

Wing Commander 'Mac' Furze

Cold War pilot who was fired on when he penetrated 1,000 miles into Soviet air space on a spying mission

WING COMMANDER "MAC" FURZE, who has died aged 83, was a Cold War bomber pilot, competed in the London to Christchurch Air Race and was involved in trials of the British airborne nuclear weapon. Furze's most dramatic mission came in 1954, when three RAF crews set off on an intelligence gathering flight over the Soviet Union. A similar mission had been successfully undertaken in 1952, under the command of Squadron Leader John Crampton, and Furze was selected to accompany Crampton as his co-pilot on the second spying sortie.

Three aircraft took off late on the evening of April 28 and headed for the Kattegat, off Denmark, over which they refuelled from airborne tankers. Crampton, Furze and their navigator flew the longest of the three routes, penetrating 1,000 miles into southern Russia to gather radar and photographic intelligence on 30 targets. Unknown to the crews, however, Russia's air defence system had detected them and fighters were scrambled to intercept.

As Crampton and Furze approached Kiev it was clear that accurate anti-aircraft fire was being directed at them and, after a near miss, they turned immediately to return. They took the shortest route, at maximum speed, out of Soviet airspace and so were unable to

rendezvous with their airborne tanker. Very short of fuel, they landed at a US airfield in southern Germany.

Robert McAlastair Furze was born at Bishop's Stortford on November 9 1928 and educated at Pangbourne College before gaining a cadetship to the RAF College, Cranwell.

After graduating in 1949 he flew Lincoln bombers with No 617 Squadron, and in 1951 he joined the RAF's first jet bomber squadron, No 101, flying the Canberra.

In 1953 he was selected as a reserve pilot for the London to Christchurch Air Race. Just 24 hours before the off, a pilot was declared unfit and Furze took his place to fly a Canberra PR 3 aircraft. Five Canberras were among the entrants and they took off at five-minute intervals from Heathrow Airport during the late afternoon of October 8.

Furze routed via Basra, Iraq, and Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where a main wheel had to be changed. From there he aimed for the Cocos Islands and then on to Perth, where the aircraft was on the ground for just 11 minutes. Furze and his navigator landed in New Zealand after completing the 12,300 mile journey in 24 hours 35 minutes — 44 minutes longer than the winner.

After his overflight of the Soviet Union, Furze spent some months at Weybridge with

Furze: in the London to Christchurch Air Race he completed the 12,300-mile journey in 24 hours, 35 minutes



the aircraft manufacturers Vickers Armstrong, becoming one of the first RAF pilots to fly the Valiant. In February 1955 he helped establish 1321 Flight Trials Unit for the introduction of the Valiant into RAF service and for integrating the Blue Danube nuclear weapon. The trials successfully determined the parameters used for the live nuclear tests carried out at Maralinga (Australia) in 1956 and at Christmas Island a year later. In the meantime, 1321 Flight had been disbanded, and Furze left to join No 214 Squadron as a flight commander.

In addition to operating in the strategic bomber role, the Valiants of No 214 pioneered air-to-air refuelling with trials that culminated in a non-stop flight to Cape

Town. Furze flew a Valiant tanker to support this record-breaking flight.

In July 1966 he assumed command of No 14 Squadron, based at Wildenrath in Germany. His Canberra bombers operated at low level, with one maintained at 15-minute readiness armed with a tactical nuclear weapon. One of his officers commented: "On 14 Squadron we had a real gentleman for a CO and his manner made for a happy squadron."

During the 1970s Furze filled staff appointments at HQ 1 (Bomber) Group, the MoD and the Officer and Aircrew Selection Centre before retiring in 1983.

A tall, handsome man, Furze had a quiet and gentle nature. He restored antique furniture and had a particular interest in old clocks.

He was very active in his village at Much Hadham in Hertfordshire, where he organised a Neighbourhood Watch scheme; was treasurer for the village fete; and served as a church warden for many years.

Mac Furze married his wife Marna in 1955. She died in 1995, and he is survived by their daughter and his partner Gillian.

Wing Commander Robert "Mac" Furze, born November 9 1928, died December 4 2011