

Joe Berry; the forgotten Ace.



In the churchyard at Scheemda, in Holland, is a solitary war grave. It marks the final resting place of 24 year-old Squadron Leader Joseph Berry D.F.C. and two Bars, Joe Berry, as he was known, was my father's cousin, and although I was born seven years after he was killed in action, my great passion in all things historical ensured that my research in a relative I never knew would snowball into an obsession.

When a person reaches middle age and the realisation of one's mortality comes to the fore, the desire to find one's roots becomes a magnetic force. It was this force that compelled me into documenting my disjointed family history, and one of the first stories that I heard was that the family had a relative that had *"Won a medal for shooting down Doodle-bugs"*.

This resulted in me contacting and meeting people from all over Europe that I would have normally never met, about events that occurred before I was born and to help my ongoing research into piecing together Joseph's illustrious career. From his early relatively unknown flying history, to his much publicised heroic "Doodle-Bug" destroying exploits, up to his untimely death in action in the skies over occupied Europe. Sadly, since then, Joe Berry has become something of a forgotten ace; this article, I hope, should go some way to addressing this.

He came into the world, born the second child of three and the first son to a working class family in a small mining village in County Durham, on 28th February 1920. After the family moved to Northumberland he attended the local junior schools until he graduated to the Duke Grammar School in Alnwick. There he was remembered for being small, quiet and unobtrusive, a good student with a sharp mind.

On leaving school Joe went to work as a Civil Servant for the Inland Revenue, when at the age of 16 years old he had to move into lodgings in Nottingham for his work. From a very early age Joe had acquired the flying bug when he was lucky enough to take to the air in one of Alan Cobham's aircrafts age 12, when Cobham's "Flying Circus" came to Alnwick in 1932, so it was no surprise when the time came to serve his country that Joe chose the Royal Air Force.

Joseph's first taste of RAF life started after he had enlisted on the 8th August 1940, at No 9 Aviation Candidates Selection Board (A.C.S.B.) where he was recommended for training as a Pilot/Observer. He then found himself like most trainee aircrew travelling the length and breadth of the country learning his trade in various aviation schools and air force establishments, until his pilot training was completed.

Joe was posted back to Blackpool where he had done his basic training; his first squadron posting for operational flying duties was to "A" Flight, 256 Squadron, based at Squires Gate on 22nd August 1941. This was a Night Fighter Squadron equipped with Boulton & Paul Defiant night fighters. His C.O., Squadron Leader Christopher Deansley regarded Joe as being a pilot of well above average ability.

The moonlit night of 4th November 1941 brought near tragedy to the young Sergeant Berry, on a night fighter practice flight from Squires Gate. At 22:40 hours Joe's Defiant (T4053) developed oil pressure trouble, after its engine had started to run roughly, then its Merlin engine cut out, after first informing Squires Gate of their predicament the decision to bale out was made.

At a height of 4,700 feet the Defiants air gunner, 21-year-old Flt/ Sgt E.V. Williams, was told to bale out first while they were over land. But the light north-easterly wind blew him out into the Irish Sea. Joe baled out at 2,700 feet and landed safely in a field near Skippool. After being informed of this emergency by Squires Gate at 23:00 hours, the Fleetwood and Blackpool life boats were launched to find Flt/Sgt Williams. His shouting was heard several times but after a five hour search in total darkness he was not found; his body was washed up on the Fleetwood shoreline early the following morning.

On the 14th March 1942, Joe was promoted from Sergeant to Pilot Officer, and then a couple of months later 256 Squadron moved south from Squires Gate to Woodvale near Formby, Liverpool, now flying Bristol Beaufighters. On the 7th December "A" Flight of 256 Squadron now moved to Ballyhalbert in Northern Ireland, but Joe was to stay at Woodvale doing Night Fighter Training (N.F.T.), then at the turn of the year the good news came that the pilots would soon be posted overseas.

Joe and his Navigator/Radio Operator Ian Watson, and fellow fighter pilot and friend Bryan Wild and his R/O Ralph Gibbons caught a train to Filton near Bristol, to collect their brand new Beaufighters, then having firstly carried out vital fuel consumption and air firing tests at 44 Group, Ferry Command, Ferry Training Unit (F.T.U.) Lyneham, they were then ready for their long journey overseas.

