk.I Hurricanes at North Weald, Essex.

Following the German invasion of France and the Low Countries in May 1940 and the British Army's retreat to Dunkirk, 56 Squadron was involved in providing an air defence over the beaches by means of a series of detachments in France and Biggin Hill, Kent. On the 27th May Flying Officer Maxwell shared in the destruction of a Heinkel He 111 over Dunkirk, but was hit by Belgian anti-aircraft (AA) fire and forced to bail out of his Hurricane. It later transpired that the AA battery was commanded by Prince Charles of the Belgians, who apologised in person for hitting Maxwell's Hurricane. Taken by

staff car to Ostend he was repatriated to England by trawler and returned to North Weald. Maxwell was wounded in the leg and foot by cannon shell splinters following an engagement with Messerschmitt Bf 109s on the 8th June, which damaged his aircraft that burst a tyre on landing resulting in his admission to Epping Hospital.

Discharged and fully fit to fight, Maxwell returned to 56 Squadron on the 9th July to continue his fight with the enemy with 'unbelievable courage amounting almost to foolhardiness', to quote one of his fellow pilots, Sergeant George Smyth. Maxwell was able to claim a Bf 109 probably destroyed on the 28th August and a Dornier Do 17 confirmed and a Bf 110 shared on the 27th September. On the 30th September when he was engaged in a combat with Do 17s and Bf 110s over Portland, his Hurricane was damaged and he was forced to make a crash-landing on Chesil Bank, writing-off his Hurricane (L1764) in the process, but escaping unscathed. One of the Dorniers was not quite so lucky. Being at the end of a formation of twenty-five to thirty bombers, whilst Maxwell watched the Do 17 crashed with no survivors - something that he later reflected upon by saying there were 'four human beings in that plane'. His respect for his fellow human beings was a part of his deeply held Catholic views and his education in Ampleforth College.

Promoted to Flight Lieutenant on the 7th January 1941, Maxwell returned to operations and was credited with a Bf 109 probably destroyed on the 7th October. He remained with 56 Squadron until the 21st February 1941, when he was posted for a rest to No.52 Operational Training Unit (OTU) at Debden, Essex, as an instructor to teach recently qualified pilots how to fly and fight the Hurricane. The following month (March) he attended the Central Flying School (CFS) to attend an instructor's course, before returning to Debden and then to No.60 OTU at East Fortune, East Lothian, during July, where he instructed on Boulton Paul Defiants in the night-fighter role. On the 8th October 1941, Flight Lieutenant Maxwell was posted to 604 Squadron at Middle Wallop where he was teamed with Sergeant John Quinton as his radar operator (R/O).

Maxwell's tenure with 604 was remarkably short, for on the 1st March 1942 he was promoted to Squadron Leader and along with Sergeant Quinton was posted back to 60 OTU to command its Air Interception (AI) Flight. Again his tenure was short, for in August he moved to No.54 OTU at Charter Hall, Berwickshire, to take command of its 'B' Flight. Like 60 OTU, 54 was tasked with the training of night-fighter crews and their teaming-up prior to posting to an operational squadron.

In December 1942, Maxwell and Quinton were returned to operational flying following a posting to No.264 Squadron at Colerne, Wilts, where Maxwell took charge of one of its flights. 264 was tasked with the protection of Coastal Command's aircraft from intruding Luftwaffe Junkers Ju 88 long-range fighters over the Bay of Biscay, by which time it was equipped with de Havilland Mosquito Mk.IIs. It was also involved itself in intruder operations over Occupied Europe. The pair's first claim occurred during a night intruder sortie over Holland on the 21st/22nd January 1943, when Maxwell claimed a Do 217 damaged over Deelen airfield. On the 30th March the pair (by this date John Quinton had been commissioned and was a flight lieutenant) destroyed an He 111 in daylight, before Maxwell was promoted to acting wing commander and given command of 604 Squadron on the 23rd April in place of Wing Commander Wood, DFC, who failed to return from a sortie over the Channel on the night of the 16th/17th April. At this juncture the Squadron had recently moved from Ford, Hampshire, to Scorton, Yorks, to begin their re-equipment to the Beaufighter Mk.VI fitted with AI Mk.VIII. At that time 604 had been 'at war' for three and a half years, during which time it had acquired the reputation as one of the best night-fighter units in Fighter Command with a 'tally' of more than seventy enemy aircraft destroyed. It was now to enter a new period with a new aircraft and equipment and a new Commanding officer (CO). On the 3rd May Maxwell was informed of the award of the DFC for his work with 264 Squadron.

