GURTEEN, John Vinter

Pilot Officer, 81918
504 Sqn, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve
Place of Birth: Haverhill
Date of Death: Sunday 15th September 1940
Shot down over Kent
Memorial: Battle of Britain
Aged 24 years





John Vinter Gurteen was born in Haverhill on 10th February, 1916, the son of Conrad Sharp Gurteen and his wife Frances Annie nee Vinter of The Woodlands, Coupals Road. He had two younger brothers, Arthur Vinter and Stephen.

Every person living in Haverhill will be familiar with the name Gurteen. The family has very long associations with the town and since the 1800s has been a great benefactor.

John's maternal grandmother was a member of the Shipstone family who established the well-known brewery in Nottingham.

When John was of school age, he joined Summer Fields Preparatory School in Oxford.

He then won a Junior Scholarship to join Marlborough College, Wiltshire, where he was educated from September 1929 until July 1933.
During his time at Marlborough he played rugby, hockey and cricket for his junior house teams. He was a keen member of the Officers' Training Corps at the College leaving with the rank of Corporal in the B1 House Platoon.

In 1933, John was successful in gaining a scholarship to study at The Choate School, Wallingford, Connecticut, USA, being sponsored by the English Speaking Union.

He travelled to the USA on the White Star Line liner Majestic leaving Southampton on the 7th September, 1933 bound for New York. He returned to Southampton on the Cunard liner Aquitania the following year on the 15th June, 1934, aged 18.

John, 2nd left, on the liner.



The Choate School is considered one of the most prestigious educational establishments in the USA with many renowned past students. One of the most notable is J. F. Kennedy, past president of the USA, who is an alumnus of The Choate School and was probably in the same year group as John.

A report from The Choate School reads: "John is playing hockey enthusiastically, singing with the Glee Club, writing for the Literary Magazine and has won his election to the Editorial Board of the News (a most unprecedented accomplishment for a 'new boy') but more than that he shows in the hourly contacts of informal school life a friendliness, a bonhomie, a spirit of earnestness and co-operation and a sincerity of purpose that makes the school better for his being here."

By 1934, John was living in Nottingham where he was employed in the firm of J Shipstone. During his time in Nottingham he played rugby for the "A" fifteen of the Notts Rugby Football Club.



John joined the RAFVR in March 1939 as an Airman under training Pilot. Called up on 1st September, he completed his training at 5 FTS, Sealand earning his commission as a Pilot Officer in 1940. After converting to Hurricanes he joined 504 Squadron at Castletown, Scotland in late June 1940.

A letter sent to his parents that August reads: "As you know I am flying Hawker Hurricanes – max speed 335mph. Lovely aeroplanes to fly and in spite of their great speed, extremely docile."



A letter sent to John's father from an RAF friend describes the young pilot as "keen as mustard and easily the best of the bunch".

In early September 1940 the squadron moved south to Hendon to join the Battle of Britain in the skies over London. Just days later, on what is now known as Battle of Britain Day, 15th September, 1940 at 13.00 hrs, John was shot down in

combat over the south London. His aircraft, Hurricane N482, dived at full throttle on to Whiffens Cottage in Hartley, Kent destroying the house. John bailed out but did not survive. There was concern that the owner of the cottage, Mr Kershaw, might have been in the building but fortunately he was found in a bomb shelter in his neighbour's cottage Goodwins Cottage (shown in the photo).

A letter sent to John's parents by his Commanding Officer after his death reads "We intercepted some enemy bombers, escorted by fighters, right over the middle of London. After the attack, we all became separated, as often happens. It must have been after this, on his way home that John got shot down, either while attacking something or else caught out by some enemy fighters while on his own. Nobody saw anything."

John was just 24 years of age when he died. He was cremated at Hendon Crematorium and his ashes were scattered over his house by his friend and colleague, Flight Lieutenant William Barrington Royce, Commanding Officer of 504 Squadron.

John was the subject of a newspaper article published in Nottingham on 3 October 1940 that reads:

'Notts Player Killed. In Pilot-Officer John Vinter Gurteen, the Notts. R.F.C. (Rugby Football Club) has lost another member killed in action, and one who had enjoyed great popularity in sporting circles. He was held in high esteem in the firm of J. Shipstone and sons Ltd., and was a great nephew of Sir Thomas Shipstone. Pilot-Officer Gurteen, the eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. C. S. Gurteen, of Woodlands, Haverhill, was originally a member of the volunteer reserve of the R.A.F. at Tollerton. He was 24, and played in the "A" fifteen of the Notts club for several seasons.'

