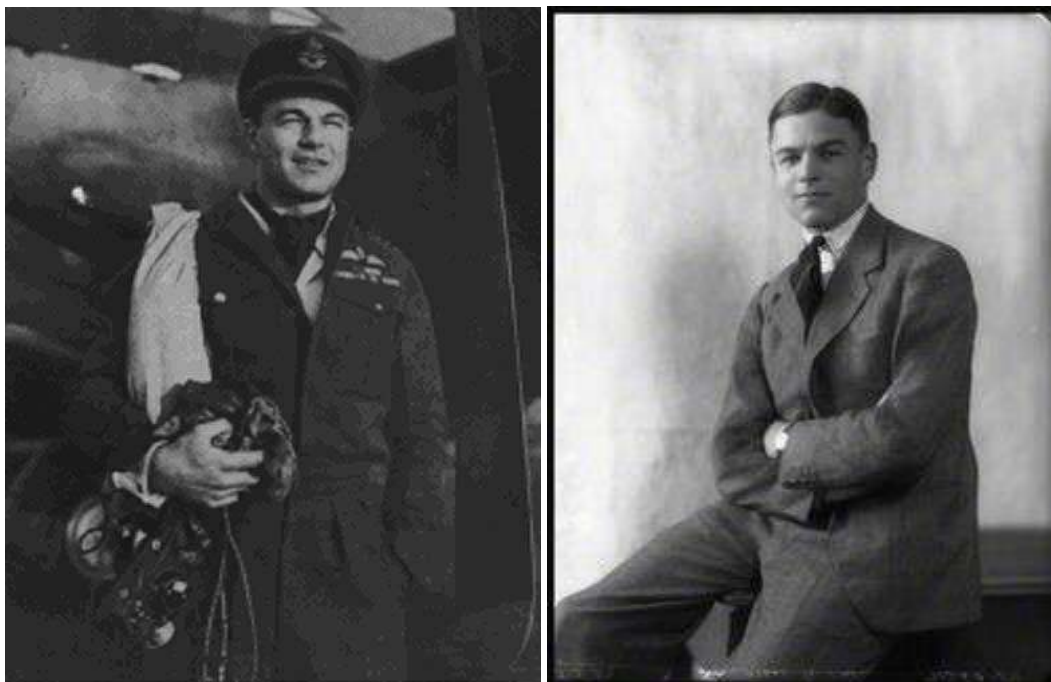


Profile - G/Capt The Hon Max Aitken, DSO, DFC, - 601 Squadron - by Ian White



The Honourable Sir John William 'Max' Aitken was the son of the Canadian newspaper magnate and businessman, William Aitken, the 1st Baron Beaverbrook, and his wife, Gladys Henderson Drury. Max was born in Montreal, Canada, on 15th February 1910, but was educated in England at Westminster School and Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he proved to be a talented sportsman, gaining a University blue for soccer, and a scratch golfer. Aitken joined the Auxiliary Air Force (AAF) in 1935 and was awarded an Auxiliary commission as a pilot officer with 601 (County of London) Squadron on the 11th September. A noted socialite and keen sportsman, Max Aitken embodied all the attributes and advantages of the 1930s Auxiliary officer; handsome, a reputable family background, financial independence and a good social standing.

At the time of his joining, 601 was based at Hendon, North London, where he was taught to fly the unit's Hawker Harts and Demons. By the outbreak of war the Squadron was equipped with twin-engined, Bristol Blenheim Mk.II long-range fighters. Along with the rest of the Squadron Flying Officer Aitken was mobilised for war service during August 1939. Following a move to Biggin Hill, Kent, in September 1939, Aitken took part in the Squadron's first operational sortie on the 27th November, when six Blenheims joined six others from No.25 Squadron in an attack on the German seaplane base at Borkum. Shortly after 601 was redesignated as a day-fighter unit and moved to Tangmere, Sussex, where it was equipped with Hawker Hurricane Mk.IIs in February 1940. On the 16th May, Aitken joined the Squadron's 'A' Flight on detachment to Merville airfield in France, to reinforce No.3 Squadron that was a part of the fighter element for the RAF's Advance Air Striking Force.

