

## **Air Vice-Marshal John Howe - obituary**

### **South African fighter pilot who commanded the RAF's first supersonic Lightning squadron**



*John Howe in his high-altitude flying suit in front of his Lightning*

5:31PM GMT 25 Feb 2016

Air Vice-Marshal John Howe, who has died aged 85, was one of the RAF's most experienced and capable Cold War fighter pilots, whose flying career spanned Second World War piston-engined aircraft to the supersonic Lightning and Phantom.

In early 1960 Howe was appointed to command the RAF's first Lightning squadron, No 74 Tiger Squadron, based in Norfolk. The aircraft represented a great advance in technology and performance, with a remarkable rate of climb to heights in excess of 60,000 ft and capable of flying at twice the speed of sound.

With no simulator or two-seat training version of the aircraft, Howe made his, and the squadron's, first flight on June 14 1960. A few weeks later he was instructed to provide a four-aircraft formation for the annual Farnborough Air Show.

Despite the inevitable early teething troubles with the complex aircraft, Howe and his pilots flew on all but one day of the show. The squadron was made the RAF's official aerobatics

team for 1961 and was in demand for appearances at British and European shows. For the Farnborough event that year, Howe trained and led a “diamond nine” formation.



*Howe diving in his Lightning during an air show*

Howe realised that air shows were good for publicity and potential international sales of aircraft, but the time devoted to them hindered the development of full operational capability. He drove himself, and others, hard, but he was a highly respected leader. The squadron's high morale helped it to reach operational status within the first 10 months despite the many problems that had to be overcome. At the end of his tour, Howe was awarded the AFC.

He said of the Lightning: "It was one of the most exhilarating aeroplanes, even by today's standards."

John Frederick George Howe was born in East London, South Africa, on March 26 1930 and educated at St Andrew's College, Grahamstown. As soon as he left school, he joined the South African Air Force and trained as a pilot. In early 1951 he joined No 2 Squadron, known as the Flying Cheetahs, which was based in South Korea as part of the United Nations forces.

The squadron, equipped with the piston-engine Mustang, was heavily engaged in the ground attack role in support of the Army. On June 24, Howe took off with three others. They responded to an emergency call for air support by a surrounded ground force.

In the face of intense anti-aircraft fire, the four Mustangs attacked gun emplacements a number of times. Howe did not expect to survive, but the four aircraft returned to base. All four pilots received US gallantry awards. A month later, Howe was forced to crash land and was rescued by a helicopter.

In September, as a 21-year-old second lieutenant, he was the leader of four aircraft instructed to attack enemy troops that were threatening friendly forces. Fierce enemy fire damaged Howe's aircraft but he continued to lead his formation against the target. The US authorities awarded him an immediate DFC, the citation recording: "He displayed a standard of leadership above and beyond that normally expected."

After completing his flying tour, Howe remained in Korea as a forward air controller before returning to South Africa. At the end of 1954 he travelled to Britain to join the RAF.

In April 1956 he joined No 222 (Natal) Squadron flying the Hunter. When a volunteer was required for forward air controller duties with No 3 Commando Brigade in late 1956, Howe's experience in Korea helped to land him the job. He sailed with the Brigade for the ill-fated Suez campaign and, at dawn on November 6, landed on the beaches at Port Said with No 40 Commando, to direct aircraft on to targets in the area. In the event, the campaign was short-lived.

Howe returned to his squadron before joining No 43 Squadron as a flight commander, still flying the Hunter. He was awarded a Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service in the Air, receiving a second two years later. In June 1959 he started training to take command of his Lightning squadron.



*John Howe in his high-altitude flying suit in front of his Lightning*

Howe remained in the fighter business, including a tour of duty with the USAF which gave him an opportunity to fly the latest American fighters, including the Phantom. In 1968 he was appointed to command the RAF's operational conversion unit that saw the introduction of the Phantom into RAF service, his unit being responsible for the conversion of the first squadron crews.

After a staff tour he became the station commander of RAF Gutersloh, the home of two Lightning squadrons and a support helicopter squadron. His fighter squadrons, based a few minutes' flying time from the border with Warsaw Pact forces, mounted a continuous quick-reaction capability. He rarely missed an opportunity to maintain his fighter pilot proficiency.

After attending the Royal College of Defence Studies he served at HQ 11 (Fighter) Group, and on promotion to air commodore was appointed the commandant of the Royal Observer Corps (ROC). The organisation had a fine record, but Howe justifiably believed that it was in need of modernisation and a more robust attitude. With his usual, not always popular, vigour, he set about applying the same exacting standards to the ROC that he did to his flying. By the time he left in 1980, the efficiency of the Corps had risen sharply.

In May 1980 he was appointed the air officer commanding the Southern Maritime Region, a departure from his previous fighter experience and where his usual forceful approach was much in evidence.

His final appointment in the RAF was the dual role of Commandant General RAF Regiment and Provost Marshal of the RAF. He retired in November 1985. He was appointed CB (1985) and CBE (1978).

In his younger days, Howe was a high-spirited officer who knew how to enjoy life – his “Zulu war dance” at social functions was a speciality. But on duty he was utterly professional and he set himself and those around him difficult goals.

In retirement he was a sheep farmer in Norfolk, where he was known as the “supersonic shepherd”; he retired in 2004. He was a capable skier and a devoted chairman of the Combined Services Skiing Association. A biography of him, *Upward and Onward*, by Bob Cossey, was published in 2008.

John Howe married Annabelle Gowing in March 1961; she and their three daughters survive him.

**Air Vice-Marshal John Howe, born March 26 1930, died January 27 2016**