REGISTRATION DISTRICT DARTFORD

1940 DEATH in the Sub-district of Dartford and Farningham in the County of Kent

Columns:–	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
No.	When and where died	Name and surname	Sex	Age	Occupation	Cause of death	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar
242	Fifteenth September 1940. In a field Hartley R.D.	John Vinter Gurteen	male	24 years	of Woodlands Haverhill Suffolk Pilot Officer R.A.F.	Due to War Operations	Certificate received from J. Bethell Officer Commanding	Twenty first September 1940	Violet V. Smith. Deputy Interim Registrar

John is remembered with honour on the Battle of Britain Memorial at Capel le Ferne, near Folkestone in Kent, on the Battle of Britain Memorial on the Thames Embankment, on a memorial at Hendon Cemetery and on the memorial plaque in the Old Independent Church, Haverhill. His name is also commemorated at Marlborough College and the Choate School, Connecticut.





The Battle of Britain Memorial Trust, founded by Geoffrey Page, raised funds for the construction of the Battle of Britain Memorial.

The Memorial, unveiled by Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother on 9th July, 1993, shares the site with the Christopher Foxley-Norris Memorial Wall which can be seen in the background and on which a complete list of "The Few", including GURTEEN J.V., is engraved.

The Battle of Britain Monument in London is a sculpture on the Victoria Embankment, overlooking the River Thames, which commemorates all those who took part in the Battle of Britain.



Finally, in 2016, as the result of efforts by the Haverhill Branch of the Royal British Legion, John Vinter Gurteen's name was added to the WW2 Memorial Plaque near to the War Memorial Cross in Haverhill Cemetery.

John was a cousin of Captain Bill Gurteen who spent three and a half years as a Far East Prisoner of War. Bill survived.



Flight Lt William Barrington Royce of 504 Squadron became the first AAF pilot to be awarded the DFC. (Distinguished Flying Cross Medal)

BATTLE OF BRITAIN DAY, 15TH SEPTEMBER 1940

The first wave of about 250 bombers came over the Channel at 11am. Spitfire and Hurricane squadrons were sent to meet them and many German planes were reported to have turned away without dropping any bombs. However around half managed to make it to London and drop their loads.

Buckingham Palace was hit during this initial raid. Two heavy bombs fell, one on the Palace buildings and one on the lawns. Neither exploded but one caused damage to the Queen's private apartments. Sergeant Ray Holmes of 504 Squadron was forced to ram a Dornier bomber intent on attacking Buckingham Palace when his guns jammed during the attack. This event was immortalized in the film Battle of Britain.

A second wave of about the same number returned at 2pm believed to be aiming for South London and the railways out to Kent.

Fighter patrols were again ready to meet the enemy and only 70 or so enemy planes reached central London where there were a series of dogfights.

The attacks continued with smaller raids on Portland and Southampton. Again, the enemy aircraft were successfully driven off by the RAF.

As darkness fell, the raids continued on London inflicting major damage on targets in the south of the city.

Railway bridges were hit between Victoria and Clapham Junction, the railway was also hit at East Croydon, gas and water mains were disrupted and St Thomas's, Guys and Lambeth hospitals were all hit although there were no reported casualties.

Prime Minister, Winston Churchill was at RAF Uxbridge, the headquarters of No. 11 Group, Fighter Command and later described what he saw: “… the red bulbs showed that the majority of our squadrons were engaged. In a little while, all our squadrons were fighting and some had already begun to return for fuel. All were in the air. The lower line of bulbs was out. There was not one squadron left in reserve”.

The RAF claimed to have shot down 185 German planes; later numbers were revised to 61, but these were the highest losses the Luftwaffe had suffered for over a month. The RAF lost 31 planes, including John Vinter Gurteen’s Hurricane.

Although fighting continued in the air for several more weeks, and British cities were bombed sporadically for the rest of the war, German tactics to achieve air superiority ahead of an invasion failed.

Sunday 15 September marked a clear and decisive defeat for the Luftwaffe. They abandoned the daylight bombing of London on 30 September, although night-time bombing continued into May 1941.