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Hangar 42 and the Piper Grasshopper

by Andrew Harris

The Piper Grasshopper is a tiny plane with a big history. Designed as a simple lightweight civil aircraft called the Piper Cub it went on to fulfil vital roles in the Second World War. The Cub was easily adapted to a military role: the colour was changed from 'cub' yellow to drab olive and new rear windows improved visibility. 3,016 civil Cubs had been built by 1940. By 1947 a total of 20,038 of the type had been produced in the USA and Canada. The great majority were

military Grasshoppers although many still called them Cubs. The plane had a split personality!

The Grasshopper was distinguished by its simplicity. It had a fixed undercarriage, a wingspan of just 35 feet, a 65 horsepower air-cooled engine, a stalling speed of just 38 mph, typically carried a pilot and one passenger travelling at 75 mph or flat out at 85 if only the pilot was aboard! Most modern cars could outpace it if it wasn't for speed limits! Although

The Piper Grasshopper of Hangar 42 (left) with their Mk 9 Spitfire known as Lucy. Picture courtesy of Mike Fenton.



TOP: The civilian Piper Cub in 'Cub Yellow'. MIDDLE: The military Piper Grasshopper was much used after the invasion of France in June 1944. This example displays the D-Day stripes used by all allied aircraft. ABOVE: The Grasshopper was also flown by the British. Seen here in RAF livery.

widely used for civil purposes, its finest hours were during the Second World War when – amazingly – it performed five crucial roles:

- Contrary to many accounts, the United States anticipated its involvement in the war by creating the Civilian Pilot Training Program to ensure a good supply of new pilots before the start of hostilities. The Piper Cub became the main trainer aircraft and it was very successful. More than 326,000 newly trained pilots – about 75% of the total - had their initial training on Piper Cubs. By the end of the war no fewer than 80% of all US military pilots had started their training flying the Piper Cub.

- The main operational role of the Grasshopper aircraft was reconnaissance and spotting for the artillery when its slow speed made it ideal. After D-Day when the allies had achieved aerial superiority it was used to find German tanks and guns hidden by the hedgerows of the bocage countryside waiting to ambush the advancing allied armies. In this role an observer/radio operator was carried although with his radio the maximum theoretical payload of the aircraft was exceeded.

- The ability of the Grasshopper or Cub to take off and land on very short or improvised airstrips made it ideal for the transport role on battlefields. Wartime newsreels evidenced how famous generals like the overall commander Dwight



Hangar 42 displays 2 Spitfires and a Hurricane. The Grasshopper is beyond.

Eisenhower, George Marshall, the dynamic George Patton and other top brass were transported around the battlefields and to crucial conferences using this robust aircraft. Without this mobility the outcome of the war could have been different.

- The most dynamic role of the aircraft was when some were equipped with two, four or more improvised racks to accommodate bazookas which could be fired at enemy tanks and armoured units. US Major Charles Carpenter became famous after he used a total of six bazooka rocket launchers to destroy six enemy tanks and several armoured cars during his wartime service.

- Last but not least was the battlefield role of the Grasshopper aircraft in evacuating wounded soldiers. As demonstrated by ever more sophisticated way of evacuating casualties in more recent conflicts, the prompt and rapid evacuation of wounded soldiers hugely increases their chances of survival and recovery. These simple aircraft made this possible in the Second World War when many soldiers owed their lives or recovery from injuries to the Piper Grasshoppers and the pilots who flew them.

The Lytham St Annes Spitfire Ground Display Team is based in Hangar 42 at Blackpool Airport where it displays two replica Spitfires, a replica Hurricane, a Spitfire simulator and a fascinating range of historic RAF vehicles, equipment and memorabilia. *It now has an airworthy Piper Grasshopper!* The Team hold open days from 10:00-16:00 hrs – with last entry at 15:30 - on the first Sunday of every month through to November. For more details google Hangar 42 or call 01253 341902. There is no need to book and the cost is just £3.50 per person with concessions for children and service veterans. A visit is recommended.



Andrew Harris gratefully acknowledges the help provided by Mike Fenton of Hangar 42 in the preparation of this article. Our article describing Hangar 42 can be seen by visiting

www.andrewharris.co.uk and going to March 2018 under 'Published Articles'.