

STUART WALCH - THE ONLY TASMANIAN TO DIE IN THE
BATTLE OF BRITAIN

by

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Flight Lieutenant Stuart Crosby Walch was the only Tasmanian to die in the Battle of Britain along with twelve other Australians.

The Battle of Britain was fought over the skies of England against bomber and fighter attacks by the German Air Force (Luftwaffe) with the main aim to force Britain to the negotiating table and seek peace. It was also hoped that in destroying Britain's naval and air defenses, Hitler would be able to invade the British Isles if that option failed.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Great Britain stated on June 18th, 1940, "*I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin*" and within several weeks it had. It culminated 31st October, when Hitler and his Air Force Commander, Hermann Goring realised that the British were not going to give in, let alone surrender. The most ferocious attacks occurred September 15 and ever since that has been designated Battle of Britain Day.

Stuart Walch was born in Hobart February 16, 1917 into the well-known Hobartian business family, J Walch and Sons, founded in 1846 and although it no longer exists is well remembered by many. His parents were Percival and Florence Walch.

He enrolled at Hutchins School in 1927 and became an outstanding sportsman, excelling at football, cricket, running and rowing.

While at school, he took an interest in aviation. To his memory the Hutchins School Magazine (December 1940) would write of his time when at school that he was a thorough sportsman and *“during his later years he was one of the most popular boys in the School, not that he ever sought popularity.”* In 1934 he passed his Intermediate certificate and left to work at the family business. Two years later he entered Port Cook where he obtained his “wings”.

Although the Royal Australian Air Force was expanding, greater opportunities were to be found in the Old Country and Walch with 25 other Australians accepted an offer by the British Government to transfer to the Royal Air Force (RAF). In 1937 he was stationed in England which at that time the RAF was also expanding with new exciting aircraft, taking delivery of Hawker Hurricanes.

War in Europe was declared September 3rd 1939 and by then Walch had been promoted to Flying Officer and on January 1940 with 151 squadron promoted to Acting Flight Lieutenant. In a few months time the Battle of Britain began. In July Stuart had been appointed Flight Commander with 238 Squadron at Tangmere. He was soon credited with kills while flying a Hurricane fighter. He was twenty three years of age and even at this young age was known as the *“father of the squadron”*.

On August 11, 1940 just after 1050 hours (10:50am) when leading his team of six they encountered an enemy force of more than 150 Heinkel and Junkers bombers escorted by Messerschmitt fighters. It was his 55th sortie. Undaunted by the overwhelming numbers, they met the onslaught. Nonetheless he and his section leaders plummeted into the waters about 10km south of Swanage. He was the third Australian to die in the Battle of the skies over Britain. Sadly like many airmen, he has no known grave.

Stuart had accounted for two destroyed enemy aircraft, two shared destroyed, one unconfirmed shared destroyed and one damaged.

He had written previously of his experience, stating: “Some of the combats I have been in have been rather wild while they lasted. So far I seem to have been in the show with my section only. Still my boys are damn good and have proved themselves very reliable supporters, as you can imagine because once we (the three of us) met 30 and got a couple. Once my flight (six of us) which I was leading met 80 and again when I was on my own I got mixed up with 15. You have got to work hard for a few hectic minutes on those

occasions.”

His Commanding Officer wrote: *“We would like Stuart’s family to know how highly he was valued in the squadron. We have lost a gallant officer and we miss him badly”*. Another, a fellow pilot wrote, *“It was while he was trying to rescue two boys from a hopeless situation that he was killed.”* His family as can be imagined was devastated losing their only son.

After the war an old Hutchins boy, businessman Len Nettlefold donated a racing form rowing boat to the school and named it Stuart Walch. The boat was kept at Sandy Bay and sadly in 1967, unrelated to the bushfires, the shed burnt down destroying the boats. A portion of the Stuart Walch shell, however, was rescued and preserved. Today it is mounted in the mess room of the Hutchins Boarding School. He is also remembered on the school’s World War II Honour Role in the Chapel of St Thomas.

In honour of Stuart, Hutchins School was presented in 2011 with a Battle of Britain Historical Society School Plaque to honour Walch, unveiled by author and representative of the Society, Kristen Alexander. It was the first and only school plaque presented in Australia.



Reg at the unveiling of the Walch plaque, Hutchins School

Like all airman, Stuart’s name is recorded on the RAF memorial at Runnymede in England and Panel 12 in the Commemorative Area at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

When the Battle of Britain was finally over, Churchill wrote: *“Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”* Immortal words which included our fellow Tasmanian, Stuart Crosby Walch.