

Wing Commander Tim Elkington, born December 23 1920, died February 1 2019

Wing Commander Tim Elkington, who has died aged 98, was one of the last surviving pilots who fought in the Battle of Britain, and was one of only two survivors of the RAF Hurricane Wing that operated with the Russians from the Arctic port of Murmansk.

He was still only 19 when he joined No 1 Squadron at RAF Northolt in July 1940, during the opening phase of the Battle of Britain. Flying a Hurricane fighter, he shot down a Messerschmitt Bf 109 on August 15. The following day, he was on patrol over Portsmouth when his section ran into a large formation of enemy fighters near Selsey Bill.

The Hurricanes were separated during the engagement and Elkington pursued a lone Bf 109. But others attacked him from the rear, and his starboard fuel tank was hit. His aircraft burst into flames. He was slightly injured and forced to bail out off the coast, and his wingman flew close by so as to allow the slipstream from his Hurricane to blow the parachute inland.

After recovering from his injuries, Elkington returned to 1 Squadron, now based at Wittering near Peterborough. On October 9 he took off with a second aircraft and the two of them chased a lone Junkers 88 bomber to the coast.

After the first pilot caused some damage to it, Elkington attacked from close range with his machine-guns before the Junkers disappeared. Shortly afterwards a Royal Observer Corps post spotted an aircraft crashing into the sea and Elkington was credited with having probably destroyed the Junkers. Two weeks later he shared in the destruction of a Dornier bomber.

John Francis Durham Elkington, always known as "Tim", was born in Warwickshire on December 23 1920 and educated at Bedford School. He gained a cadetship to the RAF College Cranwell, where he trained as a pilot before joining 1 Squadron.

After the Battle of Britain, he spent some time as an instructor at a fighter unit and in July 1941 joined 134 Squadron, which was forming at an airfield in Yorkshire prior to sailing for Russia.

After Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, was launched on June 22 1941, the Prime Minister Winston Churchill broadcast a promise of assistance, and on July 12 an Anglo-Soviet Agreement was signed in Moscow.

It was decided that the airfield at Vaenga would be used as a fighter base to defend ships unloading supplies at nearby Murmansk. The RAF sent two Hurricane squadrons, 81 and 134, to form 151 Wing, the unit given the task of helping the Russians.

Twenty-four of the fighters were loaded on-board the aircraft carrier HMS Argus. On September 7, Elkington and his fellow pilots took off from Argus and landed at Vaenga. Additional Hurricanes were shipped in crates and assembled on arrival in Russia.

The primary role of the Hurricane pilots was to escort Soviet bombers on raids over Finnmark in north-eastern Norway and also to defend the Russian airfields. On October 6 a

force of German bombers raided the airfield at Vaenga and Elkington was scrambled: he shared in the destruction of one of the escorting fighters.

With winter weather approaching, 151 Wing began training Soviet air and ground crew to use the Hurricanes, and when the RAF contingent departed in late November, the Soviet Air Force took over the planes.

During five weeks of operations, 151 Wing claimed 16 victories, four probably destroyed and seven aircraft damaged, for the loss of one RAF pilot. Four pilots were awarded the Soviet Union's highest decoration, the Order of Lenin. In 2014, the surviving members of the Wing, including Elkington, received the Ushakov Medal for bravery, at a ceremony in the Russian Embassy in London.

Elkington continued to fly fighters as the war progressed. In April 1942 he joined the Merchant Ship Fighter Unit, flying converted Hurricanes carried by CAM (Catapult Aircraft Merchant) ships, which escorted convoys.

Whenever a German reconnaissance aircraft was sighted, the "Hurricat" (a modified Hurricane) would be catapulted from the deck of the ship to carry out an intercept. On return, the pilot either bailed out or ditched alongside the CAM ship. Elkington completed one round trip to Canada in the MV Eastern City, but was not called into action.

After converting to the Typhoon fighter, he joined 197 Squadron on the south coast to fly defensive patrols and bomber escort missions. In late 1943 he headed for India and joined 67 Squadron at Alipore, flying Hurricanes in defence of Calcutta.

In early 1944 Elkington was given early promotion to work at the Air Fighting Development Unit, which played a crucial role in developing tactics and testing captured enemy fighters.

During the year he spent with the unit, based at RAF Amarda Road in north-east India, he realised that he enjoyed a fair measure of good luck. On one occasion he was flying a US-built Mustang which crashed soon after take-off because of an engine failure: as the cockpit filled with fumes the emergency release failed, but he managed to break through the canopy and escape.

He experienced another close shave when fuel sprayed into the cockpit as he was testing a Japanese Zero fighter, but he succeeded in landing safely. And while flying a Hawker Tempest he was overcome by fumes in the cockpit after fuel leaked into the engine bay. He tried to bail out, but managed to recover and land at Cawnpore.

He also suffered a number of tyre bursts, on one occasion when he was carrying a bomb. In 1946 he returned to Britain and served at RAF Turnhouse near Edinburgh, where he met Pat Adamson, whom he would marry in May 1948.

He later served at HQ Fighter Command before a tour in MoD. He converted to the four-engine Shackleton maritime patrol aircraft and in November 1955 joined 240 Squadron based in Northern Ireland.

In March 1956 he flew a Shackleton to Christmas Island in the Pacific for Operation Grapple, the testing of Britain's first hydrogen bomb. It was the responsibility of 240 Squadron to search and police the extensive ocean area where shipping was banned during the tests.

On the day of the first test, the Shackletons ensured the area was clear before a Valiant dropped an H-bomb over nearby Malden Island. During the detachment, three nuclear weapons were detonated, with the Shackletons flying at a safe distance to provide air-sea rescue if needed.

Six months later Elkington was back in Britain training as an instructor at the Central Flying School, Little Rissington in Gloucestershire. It would be the beginning of a long association with the Cotswolds.

He commanded the multi-engine squadron at the school and, on one occasion, flew a Vickers Varsity aircraft on a visit to Ghana in support of a detachment of Jet Provost training aircraft.

He remained in the RAF for a further 12 years, which included a tour in Cyprus, commanding the RAF Radio Apprentice Wing at Locking outside Weston-super-Mare, and two years in the MoD running air-sea rescue policy. He retired to his home in Little Rissington in late 1975.

There he established a picture framing business, finally retiring from that in 2005. He coaxed into life exotic plants in his greenhouses and was an early adopter of biological controls as an alternative to pesticides – having previously used a flame-thrower to get rid of weeds.

In March 2013 he and a number of his colleagues were invited to Downing Street where the Prime Minister, David Cameron, presented them with the newly created Arctic Star.



Tim Elkington, second from right, at 10 Downing St after receiving the Arctic Star from the PM

Elkington attended many reunions to commemorate the Battle of Britain and in 2017 was one of only three veterans able to attend the annual service in Westminster Abbey.

He supported the 151 Wing Association and received numerous anniversary medals from the Russians. In 2016 he visited Archangel for the 75th Anniversary of the first Russian convoy.

Tim Elkington is survived by his wife Pat, with their two sons and two daughters.

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