

# The complete fighter pilot

by Max Pudney



## Wing Commander Warren E. Schrader, DFC and Bar

Schrader with a Spitfire Vb of 165 Sqdn, 'working up' at Ayr, Scotland, 1942.

Possibly the most successful fighter pilot in Europe during the last month of World War II — shooting down 10 enemy aircraft in the space of three weeks — “Smokey” Schrader is one of New Zealand’s living legends.

Now in his late eighties, he spoke to Max Pudney about his wartime flying.

When Warren Schrader was posted to 165 Spitfire Squadron, he had a very casual introduction to the Mk 5b.

“My flight commander chatted for a while,” he said, “then suddenly looked at his watch. ‘I must away to the Mess,’ he said, ‘it’s morning tea time. The corporal here will show you the knobs and tits; I’ll see you when you come back!’

“I was glad he said when and not if. I did some familiarisation flying, never keen on aerobatics, only when I was chasing someone or being chased. I couldn’t help feeling how lucky I was to have such a beautiful aeroplane.”

Warren joined the RNZAF on 20 March 1941 and later attached to the RAF. His basic training was at Levin and then on to Christchurch to fly Tiger Moths. Because he showed some aptitude for instrument flying he was automatically streamed towards bombers, but when the RNZAF wanted one-third of the intake to go to Canada for training, he volunteered and through that managed to achieve his wish to fly fighters.

He went on to the UK No 9 Service Flying Training School at Hullavington, Wiltshire, on a refresher course flying the Miles Master Mk 1 which proved very successful as an advanced trainer. In January 1942 he went to 55 Operational Training Unit at Usworth, County Durham, to fly Hawker Hurricanes.

“That was the first time I felt really free in an aeroplane,” he says. “Before that I usually had an instructor with me, or an empty seat.” He flew 57 hours on Hurricanes and says that compared to a Spitfire the Hurricane was more like a saloon car as against a sports car.

Then came an operational posting to 165 Squadron and the Spitfire Vb. With the Captain of the Queen’s Flight as the Commanding Officer, he worked the squadron up very successfully and they got to know the aircraft well. 165 Squadron moved down to Tangmere to become part of the Tangmere Wing with 11 Group. They did a few sweeps over France, all uneventful, then over to Gravesend on the Thames Estuary to prepare for the Dieppe “Show”.

“That was a hectic business,” Warren remembers. “I was no 2 to the CO (3 and 4 were behind me) and I didn’t really know what the hell was going on. There were aeroplanes in all directions. I didn’t get to engage the Germans, I was so busy following the CO!

“He firmly believed in the line-astern formation and I had to concentrate all the time and when he weaved I had to make sure I was

in synch with him. So it was a very busy time and not very productive.”

They were up at 20,000 feet, too high to see any of the ground action, but he did see a terrible sight as a destroyer suddenly blew up — it just suddenly exploded!

After Dieppe, Sergeant Schrader was posted to Malta with 1435 Squadron. Their activities were directed mainly with ground attacks against troops and shipping strikes. Sometimes they carried two 250 pound bombs, which made the Spitfire stagger a bit on take-off ...!

“My flight commander in Malta asked who would like to go with him in the morning over to Sicily and look for some trouble. We were all fairly well oiled that night and I was the only one who volunteered as all the others knew better. So we went out and my aircraft got hit and the glycol started to stream out, looking rather like smoke. Some clown decided that ‘Smokey’ and Schrader went well together, hence my nickname.”

They also did occasional bombing attacks in Sicily. “I had only one encounter with the Italians and they left quite rapidly! Some time later I flew a Macchi 202 from Sicily to Malta. The only drawback was the throttle which operated opposite to ours.” When Smokey

taxied to the runway for takeoff, he “closed” the throttle by mistake and put on about 3000 rpm; the 202 nearly went off the end of the taxiway!

On 17 December 1943 one of the 1435 Squadron pilots was shot down quite near the coast and a trusty Walrus amphibian was sent out to pick him up. 1435 went along to give him top cover and was bounced by a couple of Bf 109s, and Warren Schrader was fortunate enough to get both of them.

“The first one tried to outrun me so it was a straight astern shot. It was a gift, but the other one, when he saw his leader blow up started to take rather violent action, not unnaturally. When I attacked he bailed out and pulled the

Below: Hawker Tempest of 486 (New Zealand) Squadron. This particular aircraft, Serial No NV 969, was flown by Schrader when scoring many of his victories.



rip-cord at the same moment. His parachute caught on the tailplane and I can see him now, being whipped up like some sort of flying object, until it tore away and he Roman candled all the way down, about 12,000 feet. He had about a minute to think about it. I saw him all the way down — he landed in Albania.”

They flew a large number of ground attacks against troops and shipping. In March 1944, Flt Lt Schrader was leading a section of four Spitfire IXs on a shipping strike near the borders of Albania and Yugoslavia. They attacked an enemy escort vessel, coming out of the sun in line astern, down to masthead height. “We continued attacking from both beams, starting small fires until our ammo was exhausted. We left the vessel still smoking and with oil issuing from the starboard side.

“I was no longer an amateur; I had been flying for quite a while by then. I ended up with 12 confirmed and one of the things I’m proud of is that there were no probables and no damaged. Later, when flying Tempests, I had shot down three, then we saw another one. I told my faithful no 2 to attack first, which he did, but with no apparent effect. So, much to his chagrin, I finished the bloody thing off!”

Some time later he had a turning fight with an FW 190 at about 200 feet and was very worried about hitting his slipstream. “I once played foolish tricks with another instructor. We were flying Harvards and I hit his slipstream and my aircraft went into a spin. At 200 feet you wouldn’t stand any chance.

The view from Schrader’s Tempest, courtesy of his gun camera.



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