The pair flew their Beaufighter V8500 to Portreath, Overseas Aircraft Delivery Unit (O.A.D.U.), Cornwall to re-fuel, then on 24th January 1943 from Portreath to Gibraltar. From Gibraltar to Maison-Blanche on the 25th, the following day they flew from Maison-Blanche to Setif in the Atlas Mountains approximately 140 miles from Algiers.

Postings were made to No 8 Aircrew Unit (A.U.) Algiers, this area in North Africa was a pilot pool, where aircrew from Britain awaited posting to their various Squadrons in the region, having received their new postings on the 26th the pair returned to Maison-Blanche to become members of 'A' flight, 153 Squadron on 30th January 1943.

In the early hours of 11th April, Joe and Ian were returning from another patrol under G.C.I. (Ground Control Intercept), they had reported having 'no trade' after making two good runs. Then suddenly the port engine of their Beaufighter VIF (TB-N) V8629 caught fire, causing the two men to abandon their aircraft. Hitting the silk for the second time Joe baled out over the Mediterranean, this resulted in a forced 6 ½ hour ordeal afloat in a dinghy before being rescued.

Receiving more posting orders on the 6th of May, then two days later Joe and Ian were sent to 'B' flight 255 Squadron in Setif again flying Beaufighters, this squadron had not scored a single victory, one of the main duties of this Night Fighter unit was to repel any Axis aircraft from attacking convoy's in the Mediterranean on the Gibraltar to Suez route.

With another move on the 24th May from Setif the pair now operated from La Sebala airfield for a couple of months then on to Bone, as their Squadron retained the same role through to July with the night defence of the Bone/Algiers areas, gradually, throughout this period the squadron's role extended to convoy escort work, as the Sicilian campaign got under way they remained in North Africa.

On August 17th 1943, they flew their Beaufighter VIF (YD-N) to Baglio-Rizzo (Bo-Rizzo), on the North West side of the Island of Sicily where the Squadron had just been posted, flying from their new bomb damaged airbase sorties were flown over Palermo, Naples, Capri and later in September the Salerno Invasion fleet and beachheads. Patrols were flown every other night in these areas, Beaufighter Mk II, IV, VIF, VII and VIII's were all flown, and they made contacts and had chases several times but had no reward for their hard work, in Ian Watson's words they had 'No one to play with'. Night after night this continued until eventually they opened their account by shooting down their first of a total of three enemy aircraft.

On the night of the 8th of September flying at 8,000 feet they made contact with an enemy aircraft just South of Capri they lost this contact a couple of times in their pursuit due to their targets violent manoeuvring, but once they had picked it up again they were determined to keep on its tail.

Now flying at 11,000 feet they manage to get a visual sighting against the back drop of the clear starlit sky, closing in to 300 feet the aircraft was identified as a Junkers Ju88, the enemy aircraft pulled up sharply to port and peeled off. Quickly Joe opened fire with all guns giving a short burst from 600 feet range but no hits were seen. The Junkers started to take evasive action, but after another two second burst while diving after his pray he did see hits on its starboard wing which then burst into flames. Another 3 second burst was enough to finish it off as they watched it make a shallow turn and then crash still burning into the sea; no one was seen to bale out.

Date	Time	Claimed	Aircraft Flown	Location	Sqn	Base
8 Sept 43	21:45	Ju 88	Beau VIF (YD-U)	Naples, S/Capri	255	BoRizzo
10 Sept 43	02:30	Me 210	Beau VIF (YD-Y)	Naples, Lago Paola	255	BoRizzo
23 Oct 43	18:55	Ju 88	Beau VIF (YD-T)	Naples, S/ Volturno River	255	BoRizzo

It was at this time that my father George, Joe's cousin was himself fighting for his life during the Salerno landings with the British 1st Army, 46th Division, not knowing that his cousin was flying up above him doing the same.

After a period of well deserved leave on his return to England, Joe's next move was to No 10 Group at Defford, to the Telecommunications Flying Unit (T.F.U.), in Worcestershire on 20th December 1943 flying defensive section for a couple of months. This unit was involved in top-secret work concerning radio countermeasures, radar and navigation equipment development.

Joseph was then posted at the request of Wing Commander Hartley to the RAF's air combat university the Fighter Interception Unit (FIU) at Ford on the 22nd February 1944; there he was to fly a number of various types of aircraft on experimental night-fighting techniques. Gazetted on the 3rd March 1944 he was awarded the DFC for shooting down the three enemy aircraft, and then promoted to Flight Lieutenant on 14th March 1944.

