

SQUADRON LEADER ROBERT BARSON COWPER DFC AND BAR, OAM, LEGION OF HONOUR (FR)



*Bob Cowper from a photograph taken after he had returned from a mission over Europe
Courtesy Stephen Lewis*

Bob Cowper was born on 24 June 1922 in Broken Hill NSW, but his family moved when he was still a child to Kangaroo Flat, north west of Gawler in South Australia, where his father worked at Roseworthy Agricultural College. After a rural upbringing and five years at Queen's College in North Adelaide, he worked first as an engineering draughtsman at Horwood Bagshaw in Adelaide, then joined the RAAF in 1940 on his 18th birthday.

In August 1941 he was posted to 10 Operational Training Unit at East Fortune in Scotland for training as a night fighter pilot, after initial training at Pearce and Cunderdin in Western Australia and then Yorkton in Canada. He was then posted in November 1941 to 153 Squadron RAF at

Ballyhalbert, Northern Ireland, where he initially flew the Boulton Paul Defiant night fighter.

The first Defiant had entered service with the RAF in December 1939. It attempted to combine fighter performance with the concentrated firepower of turret-mounted guns but the weight of the turret and a two-man crew severely reduced its performance. Another shortcoming was its inability to fire forward, which left it with a number of blind spots in its defence. This caused losses to mount until the aircraft was withdrawn from daylight operations in August 1940 and redeployed as a night-fighter. It performed much better thereafter, particularly when radar equipped.

While still at Ballyhalbert Cowper converted to Beaufighters and Flight Sergeant Bill Watson, a Scot, joined him as radio operator.

The Bristol Beaufighter was one of the most successful British-designed strike aircraft of the War. It was fast and robust, and able to carry a wide range of heavy armaments. It



*Boulton-Paul Defiant
www.Battleofbritainblog.com*

was designed originally as a long-range fighter and was derived from the Bristol Beaufort torpedo bomber, with which it shared many common components. It entered RAF service in September 1940 and was initially used in its intended daytime role, but after being fitted with airborne interception radar it also proved a capable night fighter from November 1940 onwards.

Cowper and Watson were posted to 89 Squadron RAF in Egypt at the end of 1942 and ordered to ferry out a new Beaufighter. They picked it up at RAF Station Lyneham in Wiltshire and were to proceed to Egypt via Portreath in Cornwall, then Gibraltar and Malta. The flight to Gibraltar was routine, but not so to Malta when they got hopelessly lost in darkness and heavy cloud. They had been ordered to maintain radio silence but after seven hours flying and having no idea where they were, they sought assistance by radio only to find it inoperable – this in a brand-new aircraft equipped with state-of-the-art air intercept radar. On the last of their fuel, nine hours after leaving Gibraltar, they descended below the cloud to see what they took to be the Tunisian port of Sfax, but the response to their Very pistol ‘colour of the day’ shot was hostile so they headed inland and made a forced landing among the dunes. Landing the aircraft in the desert in pitch darkness was no mean feat, but neither suffered a scratch.



Bristol Beaufighter
www.fighterworld.com

They decided they must be behind enemy lines so they torched the Beaufighter to prevent its radar falling into enemy hands and headed off into the desert before dawn. They thought Tripoli was in British hands so walked towards it, but by mid-afternoon were being trailed by apparently hostile arabs. After an exchange of shots it was established that they were not hostile after all, and

for the next few days they sheltered in the tent of the arabs' leader and his household until a British corporal of the Hussars arrived with an armoured car to take them to the front line of the Eighth Army, and the next day to Tripoli.

Cowper and Watson were flown to Luqa Airfield in Malta from Castel Benito Airfield in Tripoli, and began flying Beaufighters with a detachment of 89 Squadron RAF. Their initial operations were raids over Sicily where they bombed and strafed trains in the island's north. The Beaufighters carried a 250lb bomb under each wing and they damaged a number of trains during these sorties.

