

# **Air Commodore Geoffrey Cooper - obituary**



## **Fighter pilot and air correspondent who clashed with Max Hastings over the history of Bomber Command**

Air Commodore Geoffrey Cooper, who has died aged 89, was a fighter pilot who saw action in the Middle East and in Malaya. For 11 years, he was the air correspondent of The Daily Telegraph.

Cooper joined No 208 Squadron in early 1948 at Ramat David in Palestine. By May, the evacuation of the region was nearing completion and the squadron's Spitfires had remained to provide air cover for the final withdrawal. On the morning of May 6, a lone Spitfire of the Egyptian Air Force, which had mistakenly assumed that the Israelis occupied the airfield, dropped bombs and destroyed two RAF Spitfires.

A standing patrol was established and two hours later three more Egyptian Spitfires attacked the airfield. Cooper was airborne with his flight and he intercepted the Egyptians and scored hits on one of the Spitfires before a colleague destroyed it. Cooper then pursued a second Spitfire and shot it down. RAF Regiment gunners shot down the third aircraft. The Egyptians later claimed that their pilots had made a "navigational error". The following day, No 208 left for Cyprus.

As tension with the new state of Israel intensified in January 1949, No 208 was transferred to the Canal Zone to reinforce the resident fighter squadrons. Following Israeli incursions into Egypt, the squadron was tasked to carry out reconnaissance sorties along the border. On January 7, four Spitfires led by Cooper set off for a patrol with instructions not to cross the frontier. As they turned for home at the end of their reconnaissance, one of the Spitfires was shot down by anti-aircraft fire and the pilot bailed out. As the other three pilots dived down to look for the descending parachute of their colleague, Israeli Air Force Spitfires appeared and attacked them. The three 208 Squadron

aircraft were hit and Cooper and Flying Officer McElhaw were forced to bail out. The third pilot was killed.

The RAF Spitfires crashed 10 miles inside Egyptian territory. Cooper was picked up by Bedouin tribesmen and returned to his base the following day. The other two pilots were captured and spent a short period in Israeli hands. It was later claimed by the Israeli pilots (one was a Canadian and a second an American) that they had mistaken the RAF Spitfires for Egyptian aircraft.

Geoffrey Strickland Cooper was born in Essex on October 25 1925 and educated at Winchester. He joined the RAF in late 1944 and trained as a pilot.

After his time in the Middle East, Cooper served on a number of fighter squadrons based in Britain. In 1956 he took command of No 45 Squadron based at Butterworth near Penang in Malaya. The squadron was equipped with Venom ground-attack jet fighters and over the next two years Cooper and his pilots flew many bombing and strafing sorties against the Communist insurgents.

An excellent solo aerobatic pilot, he formed an aerobatic team of five Venoms; it gave numerous displays at events including the opening of the new Brunei Airport. The local press described Cooper's solo display as "breathhtaking". Cooper's career as a fighter pilot continued when he took command of the flying wing at Binbrook near Grimsby, the home of a Javelin all-weather fighter squadron and the Central Fighter Establishment, which developed air fighting tactics.

After appointments at HQ Fighter Command and in the Ministry of Defence, Cooper was made responsible for air operations at RAF Air Headquarters, Persian Gulf, in Bahrain. His arrival coincided with the withdrawal of British forces from Aden and the transferral of authority for the Middle East region to Bahrain. A massive airlift was established using the RAF's airfield at Muharraq on the island as the main airhead. As the day approached for the final withdrawal, the Aden based fighter squadrons moved to Bahrain. With the departure of the last aircraft on November 29 1967, the British withdrawal from Aden was complete.

Cooper remained in Bahrain, the RAF's last major HQ in the Middle East, for a further 18 months. He was responsible for coordinating the RAF's air operations in the region. Muharraq remained a staging post for aircraft en route to the Far East and was also the home for a number of fighter, transport and helicopter squadrons, which deployed regularly to Oman and the Gulf States. After two years of intense activity, Cooper left the Gulf in 1969. He was appointed OBE.

In February 1971 he assumed command of RAF Patrington on the Humber branch of Fighter Command's main early warning and ground control centres for the air defence of Britain.

In November 1972, Cooper served in the Ministry of Defence in a key appointment in the RAF's Air Plans Directorate, an organisation responsible for the future size and shape of the service. After two years he was appointed director at a time when the RAF was preparing for the introduction of the Tornado and a major upgrade of the RAF's air defence organisation.

Cooper's final appointment before retiring in September 1978 was as the Air Officer Commanding the Military Air Traffic Organisation.

In 1979, Cooper was appointed air correspondent of the Daily Telegraph. The new job involved considerable personal change. His journey to work was now by cramped commuter train rather than chauffeur-driven car to Fleet Street, where everyone called him "Geoff" instead of a respectful "Air Commodore". A lucid, serious writer, he settled in well, covering the retirement of the last wartime fighter pilot and the contraction of the Armed Forces as Communism tottered in Eastern Europe. He

described the RAF's contributions in the Falklands conflict and the technical innovations of the first Gulf War as well the expansion of the airline industry.

When asked to review Max Hastings's controversial book Bomber Command in 1979 he had no hesitation in writing that it lacked depth and credibility, not least for its attack on Air Marshal Harris's "obsession" with area bombing. Staff wondered about Cooper's future when Hastings was appointed the paper's editor some five years later.

But although other service specialists were soon stood down, Cooper continued until the early 1990s.

A keen and competent skier – he met his wife on the slopes at Zermatt – Cooper supported the RAF Winter Sports Association. He was the tower captain of St James Church in Fulmer, Buckinghamshire and he restored and repaired clocks. He was also a keen gardener.

In April 1962 Geoffrey Cooper married Noreen, the daughter of AVM Don Bennett, chief of the RAF's Pathfinder Force in the Second World War. She and a son and two daughters survive him.

**Geoffrey Cooper, born October 25 1925, died December 13 2014**

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