Air Force Association (South Australia)

Aviator Profile

SQNLDR John Reynolds Cock DFC

(World War 2 Pilot: 87SQN, 54SQN, 3SQN)

South Australian Battle of France and Battle of Britain Air Ace

John Reynolds Cock was born in Renmark, South Australia on 3rd March 1918, the son of Vivian Earnest Cock and Katherine Farley. He grew up in Renmark attending Berri Higher Primary School and Renmark High School before completing school as a border at Prince Alfred College in Adelaide. Completing school, he commenced studies at Roseworthy Agricultural College to the north of Adelaide. He was reportedly a good sportsman excelling at swimming.

Portrait image of FLTLT John Cock taken in October 1940. (AWM)

While at Prince Alfred College, John Cock commenced flying lessons with the Royal Aeronautical Club of South Australia Club under the instruction of J Buckham at Parafield Airfield in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. He received his civilian A Pilots Licence in 1937 aged on 19 learning on DH-60 Moth biplanes and a Magister Hawk monoplane aircraft and was an active member of the club in 1937 and 1938. By early 1938, he had completed 50 hours in his logbook in the cockpit of an aircraft.

During the 1920's and 1930's, the young Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) had an arrangement with the RAF for some of its trainee pilots to complete short service commissions in the RAF as Australians with the intent to help develop its officer pilot corps. Some included officers who remained in the RAF going onto senior rank including Air Marshal Ronald Lees (a South Australian), Air Vice-Marshal Donald Bennett and Air Commodore Sir Hughie Edwards. Some completed flying training at Point Cook, some completed only basic flying training, and some proceeded to England directly for flying training. In 1938 and 1939, there were several groups of recruits screened by the RAAFR but sent directly to England for initial and flying training. By the late 1938, almost 150 officers had served in the RAF in this arrangement. Incredibly, at the end of August 1939, there were more Australian pilots in the RAF than the regular RAAF in Australia.

Royal Aeronautical Club aircraft at Parafield in the late 1930's. (SLSA)

In early 1938, Cock was one of those selected for a short service commission with the Royal Air Force. He proceeded to England with 12 other such recruits arriving in March 1938 to conduct initial training and then basic flying training. For

his basic flying training, he was instructed on aircraft he had already flown at Parafield including Miles Hawkes, Miles Magistrate, and de Havilland Tiger Moths.

He then completed No. 6 Flying Training School at RAF Netheravon, Wiltshire, where they joined local forces and other young cadets from all over the world including New Zealand, Canada and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to create the 9th Intermediate Training Squadron. In Netheravon, John learnt to fly the famous Hawker Hurricane and Supermarine Spitfire, the former of which he would pilot for many years during the War.

An RAF Miles Magister training aircraft. (IWM)

Trainees at 6FTS, RAF Netheravon. John Cock is in the back row, 5th from left. (VWMA)

In early 1939, Cock was posted to No 87 Squadron based at RAF Tangmere in southern England near Chicester. He was confirmed as a Pilot Officer on 7 March 1939 and was serving alongside fellow Australian Dickie Glynde with the recently reformed fighter squadron. Seeing action on the Western Front in 1917 and 1918 before being disbanded in 1919, 87SQN was reformed in March 1937 as a fighter squadron equipped initially with the Hawker Fury and then the Gloster Gladiator before being equipped with the Hawker Hurricane in July 1938.

RAF aircrew scramble to their 87SQN Hurricane aircraft in a public affairs image. Cock flew in LK-N, the 3rd aircraft from the front. (AWM)

With war clouds looming over Europe, 87SQN was earmarked to be part of the British Air Component force to be deployed to France to counter any German offensive. A British Air

Forces in France (BAFF) Command was formed comprising a Royal Air Force Air Component of the British Expeditionary Force tasked with providing air support for the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and the Advanced Air Striking Force (AASF) for independent Bomber Command operations from French airfields. 87SQN was one of four Hurricane squadrons for fighter operations allocated to the Air Component force along with four Bristol Blenheim squadrons (providing strike and strategic reconnaissance) and five Westland Lysander Squadrons (tactical reconnaissance).

