

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

John Russell "Russ" Baxter

Service Number 033449, 419922, RAAF
131 and 453 Squadrons, Flight Lieutenant



Russ was born on the 26th November 1922 in Geelong Victoria. He enlisted on the 10th October 1942.

His initial Training was at Victor Harbor, South Australia and then Elementary Flying Training at Benalla, Vic. Service Flying Training was at St. Hubert, Quebec (near Montreal, Canada). Russ tells his story:-

"My wings and commission were awarded at St. Hubert on 9 October 1943. Then, after two weeks leave in New York, operational training on Hurricane Mark II aircraft commenced at RCAF Bagotville, Que. about 300 miles north of Quebec City and very cold in winter.

In December 1943 after about 50 hours on Hurricanes the pilots from the course (mostly Canadians with a few from the UK, New Zealand and Australia) were sent to New York by train and then to Scotland on the troop ship '*Aquitania*'. That former Cunard liner carried about 10,000 service personnel, almost all Americans on their way to the UK to prepare for the invasion of Europe.

After arrival in the UK the Australian aircrews were sent to the RAAF Personnel Depot at Brighton, Sussex for a few weeks to await postings to Operational Training Units with more advanced aircraft. At the beginning of March four of us were posted to the Spitfire OTU at RAF Eshott, Northumberland - P/O Denny Kingsbury, P/O Vic Porich, Sgt. Billy Lynn and myself. At Eshott we were given about 60 hours on early model Spitfires (Marks I and II), but Billy Lynn was one of three pilots unfortunately killed in accidents during that course. The other three of us were then sent to RAF Tealing near Edinburgh for a couple of weeks prior to the landing in France.



Russ Baxter (centre) at St Hubert Que 1943
Via Dr John Baxter & Mr Roger Baxter

On 7 June 1944 (the day after D Day) Denny Kingsbury and I were posted to RAF Culmhead, Somerset where there were three Spitfire squadrons operating under the command of W/Cdr Peter Brothers DSO DFC, namely 616, 126 and 131 Squadrons. Denny was sent to 126 Squadron and I was sent to 131, which was equipped with Spitfire VIIIs. These had lightly pressurised cockpits enabling them to operate above 40,000 feet, but practically all of our operations over France and the Low Countries were sweeps and bomber escorts at much lower altitudes.

In August 616 became the first RAF Squadron to be equipped with jet aircraft - Gloster Meteors. It was quite exciting to see these hitherto secret aircraft landing at Culmhead and making a whistling sound rather than the usual roar of the Merlins. Naturally we were rather envious of the 616 Squadron pilots.



Spitfire – Rednal Mar-Apr 1945
Via Dr John Baxter & Mr Roger Baxter

W/Cdr Brothers, who was generally known by his radio call sign 'Wingco Pete', had fought in the Battle of Britain in 1940 and later been the CO of one of the RAAF squadrons based in Britain. Then, as we are all aware, after his retirement he became the Patron of the Spitfire Association.

The depth of his operational experience was illustrated during a sweep down near Bordeaux on 7 August 1944 when a group of FW190s appeared a couple of thousand feet above and began to dive down towards us. 'Wingco Pete' called us on the R/T with the instruction "Prepare to break when I say now!". His subsequent timing of the word 'Now' was perfect. We wheeled around in a maximum rate turn to the left and, being in front of our group; he managed to shoot down one FW190 while the others continued diving down and headed off below.



453 SQN Apr-Sep 1945
Via Dr John Baxter & Mr Roger Baxter

Presumably they did not wish to get involved in a dogfight with much more maneuverable Spitfires. One of them shot past my tail so close that I could look down into its cockpit and see that the pilot was wearing a white helmet, but not one of our aircraft was hit by enemy fire.

I then joined with one of my colleagues who was chasing an FW190 towards the east, but after about 10 minutes I noted that my fuel was getting very low and we were not getting any closer to the 190, so I

peeled off and headed for the Normandy Beachhead, doubting whether I had enough fuel to reach England. We had no maps showing the location of our airstrips in Normandy, but I soon found a strip with Mustangs parked beside it, so I landed and asked for fuel. The padre then drove up in a jeep and said "the boys are having tea in a tent over there, so how about joining us while your aircraft is getting refueled?". As we walked into the tent, an RAAF Flight Lieutenant walked out towards us and I recognized him as one of the older boys I had known at school back in about 1938. What an incredible coincidence!

