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Despite the length and ferociousness of the aerial combat, Flight Lieutenant James Nicolson was the only RAF pilot to be awarded the Victoria Cross during the Battle of Britain. Indeed, he was the only member of Fighter Command to receive the prestigious award throughout the whole of the Second World War. So who was James Nicolson and what did he do to earn his VC?

Eric James Brindley Nicolson was born in Hampstead, London in 1917. He received a formal education at the Yardley Court preparatory school before attending Tonbridge School in Kent. By the mid-1930s he had become an engineer but would enter the RAF in 1937, joining No.72 Squadron as a fighter pilot in the same year. Following the outbreak of the Second World War, Nicolson transferred to No.249 (Gold Coast) Squadron, with which he would experience combat during the Battle of Britain. The squadron was equipped with the Hawker Hurricane at this time, and it would be while flying this type of aircraft that he would earn the VC.

While conducting a flight close to Southampton, on 16 August 1940, Nicolson came under attack by a Messerschmitt Bf 110; the fire of which hit him in the foot and blinded him in one eye. His Hurricane was also badly damaged in the engine, then, to Nicolson's horror, the fuel tank caught fire, later causing him to suffer serious burns to his hands. There was little choice but to bailout from the stricken fighter but, as he began to do so, he noticed another Messerschmitt close by; he then decided to temporarily abandon his escape by parachute and, with the German plane in his gun-sight, began firing his eight .303 Browning machineguns. This decision was an incredibly risky one, but it paid off as the Messerschmitt suddenly went into a dive from which it did not recover. With his enemy destroyed, Nicolson finally jumped from the doomed Hurricane and painfully pulled the ripcord on his parachute with his burnt hand. The pilot, however, was not yet out of danger, since a member of the Local Defence Volunteers opened fire on him thinking he was a German; fortunately the shotgun he was using only lightly peppered Nicolson's leg. For his act of valour against the Messerschmitt, twenty-three year old Flight Lieutenant Nicolson was awarded the Victoria Cross; the citation of which was published in the London Gazette of 15 November 1940. It read:

'During an engagement with the enemy near Southampton on 16th August, 1940, Flight Lieutenant Nicolson's aircraft was hit by four cannon shells, two of which wounded him whilst another set fire to the gravity tank. When about to abandon his aircraft owing to flames in the cockpit he sighted an enemy fighter. This he attacked and shot down, although as a result of staying in his burning aircraft he sustained serious burns to his hands, face, neck and legs. Flight Lieutenant Nicolson has always displayed great enthusiasm for air fighting and this incident shows that he possesses courage and determination of a high order. By continuing to engage the enemy after he had been wounded and his aircraft set on fire, he displayed exceptional gallantry and disregard for the safety of his own life.'

Despite the award, Nicolson remained very modest about his achievement, and was even slow at getting the VC ribbon sewn onto his uniform. It would not be until September 1941 that he was deemed fit enough to return to flying duties, being posted to India the following year. In August 1943 he became the squadron leader of No.27 Squadron, a unit that flew Bristol Beaufighters during the Burma campaign. It would be during his time on operations over Burma that he would earn yet another gallantry medal, this time in the form of the

Distinguished Flying Cross, which was awarded on 11 August 1944. Promotion to wing commander followed but, on 2 May 1945, while flying as an observer in a B-24 Liberator with No.355 Squadron, his plane caught fire and crashed into the Bay of Bengal. Sadly Nicolson's body was never recovered and he was listed as killed-in-action, bringing to a sad end the remarkable flying career of Fighter Command's only VC recipient. Today, his name can be found on the Kranji War Memorial in Singapore. Also on the ill-fated Liberator flight was the first cousin of our former Chief Iain, Flgt Sgt Donald Nicolson was the wireless operator. He sent the 'mayday' signal back to base, but like the W/Cmmdr, he did not survive the crash into the Bay of Bengal. Iain and Donald were close friends through schooldays in Tasmania.

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