

## OULTON, WILFRID EWART (1911 - 1997), RAF officer

**Name:** Wilfrid Ewart Oulton  
**Date of birth:** 1911  
**Date of death:** 1997  
**Spouse:** Sarah Gwenllian Oulton (née Davies)  
**Spouse:** Leticia Sara Oulton (née Malcolm)  
**Parent:** Martha Oulton (née Wellings)  
**Parent:** Llewelin Oulton  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** RAF officer  
**Area of activity:** Military  
**Author:** Bryan Boots

Wilfrid Oulton was born on 27 July 1911 at 2 Ellie Street, Monks Coppenthal, Nantwich, Cheshire, the eldest of eight children of Llewelin Oulton (1887-1955), a teacher, and his wife Martha (née Wellings, 1884-1918). His father had served as a scientist with the Royal Flying Corps in the First World War, and joined Abertillery Grammar School in 1919 as a Chemistry teacher. Wilfrid received his education at Abertillery prior to winning an open scholarship to University College, Cardiff, to study engineering.

In 1929 Wilfrid Oulton entered the Royal Air Force College Cranwell as a flight cadet. He graduated at the top of his class, and was commissioned as a pilot officer in the RAF in July 1931. He entered RAF Calsot in October 1931 and trained as a flying boat pilot. In April 1932 he was posted to 204 Squadron at RAF Mount Batten, where he flew Supermarine Southampton and Supermarine Scapa flying boats. He was posted to 202 Squadron in Malta in August 1932 and was promoted to flying officer in January 1933.

He married Sarah Gwenllian Davies (1913-1990) in Malta in 1935, but as he was only twenty-four he didn't qualify for marriage allowance, so to enhance his income as his family grew, he studied languages and worked as an interpreter. The couple had three sons, two of whom joined the RAF, and the other the Royal Canadian Air Force.

At Cranwell, Oulton had excelled in navigation, and when he returned to the UK in March 1936 he attended the School of Air Navigation, and became an instructor at the school in November of that year. He was promoted to squadron leader in December 1938 and was the RAF squash champion for 1938-39.

When war broke out in September 1939 Oulton was commanding officer of C Flight, 217 Squadron based at RAF Carew Cheriton in Pembrokeshire, but he was soon seconded to the Ministry of Aircraft Production to organise navigational training. He was mentioned in dispatches in February 1940 and promoted to wing commander in March 1941.

In April 1943, Oulton was appointed commanding officer of 58 Squadron, flying Handley Page Halifax bombers in an anti-submarine role. In May 1943, he participated in the sinking of three German U-boats in the Bay of Biscay, for which he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. In October 1943, he became commander of RAF Lajes Field, a base in the Portuguese Azores, and from there his squadrons could hunt enemy submarines and protect allied shipping using their Flying Fortress bombers. For establishing and commanding this crucial service he was awarded a DSO in November 1943. He was promoted to group captain in January 1944 and became commander of the flying boat base at RAF Castle Archdale in Northern Ireland. Later that year he was mentioned in dispatches for a second time. In March 1945, Oulton was appointed deputy director of maritime navigation in Northern Ireland and was mentioned in dispatches for a third time in June of that year.

At the end of the war he briefly became deputy director of flying at the new Heathrow Airport, which involved establishing the air traffic structure. In 1946 he returned to Northern Ireland as the RAF director of the joint anti-submarine school at Londonderry (Derry), where one of his students was the young Duke of Edinburgh shortly after his marriage to the Queen. Oulton thereafter continued his steady rise upwards through the RAF and was appointed air attaché in Argentina, from where he also covered Paraguay and Uruguay. On his return to the Air Ministry in 1953 he was appointed CBE and joined the directorate of staff training and then the directorate of operations.

In February 1956, the decision was made to appoint an RAF officer in place of an admiral to take charge of the H-bomb trials on Christmas Island in the Pacific named Operation Grapple, and Oulton was selected and appointed Air Vice-Marshal. The trials involved a number of drops, some of which were inert but three were live. The main trials took place in June 1957, but it was decided to carry out three further trials named 'Grapple 'X', 'Y' and 'Z'. Oulton remained in command for 'Grapple X' but was succeeded by John Grandy for the other two.

In April 1958 after returning from the Pacific, Oulton was appointed CB and became senior staff officer at Coastal Command headquarters at Northwood. This proved to be his final posting as, at his own request, he retired from the RAF in 1960. In retirement, he joined EMI Electronics as director of defence projects, and at one stage set up a joint venture on satellite communications with Hughes Aircraft of California. In 1982, he also started his own business consultancy, Medsales Executive, and held the position of chairman until 1987. He became an honorary fellow of the University of Wales, and a fellow of the Royal Institute of Navigation. His memories of his time as task force commander were published in 1987 as *Christmas Island Cracker: Account of the Planning and Execution of the British Thermonuclear Bomb Tests, 1957*. In 1995 he published *Technocrat*, a biography of his friend the American nuclear scientist Dr Allen Crocker.

His first wife died in 1990, and in November 1991 he married Leticia Sara Malcolm (b. 1921), an Argentinian artist. In retirement they lived in Lymington, Hampshire, where Wilfrid Ewart Oulton died of bladder and prostate cancer on 31 October 1997. Following cremation his ashes were spread over the Bay of Biscay by an aircraft of 206 Squadron.

### Author

Bryan Boots

### Sources

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Wikipedia

South Wales Gazette, 7 October 1927, 22 March 1935, 2 January 1942, 20 June 1947, 17 May 1957, 3 January 1958, 30 January 1959

London Gazette, 20 February 1940, 4 June 1943, 12 November 1943

The Times, 23 December 1957, 4 November 1997, 1 December 1997, 24 December 1998

### Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Wilfrid Oulton](#)

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APA Citation



Boots, B., (2024). OULTON, WILFRID EWART (1911 - 1997), RAF officer. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 13 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s15-OULT-EWA-1911>

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