87SQN deployed to Roun and then Merville in northern France in September 1939. It then deployed northeast to Lille along the French/Belgium border in December. On 14 April 1940, Cock claimed his first aerial victory shooting down a Heinkel 111 conducting a reconnaissance mission off Le Touqet over the northeastern French coastline. In his log book, he recorded "*Intercepted HE111 at 11,000 over Berc Sur Mere. Chased it to 26,0000 and opened fire. Aircraft crashed in sea*." The victory would be the first of a series with the German invasion of France and Belgium on 10 May and the Battle of France. Based at Lille, 87SQN was once of several RAF squadrons bearing the brunt of a vicious and overwhelming air offensive and Cock was in battle daily. On the first day of the invasion, he shot down a Junkers Ju 88 fighter-bomber and damaged a Dornier Do-17 light bomber and a Me-110 twin engine fighter. On the 12 May he destroyed a Heinkel He-111 near a bridge over the Meuse and on the following day, a Messerschmitt Bf-109 fighter over Louvain. He claimed a Ju 88 destroyed near Le Cateau on 16 May but this was unable to be confirmed. On the 17 May, 87SQN intercepted 80 Junkers Ju 87 dive bombers east of Brussels where Cock would destroy his fifth enemy aircraft and become one of Australia's first air aces of World War 2. The following day, he was one of four pilots that shared in the destruction of a Henschel Hs 126 reconnaissance aircraft over Courtrai.

The rapid German advance across France up to the English Channel overran Air Component bases, and the Air Component evacuated to southern England from 19 to 21 May. Of the 261 fighters that had operated with the component, only 66 returned to England; 120 of the lost aircraft had suffered damage which under normal circumstances would have been repairable. By 25 June, the Battle of France was over. Across a brief six-week period, the British and French forces had been decisively overrun in Belgium and France. Meanwhile, 87SQN withdrew to England on 22 May, returning to Debden following an intense 12 days of aerial warfare.

On 18 June, Prime Minister Winston Churchill forecast the impending Battle of Britain declaring in a now famous speech in the House of Commons that "*the Battle of France is over. I expect that the battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us."*

Reconstituting at Church Fenton in central England from May to June, 87SQN was moved to Exeter in southwestern England completing its move by 6 July to defend the western approaches to Plymouth and Bristol. Three days later, Cock conducted one of the squadrons first patrols of the Battle of Britain - an early patrol over Weymouth on the English coastline in 87SQN Hurricane P3596 LK-N that lasted 70 minutes without any incident. Larter in the day, he conducted a second combat air patrol between Dartmouth and Salcombe in the same aircraft in which he identified a Dornier Do 215 reconnaissance aircraft maneuvering between cloud to conceal itself. He fired four short bursts at the aircraft and reported seeing its starboard engine damaged, but the aircraft got away.

87SQN Hurricane LK-A in flight during the Battle of Britain. (IWM)

For the first week of July, the Luftwaffe largely conducted reconnaissance and probing missions. These had commenced following the issuing of orders from Adolf Hitler to maker plans for the invasion of England including the first operational directives to the Luftwaffe for the air campaign against England. The orders specifically directed the Luftwaffe two basic tasks: 1) the interdiction of the English Channel attacking convoys, destruction of harbour facilities and laying of mines and 2) the destruction of the Royal Air Force. On the 10 July, the Luftwaffe commenced conducting large formation operations targeting British radar and maritime targets along the southern coastline. It saw the largest dogfight fought over the Channel up to that point. By sundown the RAF recorded 13 destroyed aircraft for the loss of lost seven RAF aircraft. The 10 July is now recognized as the start of the Battle of Britain.

FLGOFF John Cock with 87SQN during the battle of Britain. www.bbm.org.uk

By late July the German offensive was taking a toll on allied convoys and the Admiralty suspended merchant shipping during daylight. On 22 July, Cock is flying Hurricane P3596 in a three aircraft patrol over Portland along the southern coastline between Exeter and Bournemouth. The patrol sight a German reconnaissance aircraft and attempts to intercept but the aircraft eludes it. Steadily, the Germans begin operating at night and on the 26 July, 87SQN is one of several RTAF squadrons conducting night patrols. At about 11.30pm, Cock is conducting a 'Cats Eyes' patrol near Hullavinton east of Bristol flying Hurricane P3394 LK-M when he sees an enemy aircraft caught in searchlights. He maneuvered closer to the aircraft and after identifying it as a Heinkel He-111 bomber, opened fire at 230m. The bomber spiraled away and crashed at Longfield. It was the first night aerial victory for an Australian fighter pilot in World War 2.

