

Edinburgh Airport's tribute to the pilots' pilot

Passing passengers can't help noticing the pilot who seems to have flown out of another age at Edinburgh Airport. They need only look behind the lifesize figure in wartime flying gear to see who he is and why he is there, frozen into a lifesize bronze statue. He is, or was, [Captain Eric "Winkle" Melrose Brown](#) from Edinburgh who became Britain's best ever test pilot and the most decorated flyer in Royal Navy history.

Those passers-by will read on the plinth only the subject's name and the many letters behind it – CBE, DSC, AFC, MA Hon, FRAeS, RN – before learning, from pictures and texts on a nearby display board, the full extent of his legendary airborne accomplishments... in other words, why he is there.

Erected opposite the over-head-high EDINBURGH entrance sign at the Plaza arrivals concourse, the heroic portrayal of Captain Brown is by Fife-based sculptor David Annand, creator of the celebrated Robert Fergusson statue outside Edinburgh's Canongate Kirk.

But how did the impressive tribute come about?

New life was breathed into Winkle Brown's Edinburgh connection when, as a guest on *Desert Island Discs* in 2015, he recalled to fellow-Scot Kirsty Young that he had been launched into the air by Edinburgh University's Turnhouse-based air unit.

Listening in, current members of that unit's successor group, the Edinburgh University Air Squadron Association, were moved to bring him into their newer fold as an honorary member – an offer happily accepted when they invited him to lunch at a Gatwick airport hotel.

“When he died soon after that [at age 97, seventeen months ago

at his home in Surrey] we felt we had to initiate a lasting memorial at a place that would mean something to him," says association treasurer Dr Murray Carmichael, "and that was the airport of course."

The airport's enthusiastic agreement was quickly secured, money was raised from various charitable sources involved in aviation, the sculptor duly commissioned and – a few months after his successful pursuit of a "very elusive" good likeness – some of the group gathered to see the work being finished at Powderhall Bronze foundry.

Their souvenir picture, with most of them looming over the life-size effigy of Brown, explained to some extent how the pilot got his now-famous nickname.

"Being only five feet four inches tall, his height was remarked on by an officer when he was joining the Royal Navy," says Dr Carmichael. "The officer likened him to a periwinkle – and the name stuck, in part anyway. But he had reason to be grateful for his height on at least four occasions – as he wriggled out of plane wrecks when other pilots didn't."

Leith-born Eric Melrose Brown, the son of a balloon observer and pilot, was initially educated at the Royal High School, then went on to Edinburgh University to study modern languages – with the accent on German – before joining the university's air unit.

From there, it was a natural hop into the Royal Navy's volunteer reserves as a Fleet Air Arm pilot and a career that would make record-breaking history.

He is in the Guinness Book of Records for having flown more aircraft types (487) than any other pilot and holds the world record for most aircraft-carrier take-offs and landings (over 2,000) including "firsts" with twin-engined, rotary-winged and jet-powered planes.

A key influencer in the design of an entire generation of aircraft, Winkle Brown flew every major and most minor combat aircraft before and after the Second World War – including gliders, bombers, airliners, flying boats, helicopters and all the early jets – becoming a heroic pioneer of jet technology.

His mastery of flight, combined with his German language skills, proved invaluable when, at the war's end, Churchill wanted to know as much as possible about the enemy's technological weapons. The celebrated test pilot was sent to interview leading Nazis such as Hermann Goering, test their advanced aircraft, and fly them back to Britain.

In that context, he even flew the suicidally dangerous Messerschmitt Me163B-1a Komet rocket-powered fighter (with which he was reunited in September 2015 at the National Museum of Flight in East Fortune) and by his own admission, when he first climbed into its cockpit "I wondered if I was going to survive".

So how did he survive, especially considering that he also flew several stints as a fighter pilot in the wartime defence of Britain? "A fighter pilot has to have a swivel neck," he wrote in his autobiography *Wings on My Sleeve*.

In that book, Bill Humble, chief test pilot for Hawker Aircraft, said of Captain Brown: "In an era of outstanding test pilots, Winkle was simply the best."

The photo above shows the **Edinburgh University Air Squadron Association members (among others) celebrate the finished sculpture of Winkle Brown at Powderhall Bronze – back row (from left): Dr Neil Beattie, Mike Lynch, Gordon Champion, foundry MD Brian Hammond, sculptor David Annand, Dr Stewart Slater, and John Grant. Seated are the association's chairman Dr Hamish MacLeod and treasurer Dr Murray Carmichael. PHOTO : Mike Harper**