

Robert Stanford Tuck DSO, DFC and two Bars, AFC 1 July 1916 – 5 May 1987

After he left school in Catford in 1932, Roland Robert Stanford Tuck joined the Merchant Navy as a sea cadet before moving to the RAF at 19 on a short-service commission. Bored with the sea and wanting to fly, he trained at No. 3 FTS in Grantham, passing out with the highest rating available.



In July 1936 Tuck was posted to Fighter Squadron No 65(F) at Hornchurch, one of the first Squadrons to receive the revolutionary Spitfire in 1938. By the outbreak of war he had flown several hundred hours in them and was thoroughly familiar and confident in these new aircraft – critical during combat.

On 16 May 1940, Tuck was instructed on a top secret order to fly to Hendon with two other Spitfires acting as fighter escort to an un-armed twin-engined Flamingo. This was carrying Winston Churchill and a small staff to Le Bourget, for his final attempt to prevail on the French to hold out a little longer. Churchill realised the evacuation of the BEF from Dunkirk was imminent. After the return flight to Hendon the next day, Churchill thanked them for their escort, but from his expression he left the pilots in no doubt that he had been unsuccessful.

Tuck's first aerial combat took place over Dunkirk on 23 May 1940, as a flight commander in 92(F) Squadron when he destroyed three German fighters. The following day he shot down two German bombers and as aerial fighting intensified over the next two weeks his score rapidly mounted. He continued to serve with No 92 Squadron on Spitfires, commanding one of the Flights throughout the Dunkirk battles, the large air battles over the Channel in the build-up to the Battle of Britain. On 28 June Tuck was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) by King George VI for his initiative and personal example over Dunkirk.

During the height of the Battle of Britain on 11 September 1940, he was posted to take over command of No 257 Hurricane Squadron, which up until that time had suffered heavy casualties, losing more fighters than they had shot down. But after a few days rest and practice, Tuck managed to turn his new squadron around which resulted in his earning a DFC for his bravery and a DSO for leading No 257 squadron with great success.

Tuck continued to command No 257 squadron until half way through 1941, when he was given command of the Fighter Wing at Duxford. In October 1941 he lectured in the USA on air combat and flew all the American fighters as part of an Air Ministry assessment for the Lend-Lease programme. When he returned to the UK he took command of the Biggin Hill wing of four Spitfire Squadrons. His air combat career finished credited with 29 air victories when he was shot down by ground fire during a low level attack over Northern France in January 1942 and was taken prisoner by the Germans.

He spent the next three years as a POW, managing to escape in January 1945. Back in England by April 1945, he completed a refresher course on Harvards at Digby before flying Vampires and Meteors at Tangmere and West Raynham.

In 1946 Tuck became Station Commander at Coltishall, and after a spell in Singapore, retired from the RAF in 1949.

In 1978, the Aircraft Recovery Group excavated the remains of an Me 109 22ft deep in the marshes, (sadly still containing the remains of the pilot, Lt. Wemer Knittle), and after considerable research at the MOD, it was decided that it was an aircraft Tuck had shot down, but had only claimed as "probable" at the time. It was duly accredited to him, bringing his total victories to 30.

After the war, Tuck settled to mushroom farming at Eastry in Kent. He died on May 5 1987 aged 70 and is commemorated by a plaque in the Parish Church of St Clements, Sandwich.