The CO and his R/O claimed a Do 217 'damaged' on the night of the 26th/27th July over Yorkshire. Their first confirmed victory with 604 occurred on the 22nd August, when in company with another Beaufighter flown by Flight Lieutenant Sturman and Flight Sergeant Weston, they intercepted an enemy weather reconnaissance aircraft some 150 miles (240 km) off the English North Sea coast. Flying straight and level and attacked by both aircraft, the weather-plane was shot down with the credit being awarded to Maxwell and Quinton. The following year (February 1944) the Squadron received its first examples of the de Havilland Mosquito NF Mk.XII and XIII fitted with AI Mk.VIII, whence it moved to Church Fenton, Yorks, and then to Hurn, Hants, in May. This was a quiet period as far as the CO was concerned and it was not until the night of the 15th/16th May that he and Quinton

claimed a Ju 88 shot down into the English Channel off the Isle of Wight. On the night of the 2nd/3rd July he called for volunteers to flying in appalling weather and despite an order to the contrary grounding the Squadron, every crew's hands went up. He chose just one to accompany him and Quinton and both claimed an enemy aircraft destroyed - in his case another '88 brought down in the vicinity of Le Harve. A second was claimed on the 8th/9th along with a Do 217 claimed as a probable. The Ju 88 was the 100th enemy aircraft destroyed by 604 and the twenty-third under his command. These were the last victories claimed by Mike Maxwell and John Quinton¹ before the CO was replaced by Wing Commander Desmond Hughes during July 1944 and he posted to the Far East to take command of No.84 Squadron at Charra, Bengal, flying Mosquito fighter-bombers (FB.VI). However, before he could begin operations the Japanese surrender, but he remained in command of 84 Squadron at Seletar, Singapore, until December 1946 before moving across the island to take over 60 Squadron at Tengar whilst it converted from Republic Thunderbolt IIs (P-47D) to Supermarine Spitfire Mk.18s.

Maxwell remained with 60 Squadron for a year after which he was posted to the UK, arriving 'home' early in 1948 and taking four months leave before entering Ampleforth Monastery as a novice on the 27th April on leave of absence from the RAF. He stayed at Ampleforth for the next four years, but left in 1952 to rejoin the RAF in the November in the rank of squadron leader, where he converted to jets and learned to fly Gloster Meteor, the de Havilland Vampire and the Venom. In January 1954 Squadron Leader Constable Maxwell assumed command of No.23 Squadron, a Venom NF.2 night-fighter unit based at Coltishall, Norfolk. Whilst there he acquired the nickname 'the mad monk' because of his habit of clasping his hands in front whilst undertaking briefings. On relinquishing command a year later he returned to Oxford to command the UAS for two years and then moved to the Central Fighter Establishment (CFE) to study and develop fighter tactics. From March 1960 he spent an enjoyable six months as the Station Commander of RAF Gan, the RAF staging post in the Indian Ocean, where he reputedly plied senior officers with a 'ferocious' cocktail made from a concoction of gin and coconut oil! Maxwell's final posting as a wing commander was in Scottish Command before he retired from the RAF on the 3rd June 1964.

In 1960 he attended his brothers wedding and met Susan Davies, whom he married in 1962 and by whom he had two sons. After retirement he joined the family business of Robert Stuart Ltd, contracting to companies within the aircraft industry, of which he became chairman. Wing Commander Michael Constable Maxwell, DSO, DFC, died on the 31st August 2000.

¹ Flight Lieutenant John Quinton survived the war and remained in the post-war RAF. He was killed after giving his parachute to an Air Cadet, when the Wellington in which they were flying got into difficulties. He was subsequently awarded a posthumous George Cross for his great gallantry.