

Wing Commander Jim Higgins

WING COMMANDER "BIG JIM" HIGGINS, who has died aged 78, was a notably successful — and lucky — bomber pilot during the Second World War.

Higgins was a huge man, whose enormous hands were perfect for handling multi-engined aircraft. Later in his career, as a Sunderland flying-boat pilot, he was one of the few who could control all four throttles on take-off with one hand.

In the spring of 1940 Higgins was flying Bristol Blenheim light bombers during the German invasion of France and the Low Countries. He made 26 daylight and seven night raids with Sgt "Two Gun" Cody, whose skilled gunnery repeatedly saved their twin-engined Blenheim from disaster.

On a raid on Dinant on May 15 their craft and two other Blenheims of 40 Squadron were attacked by a mixed force of some 50 Me 109s and Me 110s. After diving from cloud cover to drop his bombs Higgins raced for home at low level. Enemy fighters had already accounted for the other two Blenheims. He made it back to base, but only after a desperate chase.

Shortly afterwards he was one of two surviving pilots of six Blenheims which attacked Calais. By July 1 he was the only survivor of the 18 Blenheim pilots with whom he had started operations. That year he was awarded the DFC.

James Stewart Higgins was born on April 15 1917, at Whitwell, Worksop, and



'Big Jim' Higgins: bomber pilot

educated at Worksop Central School and Worksop Technical College. He went on to qualify in electrical engineering and worked as a laboratory assistant.

He enlisted in the RAF in 1935 as a pupil pilot, received his wings the next year and flew Hawker Hart biplane light bombers.

In early September 1940 Higgins was in the vanguard of attacks on invasion barges. He was then sent to Canada for a specialist navigation course. He returned the next August as navigation instructor at No 5 Flying Training School at Turnhill in Shropshire.

Losses were so heavy that in 1942 Higgins was sent out to Rhodesia to help to train more pilots and navigators under the Commonwealth

Air Training Scheme. He was posted to Salisbury as Navigation Examiner and Group Navigation Officer, Rhodesian Air Training Group.

In 1945 he was sent as flight commander to No 52, a Dakota transport squadron operating from Calcutta, Rangoon and Singapore. No 52 was very much a VIP squadron, and its pilots wore white uniforms. Higgins became renowned for his skill in handling the Dakota, which was prone to engine failure.

Finding life tedious in the Far East without his wife, Pat, whom he had married in Rhodesia, Higgins decided to smuggle her from Salisbury to Rangoon. He got a lift to Rhodesia with the RAF, and disguised Pat in Army uni-

form so that she could return to Burma with him. With no authorisation, she accompanied him in Burma and later in Singapore, where he was in command of No 110, a Dakota squadron.

In 1948 Higgins was sent to Germany as an operations controller for the Berlin airlift. Two years later he was posted as navigation and operations officer at RAF Pembroke Dock flying-boat base. The next year he commanded No 230, a Sunderland flying-boat squadron.

In 1952 Higgins, still in command of No 230, led a summer expedition to Young Sound, Greenland. Late in August the Sound had almost frozen over by the time he managed to get his Sunderland airborne; he was the last out.

After air staff duties at the Air Ministry he was appointed station commander in Bahrain in 1954. He returned from the Gulf in 1958 as the RAF commander and liaison officer at the American base at Sculthorpe, Norfolk. From 1961 to 1963 he commanded RAF Pergamos in Cyprus.

Higgins completed his service as a member of the Airmen's Promotion Boards and retired in 1964, when he was appointed a security officer at GCHQ, Cheltenham. He retired from this post in 1982.

Higgins was awarded the AFC in 1947 and a Bar in 1953.

He married, in 1942, Patricia Loggie, who predeceased him; he is survived by his son.