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March 2018

Lancashire

& North West magazine



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The Spitfires of Hangar 42

by Andrew Harris

The Supermarine Spitfire is arguably the most lasting and iconic symbol of Britain's wartime peril and victory. Spitfires - with the more numerous Hurricanes - enabled the Royal Air Force to survive the Battle of Britain and deny the Luftwaffe the air superiority needed to invade Britain.

If the RAF didn't have Spitfires in 1940 it is hard to see how it could have prevailed. Invasion would have followed when Britain's naval losses would have been horrific without air cover and the battered remnants of the British Army would have struggled against the much larger Wehrmacht rampant after subjugating eight European countries including France. Unless little Ireland had an unlikely change of heart the United States would have lacked a foothold in Europe and the Normandy Landings - when the majority of the land, sea and air forces on the day were British - could never have happened. Churchill's Government might have inspired fighting on the beaches and in the hills and never surrendered but that wouldn't necessarily have stopped the Wehrmacht from prevailing.

With Britain conquered the lack of any second front in the air would have released huge additional German forces to be pitched against the Soviet Union which might well have collapsed. If the Soviets prevailed despite this, then communism would have simply replaced fascism throughout Europe. Frightening thoughts.

In the event 19 squadrons of Spitfires and 32 of Hurricanes destroyed half the strength with which the Luftwaffe started thanks to the different qualities of the British planes, radar, the unrecognised genius of Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding - Head of Fighter Command - and the skill and bravery of 2,927 pilots - The Few - of whom 544 gave their lives.

The Spitfire first flew on the 5th March 1936 and remained in production for 12 years which saw the hardest-fought and technically most innovative war in history. No other airframe design was ever so continuously, aggressively, thoroughly and successfully developed. No less successful was the parallel development of the two Rolls Royce engines - the

Merlin and the later Griffon. At the end of its development life the Spitfire carried an engine giving more than twice the power and weighing about three-quarters more than the original and the plane's take-off weight had more than doubled. Firepower increased by a factor of five, maximum speed by a quarter and the rate of climb almost doubled.

Including the Seafire naval version, 22,789 Spitfires were built. There were 24 marks or versions although most were experimental. Following the Mark I which fought the Battle of Britain with eight machine guns the Mark II had a more powerful Merlin engine which developed 1,175 horsepower. By March 1941 the Mark V was supplied to squadrons and was armed with two 20mm cannon as well as four machine guns and 6,479 were built. Many thought the Mark IX the best version with cannon and bigger machine guns and 5,665 were built. The Mark XIV used the more powerful Griffon engine which developed up to a massive 2,340 horsepower and the Mark XIX was stripped of guns for speed to become ideal for photo-reconnaissance.





LEFT: A Flight of Fantasy. The Fairhaven Lake Memorial Spitfire is brought to life courtesy of Duncan Harris using his telescopic camera pole and Bridge Graphics using software to delete the other pole!

ABOVE: This picture illustrates the graceful lines and beauty of the Spitfire. The aircraft was flown by 312 Squadron of the RAF with pilots from Czechoslovakia hence the flag roundel.

RIGHT: The Merlin engine coming to life can be dramatic. Picture courtesy of the MoD.



Production of the Spitfire continued for nine years to 1945 and it remained in RAF service until 1954 – and much longer with many other air forces.

Even the early Spitfires were 60 miles an hour faster than the Hurricane - which often targeted bombers - and could turn more quickly than the opposing German types and at least match their speed. With all this it was – and is - a beautiful aircraft. About 54 remain airworthy and huge numbers of people visit air shows to hear the throaty tone of the Merlin or Griffon engine. The elliptical wing is distinctive and with the uniquely graceful lines of the plane achieves an elegance which is appealing but strange in a fighter designed for killing.

No account of the Spitfire would be complete without a tribute to the brilliant designer Reginald Mitchell who anticipated the coming threat from the Nazis and persisted with his work despite illness which killed him before he could see his fighting machine in action. He is often called the first of the few.

John Coombes is a Fylde Coast businessman and former leader of Fylde Borough Council with a background in military aviation. In 2009 the wartime funding of a Spitfire by local people inspired him to launch the Lytham St Annes Spitfire Ground Display Team. It quickly achieved funds to purchase a replica Mark IX Spitfire - nicknamed Lucy – which in turn helped to raise funds for a memorial to the Lytham St Annes Spitfire. The Team have re-engineered and improved Lucy which has been displayed at many events and in Hangar 42 at Blackpool Airport where the Team are based. Lucy has also had TV appearances in 'Foyles War', 'Land Girls' and 'Home Fires'.

By 2012 the Fylde Spitfire Memorial Fund was able to commission a replica Mark V Spitfire in the livery and markings of 19 Squadron which flew Mark V Spitfires from October 1941 to August 1943 when they were replaced by Mark IXs. This aircraft is QV-J which was the World War 2 Lytham St Annes Spitfire. This was installed at Lytham's Fairhaven Lake as the Fylde Coast Fighter, Bomber & Coastal Command Memorial. It is maintained by the Lytham St Annes Spitfire Ground Display Team.

