



FLIGHT LIEUTENANT BOB LARGE - OBITUARY

News / Personalities



Airman who rescued a downed pilot from the sea and flew sorties at night to pick up French agents.

Flight Lieutenant Bob Large, who has died aged 94, flew Spitfires on sweeps over northern France before becoming a pilot on the "Moonlight Squadron", flying Lysander aircraft into remote fields in France to deliver and pick up agents.

By late 1942, Large was one of the most experienced pilots on No 616 Squadron when he took off with 11 other Spitfires on October 2 to escort a force of six USAAF bombers tasked to bomb an airfield near St Omer. Leaving the target, Large spotted some Focke-Wulf 190 fighters and dived to attack, shooting one down.

During the engagement he exhausted his ammunition. As he and his wingman crossed the French coast, enemy fighters shot down his colleague, who baled out and landed in the sea.

Large noted the position of the downed pilot two miles off Calais, transmitted a Mayday call and raced for the nearest RAF airfield. His Spitfire was immediately refuelled but there was insufficient time to re-arm it. He took off with a second Spitfire and relocated the downed pilot, who was in his dinghy, floating in a minefield. The two aircraft were immediately attacked by four FW 190s, which

were eventually driven off by other Spitfires arriving with a Walrus air-sea rescue aircraft.

Large remained overhead as the Walrus pilot (Flight Sergeant Tom Fletcher) decided to land despite being under fire from shore batteries and the hazards presented by the mines. The rescue was finally completed and Large was able to leave the scene as the Walrus headed back for the Kent coast. Fletcher was recommended for the Victoria Cross but received a Bar to an earlier DFM. Large was awarded an immediate DFC, “for his gallantry and forethought”.

Ronald Geoffrey Large, known as Bob, was born on December 2 1921 at St Pancras and attended Dame Alice Owen’s School, Islington. He joined the RAF in July 1940 and trained as a pilot.

Flying Spitfires he joined No 66 Squadron and on June 20 1941 attacked a small force of Messerschmitt Bf 109s escorting a bomber; he shot one down 30 miles south of Plymouth. Three weeks later he transferred to No 616 Squadron, one of three squadrons of the Tangmere Wing led by the legless ace, Wing Commander Douglas Bader.

On August 9 No 616 took off to escort bombers with Bader in the lead ,but the sortie proved to be a disaster, when Bader and one of his flight commanders failed to return. Throughout the rest of the day, Large and the 616 Squadron pilots searched for the two men. Large landed from his final search sortie at dusk with his fuel almost exhausted. It subsequently transpired that Bader and his flight commander had been captured and taken prisoner.

Large remained with the squadron for the next 12 months, flying many sweeps over France and frequently being engaged by enemy fighters. During the ill-fated Dieppe operation in August 1942 he flew four sorties and had “several squirts” at the enemy fighters, damaging one.

By the time he left No 616 Large had flown 188 operational sorties. He was posted to be the personal staff officer to AVM Hollinghurst, the AOC (Air officer commanding) of No 9 Group. This was an unlikely appointment for such a high-spirited officer – a fact that the AOC soon discovered. After six months, Hollinghurst gave in to Large’s pleas to return to operations, agreeing that his fighting spirit was being wasted and offering him “any fighter squadron you want”.

Large had other ideas, however, and without consulting his boss he visited a friend flying Lysanders from RAF Tempsford in Bedfordshire, and was able to persuade the squadron commander there of his suitability. When the posting notice arrived on the AOC’s desk without prior notice, there was a minor eruption when he exclaimed that he could think of no one less suitable than his errant staff officer – not least because he only had 14 hours night-flying experience. Nevertheless, Hollinghurst relented and agreed to release Large for these special duties.

Large arrived at Tempsford on February 25 1944 for duties with No 161 Squadron, often referred to as the “Moonlight Squadron”. The squadron’s task was to deliver and pick up agents from France, a role requiring highly skilled pilots with special ability and courage. They flew alone, at night, and into hostile territory, never knowing who the reception committee would be. Accurate navigation was essential if a single torch was to be found in a field after a three or four hour flight.

Large flew his first “pick-up” on April 9 and over the coming weeks flew a further eight sorties including one when he collected Violette Szabo, one of the heroines of the SOE. He was fired on during the return flight, and the aircraft ground-looped on landing as a result of his starboard tyre having been shot to pieces. He had been airborne for almost seven hours.

In August 1944 he tried to return to his old squadron, which had just been equipped with the RAF’s

first jet fighter, the Meteor. He was unsuccessful but eventually joined No 504 Squadron, the second Meteor squadron. He left the RAF in March 1947 and spent two years in the Gold Coast (Ghana) trading in cocoa.

On his return from West Africa he joined BEA and spent his weekends flying Meteors with No 601 (County of London) Auxiliary Squadron, where he became an expert aerobatic pilot. His dog Patrick often flew with him, which earned an entry in the Guinness Book of Records for the first dog to fly in a jet fighter. Large later flew with Silver City Airways on cross-Channel flights and to Libya in support of the oil industry.

In 1990, the French government made him a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour for his services to France in the Second World War.

Described by a fellow “moonlight” pilot as “a fantastic chap”, Large was the archetypal fighter pilot in that he was something of a rebel, full of high spirits, somewhat ill-disciplined, but very courageous. He was also a skilled sailor and made a trans-Atlantic voyage in his late sixties.

Bob Large married Mary Sears in 1952; she and three of their sons survive him. A fourth son pre-deceased him.

Flight Lieutenant Bob Large, born December 2 1921, died December 29 2015

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