On the 6 August, Cock was airborne in a flight of Hurricanes on patrol along the coastline to Plymouth when they sighted a formation of at least ten Messerschmitt Bf-110 aircraft above them in the sun. Altering course and climbing to engage the formation, the German aircraft turned for France eluding the 87SQN patrol.

On the 11 August, the Germans commenced the day with several raids in the Dover area attempting to draw RAF fighters into the area to then mount a large-scale major attack on the Portland naval base near in southwestern England where 87SQN is based. For Cock, the day had started off well as he had been repaid a long-standing debt of £5, a considerable amount in those days, by a fellow pilot. However, the day would quickly become one of the largest aerial engagements of the battle of Britain thus far. Through radar, operational commanders detected the building up of German formations however over France and correctly assessed the target of the German attack to be in the west and placed eight squadrons of Hurricanes and spitfires including 87SQN on alert. Soon, more than 200 German aircraft would be swarming across the Portland area.

RAF Hawker Hurricane fighters in a classic V Formation during the Battle of Britain. (AWM)

Just after 10am, John Cock was airborne with 87SQN's B Flight to intercept the predicted German attack on Portland. Fellow Aussie Dick Glynde was leading the other 87SQN flight. In what became a major and fierce air battle, four RAF fighter squadrons engage the escorting German fighters while two squadrons including 87SQN attempt to engage the German bombers. Flying Hurricane V7233VL-K Cock initially engages an escorting Bf 109 firing several rounds which hit

and badly damage the aircraft. With one of his .303-inch guns jammed, Cock engaged a Ju 88 medium bomber firing off all remaining rounds from the other working guns. A wing of the Ju-88 burst into flames but just after, rounds struck the left side of his hurricane including the cockpit. His instrument panel was destroyed and the engine damaged. His left arm was struck by shrapnel and a round. Bleeding heavily from his left arm in a stricken aircraft at 20,000 feet, Cock elected to bail out. He pulled the canopy hood and rolled the aircraft over to easily free himself but in doing so, his leg and parachute got caught leaving him dangling halfway out of the cockpit. After some kicking and pushing, he freed himself and fell out of the aircraft.

Falling out of the aircraft, Cock pulled his parachutes rip cord allowing him to float to the ground only to then see himself caught in the air amidst a fierce dogfight with aircraft whirling around. He then noticed rounds striking the parachute and cords and then saw a Bf 109 firing at him. Thankfully, he then saw a 87SQN Hurricane flown by PLTOFF Dennis David fire on and destroy the Bf 109 saving his life.

Cock landed in the sea approximately half a mile from the shore, but the large parachute billowed in the wind dragging him further out to sea. He freed himself from the parachute and kicked off his boots to allow him to swim to shore. However, restricted by a bleeding and throbbing arm and a mae west punctured by rounds, he still encountered significant difficulty and thus, elected to also remove his trousers. He eventually reached Chesil Beach located west of Portland and staggered ashore met by several home guardsmen armed with shotguns. Exhausted, bedraggled, trouser less in his underwear but with his tunic, and bleeding from the arm, it was only then that he remembered the 5 pound note in his trouser pocket, the recently repaid debt, was gone.

The 87SQN Operations Book records the event stating "*P/O Cock after his second combat suddenly found his cockpit breaking in pieces as the result of an unseen attack. With difficulty he bailed out, landed in the sea about 200 yards from the shore and managed to swim ashore where he arrived dressed in a tunic and blue underpants – a somewhat fearsome spectacle*."

Cock was initially admitted to Portway Hospital and then transferred to the RAF Hospital at Torquay where he remained until mid-September and given further leave. Two days after being shot down himself, Cock learned that his fellow Aussie 87SQN pilot, FLGOFF Dick Glyde was short down and killed in action on 13 August. Glyde was the fifth Australian pilot to be killed in action in the Battle of Britain. Now known as *Aldertag* or Eagle Day; the 13 August was the first day of *Unternehmen Adlerangriff* ("Operation Eagle Attack"), a Luftwaffe operation aimed at destroying RAF bases across southern England. It was the largest air battles thus far in the Battle of Britain with Germany losing almost 47 aircraft destroyed and 39 severely damaged and the RAF losing 24 aircraft in the air and 47 aircraft of various kinds on the ground.