Flying Officer Joseph BERRY, R.A.F.V.R., No. 255 Squadron. This officer is an exceptionally capable pilot who has destroyed three enemy aircraft in the course of a long and strenuous tour of duty. During operations at Salerno in September, 1943, he shot a Junkers 88 down in flames, and on the following night destroyed a Messerschmitt 210 over the Italian coast. His third victory took place over Naples in October 1943 when he shot down another Junkers 88. Flying Officer Berry has been forced to abandon his aircraft on two occasions and has operated with coolness and courage in the face of heavy enemy action.

On 22nd June the FIU were issued with their first Hawker Tempest V for testing. The following day they received three more. On the 25th Squadron Leader Daniel, who was a fellow FIU member flew his Tempest to Newchurch, to join Flt/ Lt Joseph Berry who had been posted there the previous day with Wing Commander Hartley. The Wing Commander had then returned to Wittering after delivering two Tempests, Edward "Teddy" Daniel and Joe Berry were then to form a small detachment to operate anti diver missions.

They had devised devices, saying "Let us destroy", therefore thus saith the Lord of Hosts, "Behold, I will punish them". Jeremiah 11, 19-22.

These Tempest pilots became the nucleus of a special team, and were tasked with defeating the Flying Bombs that had started to land on Southern England, and were causing the Government a great deal of concern; this flight operating mainly by night.

On the 28th Joe opened his account in the battle against the V1, despite the appalling weather, by destroying his first two 'Doodle-bugs' that afternoon; this was to be the start of the record number of Flying Bombs victories to come. The following day the lonesome pair was joined by another experienced pilot from Wittering, Flt/Lt Jones. Night after night they flew sorties in all kinds of weather, proving to the day fighter boys that good pilots could still fly regardless of the weather conditions.

With unusually bad weather continuing into July the patrols were still ongoing; on the second of the month Joe found himself in a chase with a flying bomb, one touch on the gun button saw the missile explode with a blinding flash. Unfortunately on this occasion he was too close and debris from the bomb slammed into his aircraft; this was to happen on more than one occasion.

The terrifying noise of his engine faltering told him it was time to head home; so setting a course for Newchurch he coaxed his aircraft back to base slowly losing height continually looking around for signs of fire. With no engine, wheels and flaps down he had only one chance to land his Tempest, he could not afford to get the landing approach wrong; with all his strength and skill he managed to make a perfect landing just short of the end of the runway. As the car coming to meet him came to a stop; with a smile on his face he told the driver *“That aircraft’s un-serviceable Sergeant.”*

The detachments flying bomb kill rate slowly started to climb, but on the night sortie of the 5th of July, Sqn Ldr Daniel did not return; he had to bale out of his damaged Tempest over the Channel after chasing a doodle bug and was killed. Two days later “Teddy” Daniel’s place was filled by Flt/Lt Alan Wagner.

Another arrival on 11th July brought Wing Commander Hartley back to Newchurch replacing F/Lt Jones, only to witness a week later the tragic demise of Alan Wagner whose Tempest EJ581 had flown into the ground in fog near Newchurch while chasing a flying bomb.

As though this was not bad enough, Wing Commander Hartley in his Tempest EJ530 was involved in a mid-air collision with a Mosquito; possibly NFXIII (HK471) piloted by 21 year old Flt/Sgt M.F. Hoare and 26 year old Flt/Sgt E.L. Bishop of No 264 Squadron. Hartley baled out and broke his ankles on landing, the Mosquito crew were killed; Joseph was now working alone.

On 23rd of July he set the record claiming seven Flying Bombs in one night, four nights later after a long chase he attacked one at low-level setting the bomb on fire but not exploding it. He noticed it was descending on the buildings surrounding West Malling airfield, and the inevitable explosion would have caused devastation below, so he closed in to 100 yards to ensure its complete destruction. He spoke later giving his own version of this incident saying that he had to destroy this flying bomb as he could see that it was going to hit the W.A.A.F. quarters and would have caused a great loss of life; it was for this act of unselfish bravery that Joe’s comrades believed he should have received the Victoria Cross.