On 10 March 1943 the Beaufighter flight became part of 108 Squadron RAF and later that month Cowper was flown to Castel Benito as a passenger in a Hudson to pick up a new Beaufighter. The Hudson was attacked enroute by a Beaufighter, the pilot of which fortunately realised his error and withdrew but not before one of the passengers was wounded.

Cowper and Watson had their first air combat during the night of 18-19 April when they engaged in a long duel with a German Me 210 night fighter off Trapani on the west coast of Sicily. The Me 210

was also radar equipped, which resulted in repeated head-on contacts when they manoeuvred to get on each other's tail. After a number of these contacts Cowper was in position to fire into the enemy's line of flight and observed strikes along the length of the Me 210's fuselage. It turned into a steep dive and disappeared so was claimed only as damaged, but unconfirmed reports of a dinghy in the area suggested it was probably a kill.

Throughout March the Beaufighters flew secret low-level missions over Sicily carrying senior army officers who were specialists in parachute and glider operations. These were carried out on moonlit nights for the specialists to examine the terrain in preparation for the airborne landings that were to be part of the forthcoming invasion. They also had to fly exercises as simulated troop carriers, flying straight and level through enemy flak to test the defences. All the aircraft survived unscathed.



Bristol Beaufighter in attack
Courtesy Stephen Lewis

The invasion of Sicily, operation Husky, began on the night of 9/10 July with airborne landings. The US Seventh Army under General George Patton went ashore the next day in the Gulf of Gela between Licata and Scoglitti on the south central coast, while the British Eighth Army landed south of Syracuse on the south east tip of the island. Cowper, during this period, flew with Pilot Officer Farquharson because Watson was ill with dysentery.

On the night of 11/12 July, they attacked a Ju 88 at 10,000 feet that was part of a German bomber stream attacking allied shipping. The Ju 88 exploded in a fireball that badly damaged their Beaufighter. The perspex was blown out of the front, all engine control was lost and Cowper had pieces of molten aluminium lodged in his legs. Farquharson called that he was bailing out, then the aircraft dropped a wing and entered a spin so tight that the 'g' force made it very difficult for Cowper to do the same. He lost consciousness but came to to find himself falling through the air, pulled his ripcord and very soon thereafter hit the sea with the aircraft simultaneously crashing nearby. He was able to get rid of his parachute, inflate his Mae West and dinghy and climb into it. Fortunately a hospital ship, HMS *Aba* was steaming in his direction and an hour or two after dawn was close enough to see his flare.

Cowper was picked up with a deeply cut and broken nose, bruised forehead and a minor shrapnel wound to his thigh. Farquharson was never found and may have gone in with the aircraft.

The *Aba* steamed to Tripoli and Cowper hitched a ride back to Malta on a Dakota five days after he bailed out. On 19th – a week after the incident – he was flying again despite the pain of wearing an oxygen mask over his broken nose. Two nights later, back with Watson, they destroyed another Ju 88 off Augusta on the Sicilian east coast. Again, it exploded and they had to fly through its debris

with molten aluminium coating the windscreen. This made forward vision so difficult that they were unable to get into firing position on another Ju 88 and so an opportunity was lost.

Cowper's tour ended in mid-August 1943 when he was awarded the DFC and posted to 63 OTU at Honiley in Warwickshire as an instructor. He had met an Australian WAAF aircraft plotter at Ballyhalbert named Kay McCall, and they were married at Garelochhead near Lach Lomond in Scotland on 9 December 1943.