A formation of Dornier Do-17 medium bombers in formation during the Battle of Britain

In October, Cock was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions on 11 August with the Citation reading "*This officer has destroyed seven enemy aircraft. In August 1940, when in action against a large formation of enemy aircraft, he attacked and destroyed a Junkers 88. During this combat he was attacked from below and his aircraft caught fire. Though wounded, he escaped by parachute and fell into the sea, but saved himself by swimming ashore. Flying Officer Cock has shown magnificent courage and initiative against overwhelming odds*."

Cock later learned that the German pilot who shot him down was Helmut Wick, a noted Luftwaffe fighter ace who is credited with 56 aerial victories and was the fourth recipient of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves, the nation's highest military decoration, awarded the day he shot down John Cock. Wick was killed in action in November 1940.

Helmet Wick who shot down John Cock on 11 August 1940. At the time, he was the leading Luftwaffe ace.

While in hospital, he was promoted to Flying Officer on 3 September 1940. By the time of Cock's return to 87SQN in mid-September, the Luftwaffe was now attacking London and aircraft factories rather than RAF targets in the south of England, some being in the area of No. 10 Group. The tide had changed in the Battle of Britain following the change in strategy instigated in early September and the momentous and decisive aerial victories on 15 September where two massive waves of German attacks were decisively repulsed by the RAF by deploying every aircraft in No 11 Group of Fighter Command. Sixty German and twenty-six RAF aircraft were shot down. The action was the climax of the Battle of Britain and was a watershed moment for the Luftwaffe.

Cock reported back to duty with 87SQN on 10 September to fly three missions on the day of his return in a Hurricane – the first since his bailing out on 11 August. In the morning of the 15 September, Cock is part of a patrol flying out of Exeter where they identify a He 111 at altitude but fail to engage it when it disappears into haze. With many of the momentous German attacks targeting London and southeastern England, 87SQN avoid the epic and fierce air fighting that will dominate the day. He conducted various night fighter patrols over the next several weeks.

On the 30 September, Cock took off from Exeter later in the afternoon as one of eight 87SQN Hurricanes operating as pairs to intercept a large group of German bombers escorted by Bf 109's and Me 110's. Preparing to attack out of the sun, Cock himself was suddenly engaged from behind by a Bf 109 which overshoots allowing Cock to close in behind and fire resulting in black smoke trailing from the stricken German fighter. Following it into cloud, he finds a Ju 88 bomber and attacks it from the side and the read setting it on fire resulting in two more aerial victories for the now very experienced South Australian fighter pilot.

During the first week of October, Cock lead B Flight to Bidbury in central England where they conducted night fighter patrols now referred to as 'Cats eyes' patrols referring to the ability of a cat to see at night. Returning to Exter on the 9 October, he was back in the air flying a patrol over Portland when his section encountered a large formation of Me 110s escorted by Bf 109's. He fires onto a Bf 109 resulting in thick black smoke coming out of its engine before it escapes into thick cloud.

A German Bf 109 shot down near Hastings on 12 August 1940. (IWM)

On 24 October, Cock was flight lead for four Hurricanes conducting local training flying a box formation. At about 3,000 feet, his engine suddenly cut out. He pushed the nose down to avoid colliding with his wingmen but in doing so collided with the fourth hurricane which had by now caught up. Its propeller cut through the tail of Cocks aircraft causing it to plummet towards the ground until regaining some momentum allowing it to climb steeply. Struggling to control the aircraft, Cock crash landed the aircraft back at Exeter. Meanwhile, the junior pilot, PLTOFF D. Jay, of the other aircraft (P3404) attempted to bail out of his stricken aircraft only to have his parachute fail to open and thus perish in the accident.

The 87SQN Hurricane that Cock flew on 24 October 1940 showing the badly damaged tailplane after his collision with another aircraft. www.bbm.org.uk

In November, 87SQN moved to Colerne east of Bristol to concentrate on night fighter operations. Meanwhile, a month later Cock completed his tour of duty the unit having seen intense combat in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain. Over a period of less than one year, he had destroyed 11 confirmed aircraft in the air, four probable destroyed aircraft and five damage aircraft.