At the end of August 1944 131 Squadron was moved from Culmhead to Friston, Sussex to operate over the Low Countries and Germany. The grass airfield at Friston was perched on the edge of one of the 'Seven Sisters', which are a series of seven white cliffs near Beachy Head, so landing from the south was rather like landing on an aircraft carrier. Towards the end of September 131 was involved in supporting the British airborne landing in northern Holland aimed at securing control of the bridges over the Rhine, escorting Dakotas which were carrying paratroops and towing gliders. The bridge at Nijmegen was successfully secured, but the attack on the bridge at Arnhem was beaten back by a strong group of German tanks and troops hidden in the forest nearby.

The allied high command then decided to destroy the bridge at Arnhem and on 30 September 131 Squadron escorted a group of American B26 bombers selected for that job. On the way home from Arnhem I noted that my oil pressure had dropped to zero, so I called 'Mayday' and was directed to Brussels for an emergency landing, but my engine blew up on the way. I extinguished the flames pouring from it by switching off fuel and ignition and looked for a suitable field for a wheels-up landing. In the half light of late afternoon a long narrow field on my right looked suitable, so I headed for that. However, when I got close to it I found that there was a high tension pylon right in the middle of the near side of it with power cables on both side - a major hazard for anyone attempting a power-off landing. I had to stretch the glide to lift my right wing over the top of the pylon, clearing it by a foot or two, and lost too much airspeed in the process. Consequently, when I descended on the far side and tried to flare out for touchdown, the aircraft mushed and struck the ground tail first, breaking the fuselage in half just behind the cockpit.



Spitfires – 453 SQN Fassberg Sep 1945
Via Dr John Baxter & Mr Roger Baxter

Fortunately an Army ambulance crew on a road nearby heard the crash and came to my aid. I was able to stand with considerable pain, so I was taken to a Canadian Army doctor and then to a field hospital under canvas not far behind our lines. An X-Ray showed that I had a crushed spinal disc, causing sciatic pain in my left leg, so I was put into a body plaster from under my armpits down to my hips and sent to a hospital in Ghent for a couple of weeks. Eventually I was

flown back to the RAF Hospital in Wiltshire where the uncomfortable body plaster was thankfully removed and after that I was sent to the RAF Rehabilitation Unit at Loughborough for a period of exercises in their gymnasium and warm pool.

I was posted back to Friston at about the end of 1944, by which time 131 Squadron had moved on, and was given a period of rest with minor ground duties, being still classed as 'medically unfit for flying'. In March 1945 I was given a brief refresher course on Spitfire Vs at an OTU and then posted to 453 Squadron RAAF early in April, only a month before the end of the European War. At that stage 451 and 453 Squadrons were based at Lympe, Kent, under the command of W/Cdr Don Andrews DFC, who at the age of 23 was possibly the RAAF's youngest Wing Commander. Then on 1 May, a week before the end of the War, the Wing was moved across to Hawkinge. There were not many operational flights during that last month since most of the action had moved to the east, but there were some bomber escorts to naval bases in northern Germany.

After the end of the European War it was decided that 451 and 453 Squadrons would represent Australia in the European Occupation Forces, so both were given conversion courses on to the Griffon engined Spitfire XIV, a very powerful aircraft with a five-bladed propeller and a gyro gun sight.

During my time in Germany 453 Squadron was based at three former Luftwaffe airfields - Fassberg near Celle in Northern Germany, Gatow near Berlin and Wunsdorf near Hanover. Our task was to impress upon local population and possibly the Russians the fact that we were there. For example, when we were in Berlin we would be told to put twelve Spitfires into the air in close formation and fly up Unter den Linden and over the Brandenburg Gate at a low altitude making a very loud noise with our twelve 36 litre Griffon engines.

We had expected the German people to be rather resentful of our presence and perhaps aggressive, but found them to be co-operative and often helpful. We concluded that they were relieved to be in the British Sector rather than the Russian one, where their fellow countrymen were treated very roughly.