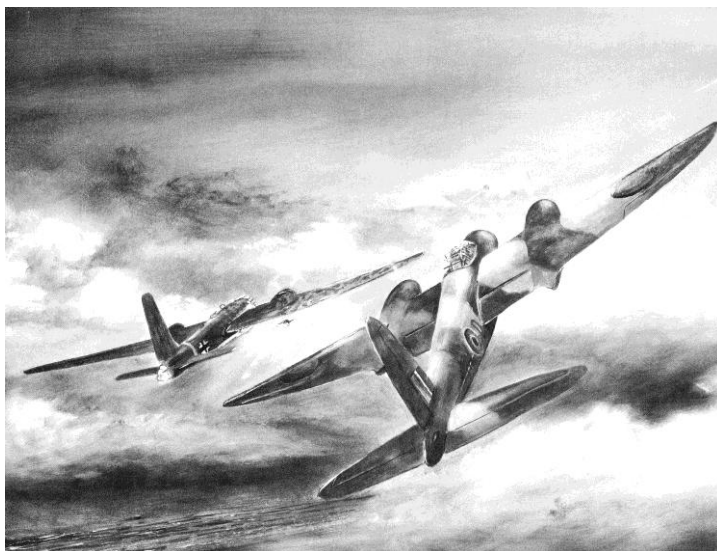
Bill Watson (left) and Bob Cowper in their official photograph following the Investiture at Buckingham Palace on 2 Feb 1943 when they received their gallantry awards (via Stephen Lewis – Chasing Shadows)

From August 1943 until March 1944, Cowper instructed in night flying on Beaufort IIs and taught Hurricane pilots instrument and night flying in Miles Masters, and then was transferred to 5 TEU at Annan in Scotland.

He was then posted as a flight commander to 456 Squadron RAAF at Farn in Sussex on 10 May 1944. He was checked out in a Mosquito XVII by the Squadron's Commanding Officer Wing Commander Keith Hampshire and flew his first flight on 19 May. Watson rejoined him as his radio operator after being involved in airborne radar testing at Hinton-in-Hedges south of Honiley.

The de Havilland DH-98 Mosquito was originally designed as an unarmed long-range fast bomber and entered production in 1941. It was constructed almost entirely of wood and excelled as a day and night fighter, intruder, fighter-bomber, photo-reconnaissance aircraft, dual control trainer and even as a transport aircraft for BOAC.

Operation Overlord started on 6 June 1944, for which 456 Squadron contributed to night air cover.



*Frank Harding's painting of the engagement with the He177
(Via Stephen Lewis – Chasing Shadows)*

On the night of 9/10 June, Cowper and Watson saw their first combat while patrolling off Cherbourg when they crippled a Heinkel 177, which crash landed on the Cherbourg peninsula. During the same night they destroyed a Dornier 217. On the night of the 14/15 June they hit a Ju 88 in the port engine and the crew bailed out with the engine on fire. The aircraft spun into the sea. On the night of 4/5 July they hit and destroyed another Heinkel 177, which was bombing allied shipping.

456 Squadron also provided night intercepts of V-1 flying bombs that the Germans were launching in increasing numbers against southern England. By the end of August the Squadron was credited with destroying 24 of them. Cowper and Watson claimed one but it was not confirmed because an anti-aircraft battery also claimed it.

456 Squadron was then relocated to Church Fenton in North Yorkshire on 30 December 1944 and equipped with Mosquito NF XXXs. This version was powered by Rolls Royce Merlin Mark 76 engines, and had a top speed of 416mph and a range of 1,159 miles.

The Squadron was held in reserve while training for night bomber support, but by then the Luftwaffe was largely beaten and there were few operational opportunities.

In March 1945 the squadron was ordered to Bradwell Bay in Essex, from where it provided support for bombing raids over southern Germany and Czechoslovakia, and some low level attacks on ground targets. The Squadron flew its last operational sortie of the War on 2 May 1945, five days before Germany surrendered. Squadron Leader Bob Cowper by then was acting CO and it

was under his direction that the disbanding of the unit was moved forward to 15 June 1945. 456 Squadron was the only Australian night fighter squadron formed in WWII.

