

82163 Flight Lieutenant François Xavier Egenoff Egon Hubert de Spirlet

Born on 3rd December 1916 in Ayeneux near Liege, Belgium, François de Spirlet studied for a Bachelor of Arts in Humanities at the University of Torino. He was later designated for the Municipality of Ayeneux's draft of 1936, and was sent to join the 3rd Regiment of Aeronautics on the 24th September. On 23rd November he was promoted to Corporal and admitted for aircrew training as an Observer. Promotion to Sergeant followed on 23rd June 1937, and the following day he was promoted to Adjutant candidate Second Lieutenant of the Reserve. Recalled on 2nd May 1938, he was placed on unlimited leave and admitted into the ranks of Reserve Aircrew with his Observer Brevet.

On 31st August, François voluntarily returned as a Corporal (substantive Sergeant) and the following day re-engaged for two years, being posted to Wevelghem for training as a pilot. Receiving his Elementary Brevet on 15th May, he was to be awarded his Military Flying Brevet on 18th August.

On 26th August 1939, François was posted to Evere, joining No. 7 Flight, (the Winged Arrow), III Group, of the 3rd Regiment of Aeronautics, flying Fairey Fox VIII aircraft. Promoted to Sergeant Pilot on 21st September 1939, he was awarded the Higher Military Flying Brevet on 12th October. On 20th November 1939, de Spirlet was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant of the Aeronautical Reserve and was subsequently posted to No. 1 Flight (the Black Dragon), I Group of the 3rd Regiment of Aeronautics, also stationed at Evere, on 27th November 1939.

Taking the Oath on 4th January 1940, François was still with this unit when the Germans invaded on 10th May. Two days later, they withdrew to Noirant-Fontes in France, where they hoped to be re-equipped with replacement aircraft. This was not to happen, and they slowly moved through France via Tours, Montpellier and Port Vendres, before François left his unit on 22nd June 1940 at Gibraltar and sailed for Liverpool, at which he arrived on 7th July 1940, being immediately taken into the Belgian Forces in Great Britain.

On 12th July, François was posted to the Royal Air Force Depot at Gloucester before moving on to No. 15 Operational Training Unit at Harwell, Oxfordshire, on 20th July with the RAF rank of Pilot Officer. One week later, on the 27th, he moved to No. 7 Operational Training Unit at Hawarden, Flintshire.

On 12th August 1940, François de Spirlet was posted to No. 87 Squadron, where he was to fly Hawker Hurricanes operationally against the German Luftwaffe, in what came to be known as the Battle of Britain.

On 15th April 1941 François was again posted, this time to No 609 (West Riding) Squadron, stationed at RAF Biggin Hill in Kent. Initially flying Supermarine Spitfire Mk 1's, the squadrons aircraft were gradually replaced by Mk IIa's and MkVb's. It was whilst flying from Biggin Hill that François was to score his first aerial victory, when on 17th June 1941 flying Spitfire MkVb W3179 he destroyed a German Messerschmitt Bf109E off the French coast near Le Touquet at 19:45 hrs. 5 days later, on 22nd June, it was his turn to be shot down, when cannon fire from a Bf109 hit the engine of Spitfire W3197 PR-T near Dover at 15:00hrs. François baled out slightly

injured and was rescued by an RAF high-speed launch, subsequently spending two days recovering in Ramsgate General Hospital. Back with his squadron, François was promoted to Flying Officer on 20th July, and again on 25th August, becoming Acting Flight Lieutenant. He was to gain his second, and final, confirmed aerial victory on 29th August, whilst flying Spitfire VB W3625 from RAF Gravesend, Kent, when he destroyed a Messerschmitt Bf109E inland from Gravelines, France, at 07:30 hrs.

On 31st October, he was promoted by the Belgian Air Force, being commissioned as Lieutenant of the Aeronautical Reserve, followed by promotion to Captain on 26th February 1942.

Highly regarded by his fellow squadron members, de Spirlet became a cornerstone for them. Popular with his groundcrew, he was knowledgeable on the technical side of aircraft, as well as being an accomplished flier. Recognition of his valour from a grateful government came with the award of the Croix de Guerre with palm on 21st July 1941, followed on 29th August with a further palm, and an additional third palm was added posthumously on 3rd July 1942.

At 06:15 hrs on 26th June 1942, 82163 Flight Lieutenant François de Spirlet, 'B' Flight Commander of 609 (West Riding) Squadron, was killed in an accident at RAF Duxford. Piloting Hawker Typhoon Mk Ib R7710 PR-E during a take off in formation with three other aircraft, his left tyre burst, causing the aircraft to swing across the runway and into Typhoon R7817 PR-D, piloted by fellow Belgian Pilot Officer Raymond 'Cheval' Lallemand. François' aircraft shot into the air before crashing down and bursting into flames, François dying from a crushed skull and broken spinal column.

25 year old François de Spirlet was buried at Brookwood Military Cemetery in Surrey, England in plot 26, Row A, Grave No.2. On 29th October 1949, his body was repatriated to Bruxelles Town Cemetery at Evere, where he now lies in plot II / 36.



Awards and Decorations

Croix de Guerre with Palm

Quotation on the Agenda of the Army and attribution of an additional Palm on the Military Cross.

