

The Daily Telegraph | Obituaries

Air Vice-Marshal Ted Hawkins

Pilot who flew Catalina flying-boats on a top-secret reconnaissance operation over the high Arctic



Hawkins: before the war, he was recruited for intelligence gathering in Germany, including fraternising with the Hitler Youth

AIR VICE-MARSHAL TED HAWKINS, who has died aged 97, was twice awarded the DFC for maritime patrol and anti-submarine operations during the Second World War.

After a winter of flying Catalina flying-boats on Atlantic patrols and anti-U-boat sorties with No 240 Squadron, Hawkins was tasked to carry out a top-secret reconnaissance to obtain information about the sea ice between Jan Mayen Island and Spitsbergen Island in the high Arctic. He was also to report on the state of ice conditions in the fjords of West Spitsbergen and to determine if enemy forces were on the island.

Two passengers accompanied him and his crew when the aircraft left the Shetland Islands on April 4 1942. One was the Norwegian Captain Einar Sverdrup, who knew the area well, and the second was Lieutenant Commander Alexander Glen, an experienced Arctic explorer who would later land on the island to conduct clandestine operations.

Flying through severe weather en route, they were greeted by brilliant sunshine when they reached the edge of the ice to complete their reconnaissance before heading for Spitsbergen. They saw no evidence of the enemy and were able to confirm that sea conditions were suitable for flying-boat operations. On return to the Shetlands after a flight of 2,000 miles the crew had been airborne for more than 24 hours. Hawkins and his navigator were both awarded the DFC. The citation concluded: "These officers showed great powers of endurance and their outstanding performance is worthy of the highest praise."

The son of a master mariner in both sail and steam, Desmond Ernest Hawkins, always known as Ted, was born on December 12 1919 at Loughton in Essex and was educated at Bancroft's School.

Leaving school in 1937, he started work as an insurance clerk, but resigned after three weeks. Walking home, he chanced to meet an MP who was also the colonel of the Third Battalion of the London Irish Rifles of the Territorial Army. Inviting him to join as a rifleman, the colonel recruited him to undertake an undercover intelligence-gathering mission in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia during the winter months of 1937-38. The mission was to infiltrate the Hitler Youth Movement, which could be achieved quite openly by joining the British Youth Hostel organisation, which was affiliated to the Wanderschaft of the Hitler Movement. The whole journey was to be carried out on foot.

After formal briefings, Hawkins was taken to Aachen to begin his "long walk" of almost 2,000 miles to Austria, Czechoslovakia and on to Berlin, using German youth hostels and fraternising with the Hitler Youth organisation along the way.

His adventures included sketching Krupps armament works by moonlight, attending a mass rally in Cologne addressed by Hitler himself, being questioned by the suspicious Gestapo (who failed to find the drawings in the lining of his rucksack) and being entertained and debriefed by British ambassadors in Innsbruck and Berlin. He was then taken by car to Hamburg to join a British cargo ship arriving in London to be debriefed at the end of January 1938.

Two months later he joined the RAF on a short-service commission and trained as a pilot before being assigned to No 1 Anti-Aircraft Co-operation Unit flying a variety of aircraft acting as targets for anti-aircraft units. After attending a specialist reconnaissance course, he converted to flying-boats before joining No 240 Squadron based in Northern Ireland in September 1941.

After the Arctic sortie the squadron was ordered to fly to Madras to open up a new base. Four aircraft, including Hawkins's, were detained at Gibraltar in June 1942 to carry out anti-submarine patrols in support of the convoys sailing to Malta.

On June 6 he spotted a surfaced U-boat near the Balearic Islands and he dived to attack. Avoiding heavy anti-aircraft fire he dropped four depth charges. The submarine submerged leaving a large pool of oil on the sea. It soon resurfaced and was observed settling by the stern. Its crew began to arrive on deck as others jumped into the sea. Shortly after, the Italian U-boat Zaffiro sank. Hawkins decided to land to pick up survivors and leave life-saving equipment but the heavy swell damaged the Catalina's hull and he

was forced to abandon his rescue attempt and return to Gibraltar. For this attack he was awarded a Bar to his DFC.

Having returned the patched aircraft to the UK for repair, Hawkins and his crew were sent to assist the scattered Archangel convoy PQ 17, going on to alight at Murmansk. From there they joined the hunt for survivors and for the Tirpitz and its escorts – a task he regarded as near suicidal in an aircraft as slow as the Catalina.

A month later, he set off to re-join his squadron in Madras. From August 1942 to October 1944 he flew on convoy escort duties, anti-submarine patrols and special duty operations including dropping agents along the coasts of Burma and Malaya. He was mentioned in dispatches.

After a spell on the air staff in Ceylon, he took command of No 230 Squadron in Singapore, flying the Sunderland on relief operations to isolated garrisons in New Guinea and to repatriate sick PoWs and Dutch internees from Malaya and Java to hospitals in India.

In April 1946 he returned to England to command the flying-boat base in Pembrokeshire before taking charge of the Maritime Aircraft Experimental Establishment at Felixstowe. He was later in charge of administration at RAF Kinloss in Morayshire, one of the RAF's largest maritime airbases.

He left for Malta in January 1955 to command No 38 Squadron equipped with Shackletons. For his services during the Suez crisis he was again mentioned in dispatches.

After attending the Joint Services Staff College and a tour on the plans staff in the Air Ministry, Hawkins returned to the maritime world as the senior air staff officer at No 19 (Maritime) Group in Plymouth. In 1964 he took command of RAF Tengah, the RAF's largest operational base in the Far East – the station complement was some 15,000 people. His Strike Wing of Canberra, Hunter and Javelin squadrons were heavily involved during the Indonesian Confrontation campaign. At the end of his tour he was appointed CBE.

On promotion to air commodore in 1968 he commanded the RAF's large air transport base, collecting the RAF's last Hercules C-130K aircraft from the Lockheed factory in the USA.

As an air vice-marshal he was the senior air staff officer at HQ RAF Strike Command at a time when a new generation of combat aircraft were being introduced into service. He was appointed CB in June 1971.

Hawkins spent the last three years of his service before retiring in 1974 as the Director General of Personnel Services (RAF) in the MoD. He then joined the Services Kinema Corporation as the deputy managing director.

He retired to Lympington in 1981 where he continued his lifelong pursuit of sailing. He was a committee member, captain of cruising, Vice Commodore and finally a Trustee of the Royal Lympington Yacht Club.

A quietly confident but approachable man, Hawkins was liked and respected by his subordinates, to whom he showed great loyalty. One of his squadron commanders at Tengah commented: "Most of those serving under him at that time admit that it was one of their happiest tours."

In 1947 Ted Hawkins married Joan Holford, an ex WAAF officer who had been widowed in 1942. She died in 2015; their son also predeceased him and a stepson survives him.

AVM Ted Hawkins, born December 12 1919, died October 22 2017

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