



Above: Russ Baxter in WWII  
Right: Russ Baxter with his grandson Chris Baxter (John Baxter's son) at the Temora airfield, NSW



# From Spitfires to Concorde

John Russell Baxter left a significant bequest to the University after a career in aeronautical engineering, that goes way back to the time he flew Spitfires during World War II, writes *Melinda Ham*.

As children, Roger and John Baxter have fond memories of taking the controls of a single-engine Piper Cherokee, whilst flying from Bankstown airport near Sydney with their father, John Russell "Russ" Baxter. At the time, their dad was well into a career in aeronautical engineering and needed to maintain his hours to keep his commercial pilot's license.

Russ didn't tell his sons the details of flying Spitfires in World War II until his later years, although this early experience fuelled his passion for aircraft and led to an international career in aeronautical engineering.

Although Russ never studied at UNSW, his son John (BEng'75 (Mechanical), PhD'80) did, becoming a mechanical engineer. Russ had a lot of respect for UNSW's engineering program and left the University a generous bequest totalling \$1.5 million.

Russ was part of a group of former WWII pilots who created the Spitfire Memorial Defence Fellowship at UNSW Canberra at ADFA, which awarded its first scholarship in 2000, and has had 14 recipients since that time.

The fellowships provide a perpetual memorial to the war-time contribution of the Spitfire and to those associated with the operation of this strategically important airplane. Research projects must aid the defence of Australia.

Russ also established the Baxter Family Postgraduate Scholarship in 2003. A total of \$15,000 annually is awarded for three years to a full-time PhD student in Engineering,



From left to right: Robert Baxter (son of Roger Baxter), Roger Baxter, Russ Baxter, John Baxter, Richard and Chris Baxter (John Baxter's sons)

Medicine or Science.

"Father never wanted to talk about the war, and the horrendous fact that when the Spitfire pilots set off into battle only half of them usually came back," recalls Roger, who trained at the University of Technology Sydney and became a mechanical engineer.

"In training, in the bitterly cold winter in Quebec in 1943, about 10 to 15 per cent of pilots also died in accidents. It wasn't until he was in his 80s, that we'd press him and get a bit of the jigsaw, and then another time, another piece."

## Spitfire escapades

As a young man from Geelong, just 20 years old, Russ Baxter enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force in October 1942.

In a detailed interview given to the Spitfire Association shortly before his death, Russ recounted how he didn't see action until June 1944 – right after the D-Day invasion – when he began flying regularly, often at low altitude, over France and the Low Countries, doing sweeps and bomber escorts.

Only three months later, having just escorted a group of American B26 bombers to destroy the bridge at Arnhem, Russ faced an emergency on the way back to base. "I noted that my oil pressure had dropped to zero, so I called 'Mayday' and was directed to Brussels for an emergency landing, but my engine blew up on the way," he said.

Although he extinguished

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the flames, Russ lifted a wing to avoid a pylon as he landed in a field. "When I descended I tried to flare out for touchdown, the aircraft mushed and struck the ground tail-first, breaking the fuselage in half just behind the cockpit," he said.

Russ suffered a crushed spinal disc and was put in body plaster once he reached a field hospital. He wasn't fit to fly again until March 1945, just weeks before the end of the war. However, he was involved in

the occupation after the war and recalled flying low over the Brandenburg Gate in formation; the Spitfire pilots were told to make a loud roar – to let the Germans know who was now in charge.

After the war, Russ received a 1939-45 Star, France & Germany Star, Defence Medal and an Australian Service Medal.

## A career with planes

Russ had enlisted part-way through his aeronautical engineering degree at the University of Melbourne. He finished his degree at the University of Sydney in 1948.

Russ' postwar career kicked off at Trans Australia Airways (TAA), where he flew a DC3 as first officer on early morning flights between Essendon and Devonport, King Island and Flinders Island, bringing back loads of fresh apples.

He later joined the Aeronautical Research Laboratory (ARL) in Fishermans Bend in Melbourne, which became a division of the Commonwealth Defence Science and Technology Organisation.

Among many projects, he helped develop early visual

landing aids for aircraft, systems still in wide use around the world today.

In the early 1960s, Russ worked on assignment at de Havilland UK, and also at British Aerospace/Aerospatiale on their joint development of the Concorde supersonic jetliner at Bristol and Toulouse.

"I remember sitting up on the roof of the UNSW engineering building and watching the Concorde come in to land during test flights at Mascot," John recalls, proud that his dad had played a part in the development.

In 1965, Russ joined Qantas engineering in Sydney and also spent time in Western Australia, fire-spotting over the eucalypt forests in a Cessna 337.

From 1972, he was Qantas' engineering specialist representative at Boeing's Everett manufacturing plant, based in Seattle, USA. He became a private aeronautical engineering consultant in 1976, until his retirement in 1985. His sons describe him as "a typical engineer; ever methodical and precise".

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## ROBERT SHEARER: Scholarship recipient

Since 2013, PhD student Robert Shearer has received the Baxter Family Postgraduate Scholarship. Working at the Garvan Institute in Darlinghurst, he is researching how cells regulate their protein and how errors in this system might contribute to cancer growth.

"The real significance of the scholarship is that I can focus all my time on research and don't have to worry about a part-time job to pay my rent," 29-year-old Shearer says. "I am really grateful to the Baxter family, as the scholarship has given me independence and made so much difference to my life."