His own aircraft was damaged in the resultant explosion; debris from the Flying Bomb was blown into his aircraft jamming the throttle at +3 lbs boost, causing him to force land his Tempest at almost full speed. This time it was an ambulance that came to meet him; with a wry smile he told the driver *“I’ll ride in front if you don’t mind, I prefer it there, get someone to tow the aircraft off the runway will you?”*, to his annoyance on this occasion it was decided that he had to share this near fatal success with the crew of a Mosquito who had opened fire earlier at the same Doodle-Bug from about 1,000 yards.

On August 4th 1944 Joseph received a Bar to his DFC, Gazetted on the 1st September, for which he had been recommended two weeks earlier after twice; being recommended unsuccessfully for a DSO by Wing Commander Hartley. Undaunted his work continued with the destruction of 5 more flying-bombs on the following night. For his unmatched skill and hard work Joseph was promoted to Squadron Leader and was given command his own squadron at Manston, dedicated to the defeat of the flying bombs by night.



The aircrews of the “new” 501 Squadron were drawn from Fighter Command squadrons with suitable night-fighter experience, Mosquito night-fighter pilots and other day-fighter pilots who had a higher than average total of night flying hours to their credit. Within the first 10 days of taking over command from Newchurch, bringing five of his fellow FIU officers with him 501 Squadron’s score had increased tenfold, starting immediately on the night of the 11th August with the destruction of eight flying bombs. This date also coincided with Joseph’s completion of four full years of RAF service.

Date	V1's	Aircraft	Time	Location	Unit	Base
28 June 44	2	Tempest V		<u>S. England</u>	FIU	Newchurch
29 June 44	1	Tempest V		<u>S. England</u>	FIU	Newchurch
30 June 44	3	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
2 July 44	1	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
3 July 44	1	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
5 July 44	2	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
6 July 44	4	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
8 July 44	3	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
9 July 44	1	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
17 July 44	2	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
19 July 44	4	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
21 July 44	1	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
23 July 44	7	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
25 July 44	4	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
27 July 44	1*	Tempest V		W Malling	FIU	Newchurch
29 July 44	2	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
3 Aug 44	5	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
5 Aug 44	5	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
7 Aug 44	4	Tempest V		S. England	FIU	Newchurch
12 Aug 44	1	EJ590 SD-L	01:23	N. Sandhurst	501 Sqn	Manston
13 Aug 44	1	EJ590 SD-L	06:13	<u>SW. W Malling</u>	501 Sqn	Manston
14 Aug 44	1	EJ590 SD-L		S. England	501 Sqn	Manston
16 Aug 44	2	EJ590 SD-L		S. England	501 Sqn	Manston
20 Aug 44	1	EJ584 SD-Q	06:35	<u>S. W Malling</u>	501 Sqn	Manston
31 Aug 44	1	EJ596 SD-C	05:50	Faversham	501 Sqn	Manston

Bar to Distinguished Flying-Cross. Flight Lieutenant Joseph BERRY, D.F.C. (118435); R.A.F.V.R. Flight Lieutenant Berry is a highly skilled and resolute pilot. He has completed a very large number of sorties and throughout his keenness and devotion to duty have been exceptional. This officer has, within a short period, destroyed numerous flying bombs.

Now acknowledged as the record flying bomb killer, Joseph was summoned to the Ministry of Information building in London for an Anglo-American "High Level" conference with other members from Fighter Command, Balloon Command and the Observer Corps of the Air Defence Great Britain involved in the battle of the flying bombs. What is to-day the central administrative building and library for the University of London, the University Senate House on Malet Street, was used as the Ministry of Information during the war and all censoring systems were co-ordinated there.

Joseph was told by Mr Duncan Sandys M.P. chairman of the Cabinet Committee on operational counter-measures against the V1's, what was still expected of his squadron; even though the Government believed that the flying bomb threat was all but defeated, these instructions had come directly from the Prime Minister himself. Outside the Ministry of Information the newspaper reporters and photographers were eagerly waiting to take pictures of these brave airmen. Joe spoke to the reporter saying, "Our chief difficulty was that, though we could see the bombs much further away at night, we could not easily judge how far away they were, all we could do at first was to fly alongside the fairly slow bombs and remember what they looked like at lethal range, in this way a very good interception system was worked out before the new shilling range finder was issued", although Joe still preferred to use his own methods.