In December 1940, Cock was posted to No. 2 Central Flying School to train as a flight instructor before being posted in early 1941 to No. 9 Flying Training School. He remained there until August 1941 when he was posted to No. 28 Elementary Flying Training School located at Meir southeast of Newcastle under Lyne in central England.

In July 1942, he returned to an operational flying unit posted to No 453 Squadron (RAAF), a spitfire squadron that that just been reformed at RAF Drem, near Edinburgh, in Scotland in June 1942 having been decimated in the initial Japanese attacks on the Malayan peninsula in December 1941 and January 1942. Posted in as a supernumerary officer, Cock's role was to augment the new squadron as it underwent workup training and became operational in July. He served briefly as a Flight Commander in August before the unit gained new pilots after which he completed a course at the new Central Gunnery School at RAF Sutton Bridge in central easter England. Established in April 1942, the Central Gunnery School brought together fighter pilots from RAF Fighter Command and air gunners from RAF Bomber Command for training together in gunnery tactics and skills to be Gunnery Instructors who would be sent to airfields around the country to pass on newly acquired skills. Following the course, briefly served with the 93rd Fighter Interceptor Squadron, a United States Air Force unit undergoing workup training at Ayr, Scotland, a United States squadron in England, where he mentored fresh-faced aircrew on tactics and gunnery. He was then briefly attached to No 222 Squadron (RAF) at RAF Hornchurch east of London in Essex in a similar role.

453 SQN aircrew in front of a Spitfire at Drem in August 1942. (AWM)

In November 1942, he was posted to Australia as a supernumerary gunnery instructor working with No. 1 Fighter Wing which had been reformed at RAAF Station Richmond on 7 October. In May 1943, he moved with No 1 Fighter Wing to

Darwin. The wing comprised three Spitfire units including No 452 Squadron (RAAF), No 457 Squadron (RAAF) and No 54 Squadron (RAF) along with a mobile fighter sector headquarters. The three flying units had seen service in Europe but only one third of the more than 90 aircrew in the wing had seen combat. The fighter wing was a belated attempt to reinforce the air defence of Australia's north following more than 50 Japanese air attacks during 1942 across Northern Australia. The lost devastating attack was the first conducted on 19 February 1942 when more than 250 Japanese aircraft attacked in two waves causing widespread destruction to the port and airbase. The attack resulted in significant allied losses (Australian and American) including over 250 Defence personnel and civilians killed, many buildings destroyed, 23 military aircraft destroyed, and eight ships sunk. In contrast, the Japanese losses were small. The attack was the largest attack ever carried out on Australian soil. Remarkably, there were more bombs dropped on Darwin on 19 February 1942 than on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941.

Figure 1John Cock just after arriving in Darwin with No 1 Fighter Wing. (AWM)

The limited and outdated RAAF presence in Darwin was reinforced with the American 49th Fighter Group and then two RAAF Kittyhawk units (No 77 Squadron (Kittyhawk) in August and No 76 Squadron (Kittyhawk) in October). The deployment of No 1 Fighter Wing in early 1943 was intended to reinforce Northern Australia's air defences replacing the American and RAAF presence that had borne the brunt over the preceding year. Indeed, the deployment of the much lauded Spitfire that had performed so well in Europe in Northern Australia promised much but did encounter operating issues in northern Australia. Conditions in Northern Australia were harsh both in terms of the tropical climate and its remoteness. Infrastructure at the smaller airfields was limited, comprising narrow dirt runways and tree-lined taxiways with primitive facilities for aircraft and personnel. This resulted in a high accident rate during February and March 1943. The aviators and aircraft found the region's hot and humid climate to be harsh; it was the first time that Spitfires had operated in a tropical environment, and the aircraft were found to have lesser performance than in other climatic conditions.

John Cock (front left) reading in the basic Officers Mess with other members of 54SQN (RAF) in the Northern Territory.

A 54 SQN (RAF) Spitfire and ground crew in the Northern Territory in 1943 showing the limited facilities that the aircraft and unit personnel operated under. (AWM)

Further, the Spitfire pilots initially used European dogfighting tactics which while suited to German fighters were not effective against the highly maneuverable Japanese fighters and the larger distances needed to be covered in Northern Australia. As a result, No 1 Fighter Wing success in the air was limited until after June 1943

when commanders and aircrew adapted to the environment, the adversary and how to best employ their high performing fighter in northern Australia. As a RAF gunnery advisor posted to the Wing, John Cock would have been close to the various tactic's discussions and development at play during this period. He also flew Spitfires as a supernumerary pilot with 54 SQN (RAF).

