



Living History

BBMF HURRICANE NIGHT FIGHTER

Dark
Knighth

Former OC BBMF **Clive Rowley** reveals the story behind the new all-black night-fighter-intruder identity for the Flight's famous Hurricane Mk IIC

BBMF Hurricane IIC PZ865 looks menacing, purposeful and beautiful in its all-black night fighter intruder livery. ALL IMAGES DARREN HARBAR



H

urricane Mk IIC PZ865 returned to its home with the RAF BBMF at Coningsby on May 5, after undergoing a 'Major' maintenance

programme conducted by The Spitfire Company (Biggin Hill) Ltd. The famous Hurricane, *The Last of the Many* – the last of the type ever built – is now painted to represent a cannon-armed Hurricane Mk IIC of 247 Squadron, which was based at Predannack, Cornwall, and Exeter in Devon during 1942. PZ865 now commemorates all those Hurricane pilots of the night-fighter squadrons who risked their lives in the dark hours, bravely trying to defend against night bombing raids, then taking the fight to the enemy on night-intruder operations.

Hurricane Mk IIC BE634 'ZY-V'

Hurricane Mk IIC BE634 was delivered to 247 Squadron at RAF Predannack on the Lizard Peninsula in Cornwall in January 1942. In common with the unit's other Hurricanes, and in keeping with their predominantly nocturnal role, BE634 was painted all-over matt black and was fitted with anti-glare panels over the engine exhausts. It was given the 247 Squadron code letters 'ZY-V'. Unusually, the 247 Squadron Hurricanes wore half-sized fuselage roundels and code letters.

In its eight months with 247 Squadron, mostly operated by 'B' Flight, Hurricane BE634 flew 258 operational sorties, including day and night scrambles, dawn and dusk patrols, convoy escort patrols, night searchlight co-operation patrols and missions in company with 'Turbinlite' Douglas A-20 Havocs. The squadron records show that BE634 frequently flew three or four sorties in a 24-hour period, with very little down time.

On April 29, 1942, Hurricane BE634 'ZY-V' was photographed on an air-to-air photoshoot by an Air Ministry photographer from a Douglas A-20 Havoc. For that sortie, BE634 was being flown by the Squadron CO, Squadron Leader Peter O'Brian, a Canadian RAF pilot, who also flew six operational sorties in the aircraft. O'Brian was a

"The famous Hurricane, the last of the type ever built, *The Last of the Many*, is now painted to represent a cannon-armed Hurricane Mk IIC of 247 Squadron"



ABOVE: The original Hurricane Mk IIC which wore the 247 Squadron code letters 'ZY-V' was BE634. Now authentically replicated on BBMF Hurricane PZ865, 247 Squadron applied the code letters and fuselage roundels at half the standard size

BELOW: BBMF Hurricane PZ865 breaks away from the camera ship displaying the four 20mm cannon of the Mk IIC and the half-sized code letters and roundels applied by 247 Squadron to its Hurricanes

pre-war pilot who had joined the RAF in January 1936 and commanded 247 Squadron for an almost unprecedented 20 months, from September 1940 to May 1942, being awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) in the process.

Hurricane BE634 was operated by 247 Squadron up until September 1942, after which it was re-allocated to 536 Squadron at Predannack.

Night victories

The pilots of 247 Squadron, flying the single-seat, non-radar-equipped Hurricanes, faced an almost impossible task in trying to locate, intercept and engage German bombers at night. There were few successful interceptions and night kills were even rarer, but there were some.

Pilot Officer Ken Mackenzie DFC scored the squadron's first night kill on July 7, 1941, during a patrol in a Hurricane Mk IIA, when he intercepted a Junkers Ju 88. After a long chase, he closed to firing range and gave the Junkers a burst of about eight seconds from 250 yards down to 100 yards. The enemy bomber burst into flames, broke up and crashed into the sea. The Hurricane's propeller was hit by debris and the windscreen was splattered with oil, but Mackenzie landed safely, jubilant at getting the squadron's first kill.

When Mackenzie joined 247 Squadron in June 1941, he was already a fighter ace with a total of 10 confirmed victories (including shared kills). These were mostly against Messerschmitt Bf 109s, achieved while flying Hurricanes with 501 Squadron during the latter stage of the Battle of Britain and into November 1940. Famously, he had knocked a Bf 109 out of the sky from very low level over the sea on October 7, 1940. In his determination not to let it get away after he ran out of ammunition, he flew alongside, positioned his starboard wing over the 109's port tail plane and then deliberately knocked it off, causing the enemy fighter to dive into the sea. The wing of





LEFT: RAF Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Hurricane Mk IIC PZ865, in its new all-black night fighter intruder colour scheme representing an aircraft of 247 Squadron in 1942, was flown for this photoshoot by the BBMF Operations Officer, Flight Lieutenant Andy Preece MBE

BELOW: Not a sight that any rear gunner in a German bomber would want to see as Andy Preece brings Hurricane PZ865's four 20mm cannon to bear. Note the night flying exhaust shields fitted to the Hurricane's nose to prevent the pilot's vision from being affected by the exhaust flames



Mackenzie's Hurricane was badly damaged, but he managed to get back to the English coast, pursued by two Bf 109s, crash-landing near Folkestone and suffering slight facial injuries. He was awarded the DFC at the end of October 1940.

Mackenzie achieved a second night kill with 247 Squadron, this one against a Heinkel He 111, on September 12, 1941, while flying Hurricane Mk IIC BD832. In his combat report he mentioned how effective he found the 20mm cannon.