From as early as the 8th of July, flying bombs were being launched at night against England in a different way, so a move from Manston to Bradwell Bay in Essex on the 22nd of September was to enable patrols to be maintained against any flying bombs that were being launched from beneath the wings of Heinkel He111 (H-22's), Code named Operation Rumpelkammer.

These Heinkel's took off from their bases in North Western Germany and Northern Holland, with a flying bomb fixed under its wing the mother ship would be vectored across the North Sea at very low level to avoid radar detection, then at some fifty miles of shore, it would climb to about 1,500 feet or so before launching its 'robot' missile in the direction of its target city, the pilot would then turn and dive for home.

At Bradwell Bay the decision was made to check out the airfields these bombers were coming from. So at 17:45 hours in the fading light of the 27th September, Joseph flying (SD-Y) and F/Lt E.L. Williams flying (SD-L) flew a two Tempest 'Ranger to North-West Germany' sortie, with the intentions of having a 'look' at these various enemy airfields. This was the first sortie of its kind for these pilots.

Due to the weather being bad, low cloud and rain (10/10ths at 1,000 feet) the mission was aborted 10 miles West of Rheine and the pair had to return, but on their way back home they still managed to fire off 640 rounds from their 20mm cannons by twice attacking and seriously damaging the engine of a train 10 miles East of Zutphen, with the weather clearing up it was decided to go again.

Before dawn at 05:35 hours on 2nd October 1944 flying his Tempest (SD-F), he led another 'Ranger' sortie with F/Lt E.L. 'Willy' Williams (SD-L) and F/Lt C.A. 'Horry' Hansen (SD-H), to attack these airfields between Zwischenhan in North Western Germany. This was a HeIII airfield with a nearby rail yard where trains transporting flying bombs to these airfields could be found, and any other HeIII airfields or enemy targets of opportunity from there to Rheine.

Crossing the Dutch coastline at first light at Egmond aan Zee, three miles South of Bergen; right between the two radar stations Salzhering and Zander, and at a height of 50 feet; low enough to avoid being detected by enemy radar. They then flew via the Ijssellake and the Noordoostpolder in the direction of Mappel, a slight turn north east brought the three Tempests on a heading towards Veendam.

At approximately 07:10 hours while flying low on their planned route, bursts of machine gun fire from alerted soldiers stationed at the German Radar Site codenamed 'Gazelle' just East of Veendam, unluckily struck him and the side of his aircraft, rupturing the glycol tank of his Tempest.

His two companions saw him slumped over the controls of his airplane and frantically radioed him to pull up, struggling to control his stricken aircraft, some eyewitness reports say 'that he' *increased his height*' presumably in an attempt to bale out, 'leaving a glycol vapour trail in his wake'. Over the R/T, he said to his fellow pilots in the truest RAF tradition 'Carry on chaps, I've had it'.

Just over 2 miles to the East of 'Gazelle' Joseph's airplane flipped over on to its back and invertedly crashed onto farm land near the hamlet of Kibbelgaarn. The two other pilots circled the crash site a couple of times to see if their commanding officer had survived the impact, but the Tempest was now seen to be burning fiercely, so they pressed on with their mission.

The remaining two pilots returned home safely at 09:25, reporting attacks on 4 Trains, leaving them smocking and steaming, 3 trains were reported attacked between the River Ems and Dummer Lake and the fourth train attacked 12miles East of Zwolle. Joseph was buried in a quiet plot in the nearby civilian cemetery of Scheemda, on the simple wooden cross were written the words, 'Unknown RAF'.

Second Bar to Distinguished Flying-Cross. Acting Squadron Leader Joseph BERRY, D.F.C., (118435) R.A.F.V.R. No, 501 Squadron. with effect from 1st October, 1944(since deceased). Since the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross, this officer has flown on many operational sorties and has destroyed a further 41 flying bombs bringing his total to 58 bombs destroyed at night. On several occasions his aircraft has been damaged by the explosion of the bombs. As Squadron Commander, Squadron Leader Berry has displayed courage and devotion to duty of a high order and under his inspiring leadership the squadron has attained many successes.



In September 1956, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission erected a permanent head stone, the text on the stone was chosen by Joe's widow Joyce:

GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN THAN THIS THAT A MAN LAY DOWN HIS LIFE FOR HIS FRIENDS.