

601 was commanded by Squadron Leader John 'The Bishop' Bisdee, DFC, who had fought with 609 during the Battle of Britain and shot down seven German aircraft, having joined at RAF Kinloss, Scotland, on Boxing Day 1939. On the 20th April 1942, Bisdee had led 12 Spitfires of 601 off the aircraft carrier USS Wasp, then sailing near the coast of Algiers, to the island of Malta, which they reached successfully. On 21st April, Bisdee shot down a Junkers Ju88, but was himself hit shortly afterwards by a Messerschmitt Bf109 piloted by Leutnant Walther Zellot of I/JagdGeschwader 53. After 6 hours in his dinghy, he finally reached shore. He later led a detachment of Spitfires to the Western Desert and served in Cairo with the air staff before being appointed Military Governor of the Lampedusa Islands in 1943. In 1944 he was posted as Officer in charge of night fighters with 323 Wing in Italy. He left the Royal Air Force with the rank of Group Captain in 1945 with at least 11 aerial victories to his credit.

BISDEE, John Derek, joined 609 Squadron in December 1939 as a Pilot Officer. He first scored during the Battle of Britain, shooting down a Bf110 on 11th August 1940. He got another of these on 7th September, and probably destroyed a He111 on the 26th. Next day he shared a further Bf110, and rounded off the month by damaging a Bf109. On 7th October he got his last victory in the Battle, shooting down another Bf110. In 1941 the sweeps over France began, and he shared a Bf109 on 25th May. Shortly after, he became a flight commander. In June he destroyed two Bf109s, probably a third, and damaged a fourth. He then received a DFC. He got his last Bf109 with the squadron on 9th July, and was then sent for a rest. In March 1942 he was posted to command 601 Squadron, at that time flying Airacobras at Acaster Malbis, but soon after managed to get the squadron converted to Spitfires. He was then posted to command 56 Squadron, flying Typhoons, but got this changed, and accompanied 601 to Malta aboard the USS Wasp, flying the first four-cannon Spitfire V's. On his first sortie from Malta he shot down a Ju88, but was himself shot into the sea and had to swim for a great distance to the island. Exhausted, he spent a few days in hospital and then returned to the fight. During May he led part of the squadron against a formation of Cant Z.1007's, all of which were destroyed, he personally accounting for one. This brought his score to 10, and it is not known if he attained further victories on the island before the squadron was posted to the Western Desert in July. Here he damaged a Me210 on 5th July, but got no further victories. He left the squadron soon after, and in 1943, promoted to Wing Commander was made military governor of the island of Lampedusa. In 1944 he was Wing Commander Staff in 323 Wing, in charge of night-fighter personnel in Italy.

Obituary November 29, 2000
Group Captain John Bisdee

Battle of Britain Fighter Ace

Group Captain John Bisdee, OBE, DFC, Battle of Britain fighter ace, was born on November 30, 1915. He died on October 21 aged 84.

JOHN BISDEE was a wartime fighter ace who shot down six enemy aircraft in the Battle of Britain and raised his tally to at least 11 well before VE-Day. Flying a Spitfire with 609 Squadron, he saw his first action over France, providing air cover for troops lined up on the beaches at Dunkirk before the air battle began over southern England.

In 1942 Bisdee led a flight of Spitfires to Malta, flying them on to the island from the American aircraft carrier Wasp ó but was himself shot down on the following day. His parachute nearly came adrift as he baled out and he floated down, hanging from it by one leg, to land in the Mediterranean. He managed to scramble into the dinghy strapped to his back, but spent many hours in the water before being picked up and taken to hospital.

Bisdee later led a detachment of Spitfires to the Western Desert and also served on the air staff in Cairo before being made military governor of the island of Lampedusa in 1943 at the age of 25.

He was only 29 when the war ended. Newly promoted group captain, he was appointed OBE and offered a permanent commission. But after careful thought, he turned it down, deciding to return to Unilever.

John Derek Bisdee was born into an old Somerset family. His father served as a brigadier in the First World War, during which he won the DSO and the MC. John Bisdee was educated at Marlborough and Corpus Christi, Cambridge, where he read French and Spanish. He was in Spain when the civil war broke out and, along with other students, he had to be evacuated from Santander by a British destroyer.

He became a management trainee with Unilever, and also joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve. On returning to Unilever after the war, Bisdee rose steadily through the group, to become chairman of Fabergé Gibbs (now called Elida Fabergé), one of its subsidiary companies.

He carved out a niche in history on the way, by arranging the first advertisement ever to appear on ITV ó which showed a tube of SR toothpaste in a block of ice in the middle of a stream.

Retiring at the age of 62, he worked for a few more years for two other companies, including S. I. Industries, an American firm which made factory handling equipment. But he then finally retired, to indulge his passion for carpentry.

He retained his close links to the RAF through the Battle of Britain Fighter Pilots Association. A pen and ink sketch of him was the picture for October in the RAF Museum's calendar for this year.

A large ebullient figure, Bisdee was best described in a history of 609 Squadron as a 'cheerful, blonde mountain of confidence'. One of the most popular so-called company 'barons' in Unilever, he was also a natural organiser ó which explains why both the group and the RAF were anxious to keep him.

He met his wife Pamela during the war in Cairo, where she was serving as an officer in the WAAF. A British Council employee stationed in Belgrade before the war, she had been put in charge of the Yugoslav Air Force which had flown to Egypt when the Germans invaded ó because she was the only British officer there who spoke Serbo-Croat.

They married in Naples shortly after VE-Day, honeymooned in Nice, then returned to their postings until they were demobilised. She survives him, together with their son and two daughters.

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