

Stanford Tuck

Hero of the Battle of Britain

By Helen Doe

He was a fighter ace extraordinaire and daredevil test pilot. Now, the life and times of Battle of Britain legend Wing Commander Robert Stanford Tuck, DSO, DFC**, AFC, have been re-told in a new biography.

And who better to tell the story of this charismatic hero than Dr Helen Doe, daughter of another hero of 'Churchill's Few', the late Wing Commander Bob Doe, DSO, DFC*. Delving deep into personal knowledge gained during the research into her father's extraordinary war experiences (see the 2015-published *Fighter Pilot*), she's now brought RAF giant Stanford Tuck back into the spotlight.

Encouraged by Tuck's sons, who gave Helen access to their father's private papers, this re-examination of the man behind the myth takes us on an action-packed and heart-breaking flight – far from the fantasy typical of a nostalgic Boys' Own adventure.

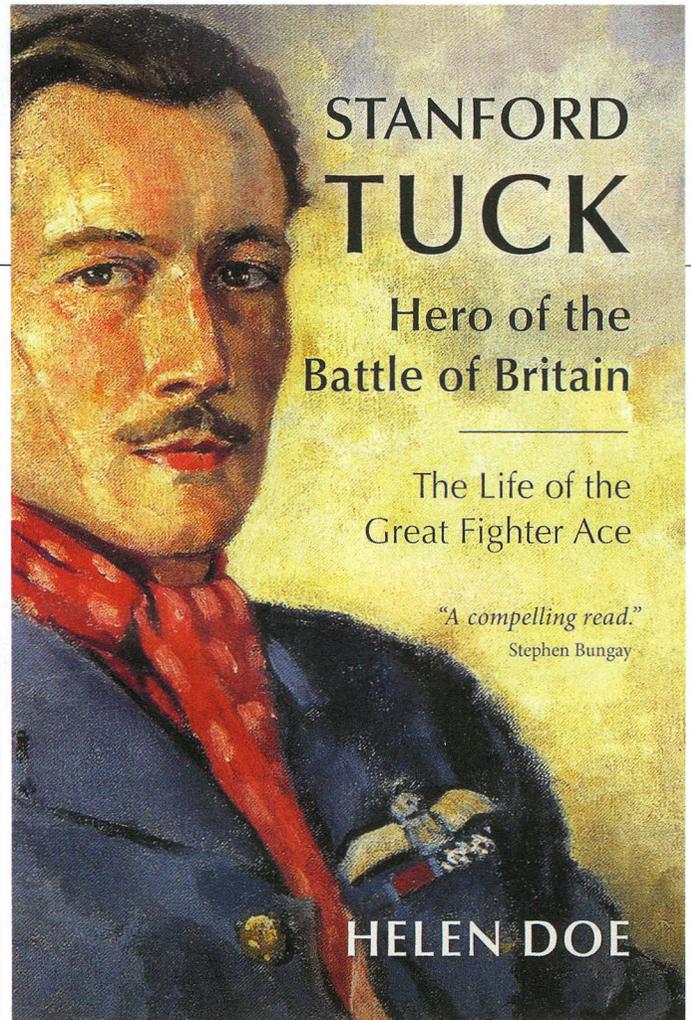
We read of a popular book about Tuck published in 1956, *Fly for Your Life*, written in haste by a somewhat gushing Larry Forrester. His remit, like many biographers of the day, was swept up in the demand for tales of wartime heroism. Some argue this whooped up the drama of the Battle of Britain with twists of fiction, romanticising the glories. The book had its day; it was a popular, gripping, jaw-dropping tale all about how Tuck earned his medals, but it failed to mention much about his years as a POW and how he later suffered with the memories of decisions he made.

Doe's latest work highlights confusions in Forrester's account, corrects and re-examines them. Each of the 11 storming chapters eloquently paints, as potently as portrait artist Cuthbert Orde's image of the ace on the cover, a dynamic insight into a man who combined flight and fight with ultimate passion. Given the availability today of good detail, Helen has had to take a fresh approach "as today's readers have much, much, more knowledge".

By May 1940, Tuck had been promoted to flight commander. He cut a fine figure, dashing and sporting a thin moustache like the Hollywood star Ronald Colman. He was a popular leader and his men admired his brilliance in the air.

Of course, Tuck's performance is legendary and the terrifying dogfights, the victories, the loss of his friends, the Luftwaffe aircraft plummeting into the English Channel as a result of his crack-shot aim, all feature. He flew above Dunkirk and southern England in Hurricanes, picking off the enemy with any chance he got, showing no fear – even taking on three Bf 109s at once.

In January 1942 his Spitfire was hit by flak near Boulogne and he was captured and sent to Stalag Luft III. There, he got to know many of the 'Great Escapers', and shared quarters with famous 'Big X', Roger Bushell. Tuck would be moved before



STANFORD TUCK

Hero of the
Battle of Britain

The Life of the
Great Fighter Ace

"A compelling read."
Stephen Bungay

HELEN DOE

the Great Escape – but the story his own dangerous bid for freedom is a must read.

When Tuck retired from the RAF in 1949, he became a test pilot and did his best to manage the burden that came with fame. He was a subject of the BBC show *This is Your Life*, and went on to run a mushroom farm in Kent. His wife Joyce stood by him – including when a television producer began stalking and harassing the Tucks, claiming the wing commander was his real father. Nothing was proven, but Tuck denied any knowledge of the man. The strain is believed to have led to Joyce's untimely death. Her husband died shortly after on May 5, 1987, aged 70.

Doe reveals Tuck as a man haunted by conscience. He often agonised over the day he fired at and killed a shot-down Luftwaffe pilot. Tuck thought it humane to spare him the misery of freezing to death in icy waters. Later the morality of Tuck's action prompted much debate. Some Germans branded him a war criminal, but his enemy-turned-pal Adolf Galland (with whom he worked with as a consultant in the film *Battle of Britain*) stood by Tuck on the issue, claiming he would have done the same thing.

This is an acute memoir of refreshing clarity written with sympathy and elan.

Reviewed by Melody Foreman

Publisher: Grub Street
Web: grubstreet.co.uk
ISBN: 978-1-91166-791-9
Hardback: 256 pages

RRP: £25
Illustrations: Yes
References/Notes: Yes
Appendices: Yes