Cowper was awarded his bar to his DFC and Watson a DFC. As well as these decorations Cowper was made a member of the Caterpillar Club (for deploying his parachute), the Gold Fish Club (for deploying his dinghy) and the Late Arrivals Club (for his trek across the desert). His combat claims are summarised in the table below:



*456 Squadron Mosquito over English countryside
(Via Stephen Lewis – Chasing Shadows)*

Table 1
Squadron Leader Robert Cowper – Combat Claims¹

| Date | Type | Locality | Result | Aircraft | Unit |
|------------|--------|----------------|-----------|-----------------------|--------------|
| 18-19/4/43 | Me 210 | Marsala Sicily | Damaged | Beaufighter VIF | 108 Sqn RAF |
| 11-12/7/43 | Ju 88 | Sicily | Destroyed | Beaufighter VIF | 108 Sqn RAF |
| 21-22/7/43 | Ju 88 | Sicily | Destroyed | Beaufighter VIF | 108 Sqn RAF |
| 9-10/6/44 | He 177 | Nr Cape Levy | Destroyed | Mosquito XVII HK353/M | 456 Sqn RAAF |
| 9-10/6/44 | Do 217 | SW Beaumont | Destroyed | Mosquito XVII HK353/M | 456 Sqn RAAF |
| 14-15/6/44 | Ju 88 | Over sea | Destroyed | Mosquito XVII HK356/D | 456 Sqn RAAF |
| 4-5/7/44 | He 177 | S Selsey Bill | Destroyed | Mosquito XVII HK356/D | 456 Sqn RAAF |

Cowper then returned to Australia with his wife and the first of four daughters. His post-war career included being a mechanical representative for Dunlop Australia, a service station owner and finally a cattle farmer and racehorse owner before retiring in Adelaide. He was the first Country Legatee to become President of the Legacy Club of Adelaide and in 2004 he was one of ten Australian WWII veterans to be awarded France's Legion of Honour in recognition of their contribution to the liberation of France.

Bob Cowper also worked tirelessly after the War to achieve recognition of 456 Squadron's contribution to the War. He was instrumental in having the Squadron's logo accepted as the official 456 Squadron badge on 1 September 2006, and on 11 September 2008 the badge was laid in a slate tile in the floor of St Clement Danes Church in the Strand, London.

Lastly, he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in the 2012 Australia Day Honours *"For service to veterans and their families through a range of ex-service organisations."*

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South Australian Aviation Museum Inc
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¹ Source: *Aero Australia* Issue 13 January-March 2007 page 84

² Mike Milln is author of *Wing Tips – The story of the Royal Aero Club of South Australia – Book 1: 1919-1941*, 2011 Avonmore Books

Table 2
Service Record
40766 Squadron Leader Robert Barson Cowper DFC and Bar

| Event | Date | Event Detail |
|----------------------|-------------|--|
| Date of birth | 1922-06-24 | Broken Hill, NSW |
| Other units | 1940-12-12 | No 5 Initial Training School |
| Other units | 1941 | No 8 Elementary Flying School |
| Other units | 1941-04 | No 11 Service Flying Training School, Canada |
| Other | 1941-04-06 | Left Australia |
| Date promoted | 1941-07-28 | Pilot officer |
| Other | 1941-08-09 | Left Canada |
| Other units | 1941-09-09 | No 10 Operational Training Unit, Scotland |
| Other units | 1941-11-11 | No 153 Squadron |
| Date promoted | 1942-01-28 | Flying officer |
| Other units | 1943-02-01 | No 89 Squadron |
| Other units | 1943-03-15 | No 108 Squadron |
| Date promoted | 1943-03-15 | Flight lieutenant |
| Date promoted | 1945-01-01 | Squadron leader |
| Other units | 1945-05-08 | No 456 Squadron |
| Other units | 1945-05-29 | Commanding Officer No 456 Squadron |
| Other units | 1945-06-15 | Headquarters Fighter Control |

(Australian War Memorial http://www.awm.gov.au/units/people_75025.asp)

Sources

Squadron Leader Bob Cowper DFC Night Fighter Ace, Dennis Newton, *Aero Australia* magazine, Issue 13 January/March 2007 pages 80-84

Chasing Shadows, Stephen Lewis with Bob Cowper, January 2007 DPA Publishing