Mackenzie was subsequently captured on one of the unit's early dusk intruder sorties into Brittany, France, to attack Lannion airfield on September 29, 1941. His Hurricane was hit by flak and his engine quickly failed. He survived a ditching in the sea and briefly evaded capture before becoming a POW. During his time in captivity, Mackenzie was involved in several tunnel-digging escape attempts. He was eventually repatriated in October 1944 after feigning insanity over a long period of time, developing a stammer for the purpose, which never left him. On his return he went straight back to flying, becoming an instructor. Mackenzie left the RAF in 1967 as a Wing Commander. He died in June 2009, aged 92.

The 247 Squadron pilots achieved only two other night kills. One was against a Dornier Do



TOP: Hurricane Mk IIC PZ865 displays its new all-black night fighter intruder colour scheme, that of ZY-V of 247 Squadron in 1942, outside the BBMF hangar at RAF Coningsby

ABOVE: BBMF Hurricane PZ865 stripped of its old fabric for inspection of the fuselage structure during its recent 'Major' maintenance programme under contract with The Spitfire Company (Biggin Hill) Ltd

Hurricane PZ865

'Major' servicing

Between February 2020 and May 2021, Hurricane PZ865 underwent a 'Major' maintenance programme at Biggin Hill, from which it emerged wearing its new all-black night fighter intruder scheme.

In order to conduct a full inspection of the airframe, the Hurricane fuselage was stripped of its fabric. In general, the aircraft was found to be in good condition, but some minor corrosion was discovered that affected some wing panels, ribs and brackets in the wing trailing edges. The Hurricane's wings were removed to enable replacement of the affected components with newly-manufactured items provided by Hawker Restorations Ltd.

Hurricane PZ865 already had a modern parametric data gathering (PDG) system, which monitors and records data from a multitude of operations and systems for subsequent download. This was upgraded during the 'Major' into a full operational loads measurement system, known as the Hurricane Load Assessment ("HuLA") system, by fitting 96 strain gauges to PZ865's airframe with a new and powerful central logger unit.

PZ865's fuselage was then re-covered with fabric by Eastern Sailplanes and the aircraft was painted into its new night-fighter scheme by RAS, the specialist aircraft surface finish company at Biggin Hill. For added authenticity, PZ865 has been fitted with the night flying exhaust anti-glare panels or 'blinkers' over the engine exhaust stacks, which were fitted to wartime night fighters to avoid the pilot being blinded by the exhaust flames.



TOP: To add to the authenticity of its new night fighter intruder, BBMF Hurricane PZ865 has had exhaust shields added. These 'blinkers' were fitted to night-flying Hurricanes to prevent the pilot's vision being affected by the bright exhaust flames when flying in the dark

ABOVE: Two of BBMF Hurricane PZ865's four replica 20mm cannon with one of the night flying exhaust shields on the nose behind them. The 20mm cannon were much heavier-hitting than the original 0.303-inch machine guns, although they only offered about 10 seconds of firing time

17Z at dusk on August 1, 1941, in failing light. Two Hurricanes intercepted and engaged the German bomber. Tragically, Pilot Officer Ricky Price misjudged his approach and inadvertently collided with the Dornier, losing about six feet of his port wing. His Hurricane crashed into the sea, killing him instantly, but the Dornier also ditched into the water.

On the night of July 22, 1942, 247 Squadron's Free French pilot, Sous Lieutenant Claude 'Terry' Helies, intercepted a Junker Ju 88 at 300 feet over the sea, while on a dusk convoy patrol. During a weaving chase, Helies fired two well-aimed bursts at the Ju 88, which caught fire and crashed into the sea. Sadly, Helies was to be killed on October 31, 1942, when his 340 (Free French) Squadron Spitfire Mk IX was hit by flak over France.

Night intruder missions

Night intruder operations over Northern France were authorised for 247 Squadron from September 1942, with the aim of suppressing enemy flying activity and causing confusion by firing on trains, vehicles and military camps, as well as occasionally strafing German E-boats in the English Channel.

The night-intruder operations would continue sporadically over the next 11 months, and although no enemy aircraft were sighted, there were some notable successes in attacking ground targets, especially trains. Some of these sorties lasted more than three hours, thanks to the long-range fuel drop tanks being fitted.

Hurricane Mk IIC BE634 was flown on a night-intruder sortie on June 3, 1942 by Canadian Flight



TOP: The shape and textures of the Hurricane are made more obvious by the all-black colour scheme. The Irish linen fabric on Hurricane PZ865's rear fuselage was completely replaced during its 'Major' maintenance work

BELOW: Hurricane Mk IIC PZ865 flying over Rutland Water in its new all-black night fighter intruder colour scheme, representing an aircraft of 247 Squadron

Sergeant Allan White. He spotted a stationary train on the Plouaret to Lannion single-track line and went in "very low" to attack it, seeing strikes on the locomotive "with much steam". Sadly, Allan White did not return from his next night-intruder operation in Hurricane Mk IIC BD231 'ZY-E', on June 27, 1942. It appears that he attempted to attack a train on the Saint-Brieuc to Guingamp railway line, near Saint Agathon, Brittany. He may have been brought down by flak or he may have collided with a building at very low level in the dark. It is known that his Hurricane demolished a chimney on a building before crashing in a field 200 metres from the railway line. He died instantly in the crash.

Despite the obvious dangers of low-level operations over enemy territory in the dark, Allan White was the only casualty of these night-intruder missions for 247 Squadron, which flew 50 such operations, the last on the night of August 25-26, 1942. However, in 22 months of Hurricane operations between February 1941 and December 1942, 16 pilots lost their lives flying with 247 Squadron, seven of them at night. **FP**

“Night intruder operations over Northern France were authorised for 247 Squadron from September 1942, with the aim of suppressing enemy flying activity and causing confusion”

