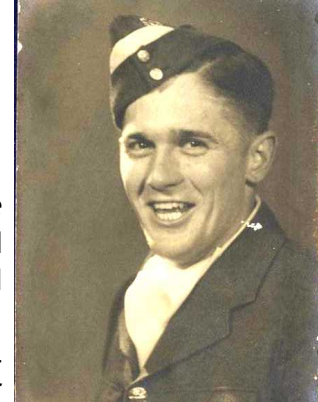


## American Airman, Canadian Pilot, British Hero

Sutton trained in Canada, Flew with the RAF in North Africa.

No. 274 Squadron of the Royal Air Force had already completed one patrol mission that Sunday morning. Its Hawker Hurricane aircraft and pilots, some of them veterans of the Battle of Britain, had patrolled over El Adem and then landed at Tobruk on the coast of Libya to refuel. At 1110 hours, a formation of enemy aircraft was reported west of El Adem and the squadron again took to the desert skies, Pilot Officer Frank Howie Sutton '40 at the controls of one of the Hurricanes.



For the next 80 minutes, the Royal Air Force pilots tangled with a mixed formation of 33 German and Italian aircraft including Messerschmitt 109s, Junker 87s and Italian Macchis. By 1230 hours, six of the participating RAF aircraft had returned to their landing field. "Three," reported the squadron log, "have so far not yet returned, namely F/LT Hobbs, P/O Sutton, P/O Gains."

Frank Sutton grew up in Monroe, NC, attending Sunday School and church, city schools and graduating in 1937 from Walter Bickett High School. Sutton enrolled at Clemson College as a textile engineering major, staying two years before returning home. Back in Monroe, Sutton developed an interest in flying, hanging out at the local airfield. In early 1940, he enlisted as a cadet in the Army Air Corps. His initial training was at Tuscaloosa, AL and from there he was sent on to Randolph Field in Texas. Perhaps motivated by a desire to get into the fight in Europe, Sutton went to Canada and was accepted into the Royal Canadian Air Force.

Once in the RCAF, Sutton's training continued, albeit at an accelerated pace. His elementary flying training was conducted at St. Eugene, Ontario, flying the North American T-6, which the Canadians called the "Harvard." From there, he and his comrades were sent to Service Flying Training School No. 2 at Uplands, Ontario. His class, number 19, graduated on April 1, 1941, earning pilot's wings and commissions as Pilot Officers. After three weeks of leave, Sutton and his mates reported to Nova Scotia, the marshalling point for the vital supply convoys ferrying men and materiel from North America to embattled Britain. Sailing aboard the *Californian*, Sutton arrived in the United Kingdom on June 11, 1941.

Sutton's training continued in the summer of 1941 at Crosby-on-Eden near the English-Scottish border. Here he learned to fly one of the RAF's front-line fighters, the Hawker Hurricane. Finally ready to join an operational squadron, his training class ferried 60 new Hurricanes from Southern England to Abbotsinch, an airfield close to Greenoch, Scotland. There, the aircraft were dismantled, crated and stowed aboard the aircraft carrier HMS *Furious*.

By this time, the English had survived the Battle of Britain and the action, for the time being at least, had shifted to the seas surrounding the British Isles and to North Africa. It was through these U-Boat infested waters that *Furious*



now plowed, south to Gibraltar and west through the Mediterranean to Egypt, where another formidable enemy awaited, Rommel's *Afrika Korps*.

The battle in North Africa had been a see-saw affair. At first, British forces had triumphed against their Italian foes. But, when the Germans committed Rommel and his *Afrika Korps* to rescue their ally, the tide of the battle turned.

Sutton was assigned to No. 274 Squadron which was involved in fighter operations in the Western Desert, helping British forces hold Tobruk.

By early December, Rommel was facing constant supply shortages. The Italian high command was unable to provide the reinforcements and materiel Rommel required to sustain his siege of Tobruk.



As Sutton and his squadron mates took off that Sunday morning, a young German named Hans-Joachim Marseille was piloting his Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter into battle from the opposite direction. In a chaotic, swirling dogfight, the Germans and Italians lost six airplanes, No. 274 Squadron lost three. Nicknamed the "Star of Africa" by the German propaganda machine, Marseille, already an ace, would eventually claim 158 victories. No other pilot shot down as many Western Allied aircraft. One of his victims was Frank Sutton.

In one of the war's uncounted ironies, Frank Sutton gave his life in the fight against Fascism while wearing the uniform of another country on the very day his own country would be thrust into the conflict; Sunday, December 7, 1941.

Frank Sutton was survived by his mother, one sister and three brothers, one of whom was already in the US Army Air Corps. Camp Sutton, just outside of Monroe and one of the larger military training bases so hastily established as the United States began its belated preparations for war, was named for the hometown hero.

Frank Howie Sutton was initially buried by Australian infantry troops and was later interred at Knightsbridge War Cemetery, plot 10.A.7, 25 kilometers west of Tobruk, Libya.