Knight about Léopold with Palm (posthumous)

Authorized to carry A final the metal Badge for the Belgian Forces in Great Britain titrates.

Medal of the Volunteers 1940-1945

1939 – 1945 Star and Clasp (Battle of Britain)

Aircrew Europe Star

War Medal 1939-1945

From the diary of Flight Sergeant Alan 'Babe' Haddon

"My Flight Commander - one of the finest men I have met was killed at Duxford.
F/Lt F.X.E. de Spirlet C.D.G. (Belgian) 26.6.42. Friday 26 June 1942"

"Jun 25th. Practice Wing in morning, No. 2 to de Spirlet. Aircraft is u/s after that so nothing else during day. Have a bath then Cheval and I go for a quiet ride in the country.

Jun 26th. A terrible day - de Spirlet killed - I can't believe it. Am in daze for rest of the day. Why had he to go. I pray to the Lord to look after François. I get very drunk in evening.

Jun 27th. Go to Coltishall in morning, return in afternoon. Have a quiet evening. Feel pretty bloody. Haven't recovered from shock yesterday.

Jun 28th. Weather u/s for flying in morning. Fly in afternoon and then escort body of François to station. Saxce, Beamont and I go out on a blind in evening. Finish up at dance.

Jun 29th. Formation in morning and in afternoon. François buried at Brookwood in afternoon. God will certainly find an honoured place for him in His home.

Jun 30th. No flying. Weather u/s all day. Stay in my room all evening. Have a drink and then go to bed. Lie listening to wireless.

Jul 1st. Early morning readiness. Do some air firing. Some new fellows come to squadron. Hope 609 can recover its old glory - will have to fight like devils now for Pyker and François."

From the diary of Flight Sergeant Bob Walling

"On June 26th we had our first fatal crash with 'Typhies'. F/Lt De Spirlet in 'E' and P/O Lallemande in 'D' were taking off early in the morning when 'D' swung into 'E' and tore the tail off. 'E' crashed and burst into flames. De Spirlet never had a chance to get out. Lallemande was badly shaken, but apart from that he was OK. Both aircraft were complete write - offs. Flying was suspended whilst 'A' and 'B' flights removed

the wreckage from the 'drome. The same evening, the squadron dance was held in the College Hall, Sawston, but there was a cloud over the entire evening. A great contrast to the boozy hilarious dances at Digby and Dorchester."

From the Form 540 Operations Record Book of 609 Squadron

June 26. At 04:50 hours 10 pilots are at Readiness. But nothing happens. At 06:00 F/Lt de Spirlet, P/O Ortmans and P/O Lallemand set off on formation practice. Immediately after the take-off F/Lt de Spirlet and P/O Lallemand collide, the latter's a/c cutting off the former's tail. De Spirlet's aircraft plunges to the ground and explodes; de Spirlet is killed. Lallemand manages somehow to land, and though his engine is torn from its frame, he only suffers from shock. After this shocking tragedy it is well that the squadron remains busy. 2 a/c are required at Readiness all day, 266 and 56 respectively gone to do duty at Coltishall and Kirton. And from 08:20 till about 10:30 a series of pairs of aircraft take off to participate in a large army exercise known as 'Test Match'. Pilots are in R/T contact with the army they are supporting, attack targets in the shape of tanks, lorries, R/T tenders etc., reckon they have done considerable damage. Under the heading of 'Reaction of Target' P/O Ortmans reports that personnel continued their lunch. In the middle of all this F/Lt du Monceau flies over from Debden on a visit of sympathy. And there is air firing and a section formation.

Francois de Spirlet reached England with F/O Malengreau in 1940. After being assigned for a fortnight to a Wellington station, both went to 87 and 56 squadrons in succession. Taking some part in the Battle of Britain. As P/Os they came to 609 with the first batch of Belgians in April '41. After being twice shot down, and shooting down 2 Me109s, Francois succeeded F/Lt Richey as 'A' Flight Commander in August. Since then, and especially since the death of F/Lt Offenbergh in January, he had in almost every way become the rock of the squadron, administratively, technically and socially, and he was always the one to whom people referred when they wanted anything done. The most impartial of the Belgians, he understood English humour and ways of thinking the best, while his own ironic humour was always a delight to everyone. As a leader, and as a friend, Francois will be hard to replace.

Gloomily in the evening the squadron betakes itself to Sawston College for its dance. This turns out to be good psychological medicine. Some 300 persons are present, including some 'sophomores' of the college and F/Lt William de Goat, who becomes the cynosure of the evening; and though the officers are permitted by the Headmaster (with some persuasion) to have a bar, the airmen somehow seem to manage so well that when 2 policemen endeavour to investigate the proceedings they are turned away by the Adj. And F/Sgt Abraham for not having a warrant. In the Officers' bar the beer is in whisky bottles, with the resulting contretemps that some people are served nips of beer, with soda added, others tumblers of neat whisky. After the party is over there is a continuation for some at the houses of the Station Commander and F/O Tidmarsh (Int. 266). – Arrival today as supernumerary adjutant, of F/O Westcott, a man of much experience in Norway and West Africa. Receives the O.B.E. for his services a few days later.