

Wings On MySleeve by Eric 'Winkle' Brown

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Brown was one of the most, probably the most, remarkable pilot in his field. He was a Royal Navy pilot and officer and flew a greater number of aircraft than anyone else. He totalled 487 basic types, both fixed wing and rotary, and even more if all variants of each type are included. His tally included machines from the German, Italian and Japanese air forces. He was a test pilot with the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough and flew aircraft that others had failed with, such as the DH108, often deliberately reproducing the flying that caused others to crash. He was instrumental in working out how to do deck landings of aircraft of all types and did 2407 himself, many of them firsts.

He ran many of the establishments that he worked in, but always made sure he kept up his flying. I got the strong impression that he was the sort of boss you would want to work for. He was supportive and demanding, with high standards, but as a flyer himself very aware of the need for careful and thorough training and knowledge of his people. He found friends and colleagues everywhere including in Germany immediately after the war. The bond between pilots, engineers and technicians proved stronger than their enforced enmity. In his modest way he describes his steady promotion which declined as the then Labour government cancelled many of the projects he was working on.

He put his survival down to his small size and his ability to withstand stresses, but as you read this book you learn how his logical or instinctive reactions allowed him to escape from situations that would have killed many pilots. The very last one in the book was typical. Whilst Commanding Officer at Lossiemouth he flew a naval Whirlwind helicopter, fitted with an arrester hook, out over the hills around Banff with two passengers to check if any farms were in trouble due to the heavy snow. His single engine blew up but he was able to autorotate. The snow was so deep that he could not see the ground to find a flat area. Because of his skill at deck landings he decided to find a wire fence and then caught it with his tail hook to stop his forward movement. No-one was hurt.

This is not an autobiography as he does not describe any of his private life. This is not a book for someone who feels uncomfortable about weapons and their use. I have always had this dilemma. I accept that while there are malign governments and leaders in the world such things are unavoidable for our safety, and I find exciting the performance of the pilots and the wonderful flying machines that result. However I can't help but think of the human bodies that are torn apart by the things sticking out of the front. I ended the book awed by the coolness, skill, energy and humility of this remarkable man. He died in 2016 aged ninety-seven.