

Air Vice-Marshal John Stacey

Air Vice-Marshal John Stacey, who died on Christmas Day aged 83, led a brilliantly executed raid to lay mines in the entrance to Singapore harbour in March 1945; it was the first raid there for three years, and involved a round trip from Ceylon of 3,460 miles, one of the RAF's longest bombing raids in the Second World War.

After five months as the flight commander of No 160 Squadron, Stacey took command in November 1944 when he was ordered to convert it to a mine-laying role. Flying the long-range four-engine Liberator bomber from a hastily prepared airfield hacked out of the jungle in Ceylon, the squadron perfected techniques for dropping mines from 200 ft at night on targets up to 1,200 miles away in Malaya, Thailand and Sumatra.

Led by Stacey, No 160 flew its first mine-laying operation in January 1945, when three aircraft flew to Penang harbour, an area swarming with Japanese fighters. After dropping his mines, Stacey climbed to reveal his aircraft on the enemy radar, flying on a north-west course to give the impression that he was making for India. After a short time, he descended to sea level and turned for Ceylon. All the Liberators returned safely.

On March 26 1945 Stacey led a force of eight Liberators to attack Singapore harbour. To increase the range of the aircraft, extra fuel tanks were fitted; in order to reduce weight, two of the gun turrets, the oxygen equipment and the armour plating were removed - together with the Elsan chemical lavatories.

Flying at sea level on the outbound leg, the aircraft flew down the Malacca Straits before climbing to 500 ft to drop their mines. To save fuel on the return journey, they were forced to fly a direct route, which involved climbing over the mountains of Sumatra and through severe electrical storms. After a flight of more than 21 hours, the eight bombers touched down at Minneriya in Ceylon. For his outstanding leadership and "high degree of courage and resolution", Stacey was awarded an immediate DSO.

John Nichol Stacey was born on September 14 1920 in Cardiff, but spent most of his childhood in Croydon, where he attended Whitgift Middle School. Always keen on aircraft, he spent many hours at Croydon airport; but after leaving school he chose to join the Merchant Navy as an apprentice.

He spent time at sea, but missed playing cricket and rugby. On shore-leave he met a friend who could not hide his delight at having just been accepted by the RAF. Stacey promptly went to the recruiting office and volunteered, and was accepted for a short-service commission.

Having joined up in July 1938, Stacey specialised in flying boats during his pilot training. Shortly after the outbreak of war he was attached to No 240 Squadron, equipped with the bi-plane Saro London flying boat and based on the Shetlands. He flew on anti-submarine and convoy patrols in northern waters before moving to Stranraer, where he became an instructor.

In September 1941 Stacey joined No 202 Squadron at Gibraltar, flying Catalinas on patrols in the Mediterranean and the eastern Atlantic. Despite being only 21, he was already a veteran of many patrols when he was appointed a flight commander of No 205 Squadron in July 1942.

The squadron was reforming at Koggala, in Ceylon, and it soon began anti-shipping and anti-invasion patrols, interspersed with air sea rescue missions. On August 26 Stacey took off to search for survivors of a ship sunk by an enemy submarine. He located three lifeboats with 60 survivors and dropped supplies to them. He then circled overhead for 10 hours until relieved by another aircraft.

In December 1942, three Catalinas were sent to carry out a reconnaissance and bombing operation against airfields and harbours in northern Sumatra. Stacey flew one of the aircraft, reaching the targets at Sabang at midnight on December 20. After carrying out a reconnaissance of the airfield, Stacey climbed to start his bombing attack against harbour installations.

Despite intense anti-aircraft fire, he successfully dropped his four 250 lb bombs before returning to Ceylon. He was awarded a DFC for being "a fearless captain whose determination to achieve success set a most inspiring example".

During 1943 Stacey flew many patrols over the Indian Ocean, often operating from Madagascar and Mauritius, before taking command of the flying-boat training unit at Mombasa. In February 1944 he was seconded to the Royal Navy for special duties, in particular the hunt for the German submarine mother ship Charlotte Schliemann.

Ten Catalinas were gathered at Mauritius for the task, but warnings of a severe cyclone prompted the local Air Officer Commanding to order Stacey to evacuate the flying boats. Stacey, mindful of his extensive experience of operating in severe weather in the Shetlands, refused to obey - and was threatened with a court martial if any aircraft were damaged.

Stacey alerted his Commander-in-Chief to his actions, and was relieved when the chief signalled the AOC: "I appointed Stacey for this task and have complete confidence in his judgment." The cyclone passed without incident, and in an outstanding joint operation, the submarine mother ship was later sunk.

After his long and arduous tour as the commanding officer of No 160 Squadron, Stacey was rested from operations and sent to HQ 222 Group in Ceylon to co-ordinate the special operations flown in support of the clandestine organisations in south-east Asia.

At the end of the war, he was granted a permanent commission. As well as being awarded the DSO and DFC, he was three times mentioned in dispatches.

After a tour as assistant air attaché in Washington, where he met his future wife, Stacey attended the RAF Staff College and the RAF Flying College. He then converted to jet aircraft before taking up the appointment of Wing Commander Flying at Binbrook, where the first Canberra medium bomber squadrons had recently formed.

In April 1960, Stacey was seconded to the embryonic Royal Malayan Air Force as the Chief of Staff. Pilots and ground crews were recruited from all races, and included some former RAF personnel. Stacey was a genial, ever popular man, and his sensitivity was greatly appreciated; on his departure two years later he was invested with one of Malaya's highest orders, the Johan Mangku Negara (JMN).

Stacey returned to the RAF in 1963 to take command of the large Canberra base at Laarbruch, on the Dutch-German border, before becoming Group Captain Plans at the RAF Staff College, Bracknell, where he reformed and updated the syllabus.

On promotion to Air Commodore, he was appointed AOC Air Cadets, a post for which he was ideally suited, and one that gave him great pleasure. At the end of this tour he was appointed CBE.

His final appointment was as the Air Officer Administration, Support Command. He retired to Kent in 1975.

Stacey was chairman, and later president, of the High Weald Housing Association; director of the Stonham Housing Association; a member of the Tunbridge Wells Health Authority; and president of the Goudhurst branch of the Royal British Legion. He served three terms as a governor of Bedgebury School, until he was made a vice-president for life in 1999.

He was a keen golfer and sailor.

John Stacey married, in 1950, Veronica Sutherland Rudd-Clarke, who survives him with their two daughters.