I was posted back to the RAAF Personnel Depot at Brighton at the end of October 1945 and travelled home on the troopship '*Athlone Castle*', arriving in Melbourne early in the New Year. Then, after six weeks leave, I was discharged in February 1946."

Service Medals: 1939-45 Star
 France & Germany Star
 Defence Medal
 Australian Service Medal, 1939-45

The above profile was compiled by **Russ Baxter** and **Steve McGregor, The Spitfire Association**, dated 5 June 2013. It is reproduced here with the permission of Dr John Baxter and Mr Roger Baxter, Russ's sons, together with additional photographs they donated. John and Roger Baxter have also contributed background to the following summary of Russ' post-war career:

Russ commenced studies in aeronautical engineering at the University of Melbourne immediately before WW2, but the war intervened. He eventually graduated with First Class Honours in Aeronautical Engineering from the University of Sydney instead in 1948.

He started his career working in an engineering role at Trans Australia Airways (TAA) at Essendon Airport in Melbourne. He was endorsed on the DC3 and flew regularly as a first officer on flights between Essendon and Devonport, King Island and Flinders Island. He used to fly early morning flights, bringing back loads of fresh apples, then start work in one of TAA's Essendon hangars.



A typical T-VASIS lightbox
Via Roger Myer www.airwaysmuseum.com

Russ later joined the Aeronautical Research Laboratory (ARL) in Fishermen's Bend in Melbourne (which much later became incorporated into DSTO). Among many research projects, he helped develop early visual landing aids for aircraft. This included flying at Avalon Airport to experiment with and test various arrangements of the glide slope optics of the landing system that became known as

the T-Visual Approach Slope Indicator System (T-VASIS), the Letters Patent for which named John Baxter (Russ) and Ronald Cumming from the ARL and Bruce Fraser and Dr John Lane of the DCA.

The T-VASIS project arose out of a study of landing accidents carried out by the ARL in 1956 in consultation with the DCA, which led to field trials at Mangalore in 1957 of a precursor system called the Precision Visual Glidepath (PVG). A number of PVGs were installed but quickly became redundant after the idea of the "T" system emerged. During 1959, field development was moved to Avalon where Russ did his testing using two DCA DC3s.

The system was demonstrated to ICAO in 1960 and agreed to be superior to the UK red-white system. However, because the UK system was already in production, it was adopted as the ICAO standard until 1967.

Both systems were trialed at Sydney Airport, which led to a DCA decision to adopt the T-VASIS. Production tenders were finally called in 1963 and the first production unit installed at Hobart Airport in 1964. The T-VASIS was finally accepted by ICAO in 1970 as an alternative standard and was accepted internationally as such in 1972. The system has been installed around the world and is still in wide use today.¹

While he was at the ARL Russ also assisted with the development of aerial water and retardant bombing of bushfires in Western Australia, and the use of aircraft to create strategic back-burns by incendiary bombing.

In the early 1960s he worked at de Havilland UK on assignment, and also at British Aerospace/Aerospatiale on their joint development of the Concorde supersonic jetliner at Bristol and Toulouse.

In 1965 he joined Qantas engineering in Sydney, eventually working on new projects such as the integration of the then new Boeing 747s into Qantas' international fleet. In December 1965 he spent some more time in Western Australia fire spotting over the eucalypt forests in a Cessna 337.

From 1972 he was Qantas' engineering specialist representative at Boeing's Everett manufacturing plant in Seattle USA. Russ retired from Qantas in 1976 and worked as a private aeronautical engineering consultant until his retirement in 1985.

¹ See *The T-VASIS Landing System*, Roger Meyer, www.airwaysmuseum.com/T-VASIS%20article.htm

Russ was endorsed on a wide range of light aircraft and John and Roger remember flying with him from Moorabbin in a Cessna 172 when the family lived in Melbourne. After the family moved to Sydney in 1965, they flew with him from Bankstown in a Piper Cherokee 140 VH-WBF that he part-owned through a syndicate.

Russ accumulated 758 hours 35 minutes RAAF flying and 437 hours 30 minutes post-war civilian flying.

He died at his home in Elizabeth Bay, Sydney, on 18 November 2013.

Mike Milln
History Group Member
March 2014