

Pilot Officer Jan Mathys

Jan Mathys, a natural Belgian, took the oath on 28th August 1941. Leaving the Belgian Congo to South Africa, Jan began his flying training with the Initial Training Wing at No. 75 Air School of the South African Air Force on 30th November. This was followed by Elementary Flying Training School at No. 6 Air School at Potchefstroom from 14th April 1942, Service Flying Training School at No. 22 Air School at Vereeniging on 5th July, No. 26 Air School at Pietersburg from 10th January 1943, No 27 Air School at Bloemspruit from 21st April, before sailing to England from Cape Town, via the continents of Africa, South America and North America, finally crossing the North Atlantic in a convoy.

After reporting to the Personnel Receiving Centre at Harrogate on 24th September 1943, Jan was posted on 11th April 1944 to No. 5 Pilot Advanced Flying Unit at Ternhill, Shropshire, before continuing his training at No. 53 Operational Training Unit at Caistor, Lincolnshire from 13th June. This was followed on the 15th August with a posting to No. 3 Tactical Exercise Unit at Chedworth in Gloucestershire. Flight Sergeant Jan Mathys now became an operational fighter pilot, serving with No. 609 (West Riding) Squadron from 12th September 1944 (joining the squadron at B53 Merville, France, under the command of S/Ldr Raymond 'Cheval' Lallemand, DFC) until 1st October 1945. Flying with his fellow Belgian Pilot Officer Albert Laforce, he had the distinction of making the last operational wartime sortie of 609, with an armed shipping reconnaissance on 4th May 1945 from airfield B103, Plantlunne. Both were later to serve together on No. 349 (Belgian) Squadron before being discharged from the Royal Air Force, and remained close friends for the rest of their lives.

Postwar, Belgian pilots took their hard-won skills with them, and many utilised them to help build the new Belgian Air force, while others went to the national airline, Sabena. Jan Mathys became a Brigade-General of the Belgian Air Force in 1976, finally retiring in 1980 from the service which he had helped found.