Whilst in France the by now thirty-year old Flight Lieutenant Aitken had some success, destroying a Heinkel He 111 and possibly another over Brussels on the 18th, another Heinkel and a Junkers Ju 87 'Stuka' the following day, the probable destruction of another Ju 87 and a Messerschmitt Bf 110 later that same day and damaged a Bf 109 on the 23rd. On his return to Tangmere Aitken was promoted to Acting Squadron Leader and given command of 601. His successful run continued with the destruction of an He 111 over Brighton on the night of the 25th/26th June, after which he was awarded the DFC on the 9th July for his work in France and England. Squadron Leader Aitken's final victory with 601 occurred on the 7th July when he shared a Dornier Do 17 over the English Channel with four other pilots. On the 20th July he handed 601 to Squadron Leader W.F.C.Hobson and was posted to non-operational duties, where he remained until February 1941.



Max Aitken with his father Lord Beaverbrook. Max senior was Churchill's Minister of Supply & Minister for Aircraft Production

That month Wing Commander Aitken was posted to command No.68 Squadron at Catterick, north Yorks, that was working up in the night-fighter role with radar-equipped, but nevertheless, obsolete Blenheim IIs. Manned mainly by Czech aircrew, No.68 received its first AI Mk.IV equipped Beaufighter Mk.IIs during May, which by the month's end had completely replaced the old Blenheims. Although declared operational during April 1941, the Squadron did not claim its first success until the 17th June, with Aitken claiming a Bf 109 on the 25th during a sweep over Northern France in a Spitfire borrowed from No.610 Squadron.

During March 1942 the Squadron moved to Coltishall, Norfolk, from where the CO claimed his first night victory, a Do 217 on the night of 30th April/1st May, followed by another on the 29th/30th May and damage to a Ju 88 the same night. On the night of 23rd/24th July a second Ju 88 and another Do 217 fell to Aitken's guns, which brought the award of the Czech Military Cross on the 11th August, the DSO on the 14th August and the Air Efficiency (AE) award on the 1st January 1943. With his tour coming to an end Wing Commander Aitken was posted away from 68 Squadron during January 1943 to join the Fighter Tactics Branch of HQ RAF Middle East. Whilst there he borrowed a Beaufighter from No.46 Squadron and claimed two Ju 52 transport aircraft destroyed, another probably destroyed and forth damaged, on the night of the 5th March 1944.

These were his last air-to-air victories for on leaving HQ Middle East Wing, Group Captain Aitken was posted back the UK and then north to Scotland to take command of the Banff Strike Wing comprising Nos.143, 235, 248 & 333 (Norwegian) Squadrons. The Bannf Wing undertook anti-shiping and anti-submarine operations in Norwegian waters with rocket projectile (RP) armed Mosquito FB Mk.VI fighter-bombers. Group Captain Aitken remained in command of the Wing to the War's end and was released from the RAF early in 1946.



Aitken with his wife after receiving his DFC at Buckingham Palace in 1940

Post war Max Aitken entered the family newspaper business, his father owned the Express Group and Beaverbrook Newspapers, and was elected the Member of Parliament (MP) for Holborn with a small majority (925 votes), but lost this at the 1950 General Election to a Labour candidate because of boundary changes. He served as Chancellor of the University of New Brunswick and participated in the 1951 Miami Nassau Offshore Powerboat Races with his wife, Lady Violet, before establishing the Cowes Torquay Offshore Powerboat Race to encourage the design and construction of fast cruising boats. In 1954 using his father's Daily Express newspaper as sponsor, Max helped to establish the London Boat Show at the Empire Hall, Olympia.

With the re-establishment of the AAF in June 1946, Max Aitken was awarded an Auxiliary Squadron Leader's commission and took command of 601 Squadron when it was reformed at Hendon that same month. Squadron Leader The Hon Max Aitken, DSO, DFC, MP, guided the Squadron through its first post-war years until June 1948, when he stood down in favour of Squadron Leader Hugh Dundas, DSO*, DFC, and formally retired from the RAF.

In 1968, Max was appointed to the Chair of Beaverbrook Newspapers following the death of his father in 1964 and was made President in 1977. He also succeeded his father as Baron Beaverbrook on the 9th June 1964, but five days later disclaimed the barony on the grounds that there should only be one Beaverbrook in his lifetime. However, on his death on the 30th April 1985, his son Max succeeded to the title.