

AIR VICE-MARSHAL JOHN ASTLEY GRAY CB CBE DFC GM (11-16)

He was born on 23 July 1899 and saw service as an officer with the Royal Engineers in the closing years of the First World War before transferring to the RAF in April 1918. Prisoner of war in Egypt in 1919

As a pilot, he was instrumental in the defeat in 1920 of an African rebel known as the Mad Mullah in what was Britain's cheapest war. In British Somaliland, on the Horn of Africa, he and his fellow pilots flying two-seat DH-9 bombers took just three weeks to defeat the forces of the rebel chieftain, Mohammed bin Abdullah, who had been fighting British soldiers since 1900. The airmen were assisted by a small camel force and about 800 men of the King's African Rifles. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

During the inter-war years, he spent much of his time on the developmental side of military aviation, with three years each at AAE Martlesham Heath (1922-5) and RAE Farnborough in the Experimental Section (1925-9), followed by two years at Felixstowe with the Marine Aircraft Experimental Establishment (1930-2). His spell at the MAEE coincided with the RAF's third and final attempt on the Schneider Trophy in 1931 where he found himself serving alongside Flight Lieutenant John Boothman (who won the trophy outright for Britain on 13 September 1931) and a young flying officer named Frank Whittle.

He was promoted Group Captain in 1940 and won the George Medal on 9 September 1941 for helping in the rescue of crewmen from a bomber that had crashed and caught fire on landing at its base in England. "One night in May 1941 the pilot of an aircraft attempted to land with the undercarriage retracted. The aircraft crashed into the main bomb dump and then burst into flames. Group Captain Gray and Squadron Leader MacCarthy immediately went to the scene of the accident. Although there was some delay in getting the fire tender to the spot, owing to wire entanglements at the bomb dump, Group Captain Gray and Squadron Leader MacCarthy entered the burning aircraft and between them succeeded in extricating two members of the crew who were trapped. By the time the first man had been extricated the fire had spread from the starboard tanks to cabin and on to the port tanks. Ammunition, incendiaries and flares were burning in the wreckage, whilst numerous explosions erupted from the tanks. In spite of this, an attempt was made to rescue the pilot, who was still trapped at the bottom of the fuselage. He was dragged clear but his harness still held him to the burning aircraft. Before he could be released another petrol tank burst into flames and spread to such an extent that any further attempts to rescue him became impossible. Group Captain Gray received severe burns on the head and his uniform was destroyed, but he continued his efforts until overcome by fumes. Both Group Captain Gray and Squadron Leader MacCarthy displayed great bravery in the most appalling circumstances."

He was promoted Air Commodore in 1943 and acting Air Vice-Marshal in February 1944 when he was appointed AOC of 91 (OTU) Group, and there he remained for the duration of the war. This was part of Bomber Command where **Air Marshall Sir John D'Albiac KCVO, KBE, CB, DSO (1908-10)** also served.

After the WW2 he became SASO Transport Command in 1949, followed in 1951 by an overseas posting to Egypt on his appointment as AOC Administrative Staff, MEAF HQ, at Ismailia. He retired from the RAF in May 1954.

He died on 6 June 1987 at the age of 87 at his home in Saxmundham, Suffolk.

The article over the page was taken from the Autumn 1990 OF Magazine :

AIR VICE MARSHAL J. A. GRAY CB, CBE, DFC, GM (10–15)

John Gray's brother, R. E. Gray, kindly sent me a copy of the obituary printed in *The Daily Telegraph* on 12th June 1987:

'Air Vice-Marshal John Gray, who has died aged 87, raised eyebrows in 1941–42 by flying on bomber raids over Germany as a 42-year-old group captain while station commander at RAF Honington, Suffolk.

Operational sorties by such a senior officer were not encouraged but Gray, who had obtained his wings in the Royal Naval Air Service in 1917, flew as second pilot on sorties over Hamburg, Mannheim, Hanover, Turin and Brest, the heavily-defended French Atlantic port where the battle cruiser *Scharnhorst* was lying at the time.

Although born in Dorset John Astley Gray was educated at Framlingham College, loved Suffolk and knew the county intimately, a bonus to a Bomber Command preponderantly based in East Anglia.

On one occasion, returning over the North Sea from a raid over Germany Gray, a member of the Aldeburgh Yacht Club, was able to reassure an uncertain young pilot from the co-pilot's seat that he had just passed over Aldeburgh.

Gray's courage in accompanying young bomber crews over Germany was on one occasion more than matched on the ground. In May 1941, after the pilot of a returning bomber unable to lower its undercarriage had crashed into a bomb dump at the base, Gray helped rescue two members of the crew.

He remained inside the burning aircraft amid exploding ammunition and incendiary bombs until the increasing ferocity of the explosions in the fuel tanks forced him to leave.

Severely burned, he was awarded the George Medal. Although senior at the outbreak of the 1939–45 war Gray was determined to return to operational flying in which he had distinguished himself early in his career.

After the 1914–18 war during which he had been shot down taking part in an RNAS attack on Bruges docks, he distinguished himself in the suppression in 1920 of a rebellious tribal leader, the "Mad Mullah" of Somaliland.

At a time when the RAF was being promoted by Lord Trenchard as an economical way of dealing with colonial trouble spots Gray and his fellow pilots were largely responsible for the DH-9 bomber settling the British Government's account with the Mad Mullah. Gray received the DFC.

Between the wars he flew as a test pilot, serving at the experimental stations of Martlesham Heath, Farnborough and Felixstowe, the latter being renowned for its flying boat and seaplane development work. This experience enabled Gray to play a part in the development of seaplanes for the Schneider Trophy competitions. Subsequently he instructed at the RAF College at Cranwell and served in Iraq.

After commanding RAF stations at Andover and Honington early in the war Gray served as senior air staff officer in Nos. 1 and 2 groups, Bomber Command, and deputy senior staff officer to Sir Arthur "Bomber" Harris at Bomber Command HQ.

From 1944 to 1946, he commanded bomber command's No. 91 group where his

operational and staff experience benefited new bomber aircrew preparing to join squadrons from operational training units.

From 1947 to 1949 Gray headed the RAF mission to Greece where he helped to form the Royal Hellenic Air Force then returning to a staff appointment with Transport Command.

From 1951 until his retirement in 1954 Gray was responsible for Administration in the Middle East Air Force.

Appointed CBE in 1943 and CB in 1945, he was unmarried.

An obituary also appeared on 9th June in the *EADT*.