John Cock with his mum during some leave in 1943 in Adelaide. (VWMA)

In early 1944, he was promoted to Acting Squadron Leader and in late 1944, returned to England completing almost two years' service with No 1 Fighter Wing in Australia. In September 1944, he was posted to No 3 Squadron, one of the RAF's oldest squadrons and a founding squadron of the Royal Flying Corps in 1912. It was the first British, Empire or Commonwealth independent military unit to operate heavier-than-air flying machines. Operating through the interwar period, it was one of the primary Fighter Command units at the beginning of World War 2. It converted onto the new Hawker Tempest fighter in March 1944 and participated in the D-Day landings and Normandy Campaign as well as against German V1 flying bomb claiming almost 300 shot down. At the end of the V-1 offensive, the squadron moved to France as part of the 2nd Tactical Air Force to conduct fighter-bomber sweeps known as armed reconnaissance missions behind enemy lines for the rest of the war. In late September 3SQN deployed to Grimbergen in Belgium for a week before deploying to Volkel in the Netherlands from early October from which it conducted armed reconnaissance missions until April 1945.

3SQN aircrew mission plan on the tailplane of a unit Hawker Tempest in Belgium in late 1944. (IWM)

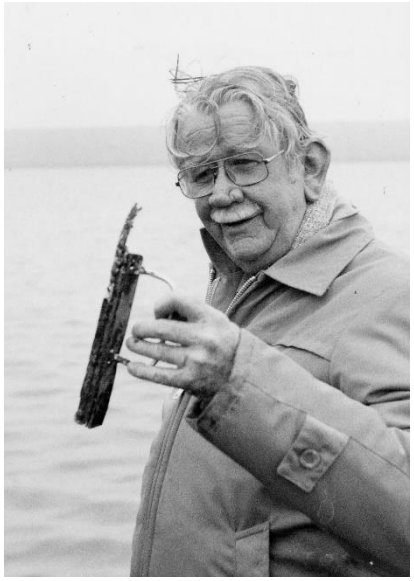
Completing a tour of duty with 3SQN, he was then returned to England in early 1945 to conduct flight testing of Hawker Tempests including tropical and desert trials in April to August 1945 in Khartoum, Sudan. In February 1946, Cock was appointed Commanding Officer of No. 72 Squadron, a spitfire squadron that had been operating in the Italian campaign during 1944-1945, and with the end of the war was part of the Occupation Force in Austria, based at Zeltweg. In this capacity, the unit conducted patrols along the Austria-Yugoslavia border flying Spitfire Mk IX aircraft. The squadron's operations reduced as Britain shifted back to a peacetime footing and in December, the unit was disbanded. By this time, Cock's short service commission had been extended but in early January 1948, he ended his service with the RAF completing ten years and four operational postings flying Hurricane, Spitfire and Tempest aircraft and having recorded 11 aerial victories during the Battle of France and Battle of Britain. Awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross, he also received the 1939–1945 Star with Battle of Britain clasp, the Air Crew Europe Star with France and Germany Clasp, the Pacific Star, the Defence Medal and the War Medal for his service in World War 2.

John returned home to South Australia in 1948 and subsequently moved to Tewantin on Queensland's Sunshine Coast where he managed his own supermarket. He sold the business and retired on the Sunshine Coast. In 1965, he returned to England for the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Britain along with 11 other Australian Battle of Britain veterans.

John Cock on the ladder with fellow Battle of Britain Ace Gordon Olive inspect a RAF Lightning in 1965 in England. (VWMA)

John Cock's Hurricane V7233 VL-K which he bailed out of in 1940 was the subject of several salvage attempts in the 1970s and 80s. In 1983, he again flew to England to witness an attempted recovery of the aircraft. While small parts were lifted from the water, the bulk of the wreck proved too heavy to raise. However, they did locate the handle to the canopy that John Cock had pulled to allow him to get out of the stricken Hurricane 40 years earlier.

In 1988 John Cock passed away at the age of 70.



John Cock in 1983 inspecting the canopy handle of his Hurricane V7233 KL-V that he last used in 1940 to bail out of the stricken fighter.

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