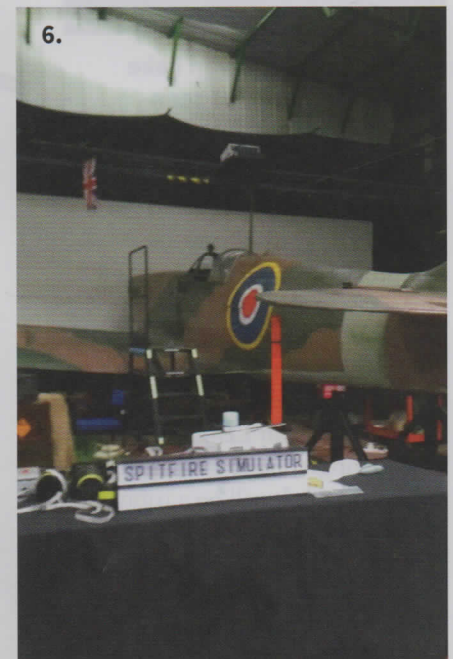
Since 2012 Spitfires Lucy and Lytham St Annes have been followed by Holly, Vicky and Diane-





HOLLY – A Mark IX Spitfire made by TDL Replica in 1982. Previously displayed at the East Midlands Aeropark it has been at Hangar 42 since 2014 and will depict aircraft FY-H of 611 Squadron which flew 6 marks of the Spitfire from May 1939 to December 1944 and again after the war. It has featured in the TV drama ‘The Halcyon’ as well as ‘Home Fires’.

VICKY – A replica Spitfire Mark II built in 2009 by Gateguards (UK) Ltd. This plane has been at Hangar 42 since 2015 and is in the livery of the 611 Squadron aircraft FY-N which was piloted by Sergeant Wilfred Duncan-Smith. Vicky has appeared in several TV dramas – most recently the BBC Special ‘Grandpa’s Great Escape’



1. The Spitfire and Hurricane: Britain’s fighters in the Battle of Britain. 2. The men behind the Display Team & Hangar 42: Chairman John Coombes in character with leading volunteer Mike Fenton at the wheel. 3. The entry gate for Hangar 42 is at the perimeter of Blackpool Airport. 4. The Mark IX Spitfire in Hangar 42. Also known as Lucy. 5. The Dispersal Hut in Hangar 42. With taped anti-blast windows as in 1940. 6. The Spitfire cockpit simulator and screen. Anybody can fly but landing is the test! 7. Nine of the 30 volunteers who make Hangar 42 work. L to R Steve Spencer, Eugene Hadley, Damian Heaton, David Edwards, Krishanne Frazier, Gillian Potter, Paul Smith, Keith Maddock and Paul Lomax.



ABOVE: The Fairhaven Lake Memorial Spitfire as seen from the ground.

screened on New Year's Day this year.

DIANE – This Hurricane Mark II was previously a pole-mounted 'Gate Guardian' at RAF Coltishall – a fighter base in World War 2 – from 1989 to 2006 then at RAF High Wycombe until 2014. It was in the livery of the 242 Squadron aircraft LE-D. This aircraft is being upgraded to be an exhibit in Hangar 42. It will be a tribute to Hurricanes which were less capable than Spitfires but provided two-thirds of the strength of Fighter Command in 1940. 14,583 Hurricanes were built but they were later relegated to the – in some ways – less challenging theatres of war in North Africa and the Far East.

Apart from the five aircraft – including the Fairhaven Lake memorial – Hangar 42 offers much for those interested in military aviation history. There are airfield vehicles, replicated briefing rooms, a dispersal hut, crash relics, archives of events and helpful volunteers whose enthusiasm you couldn't buy. A Spitfire simulator has now been installed providing one hour flying sessions preceded by 15 minutes for briefing and donning flying kit all for £60. Would-be or recycled pilots can sit in a Spitfire with the sky and ground displayed on a large screen to the front. A special treat for some and quite an experience for anyone.

Hangar 42 re-opens for the 2018 season on Sunday 4th March and the first Sunday every month thereafter



until October. Entry is £3.50 per adult and £2.50 for children aged 7-14 but there is no charge for children under 7. Groups visits can be arranged for schools, colleges and others. As Hangar 42 is 'air-side' at Blackpool Airport, access is obscure but all is made clear by our location plan. The Hangar 42 postcode is FY4 2QY. For bookings and enquiries call 01253 341902 – the number you call for the team to open the gate when you arrive so bring a mobile phone. For more information google 'Hangar 42' or find them on Facebook as a new dedicated website is pending.

The Display Team at Hangar 42 also hire out their Spitfires for events. For details visit www.spitfiredisplayteam.co.uk although it is rather out-of-date. The team display at the annual event on Lytham Green which is quite a spectacle.

The exhibits at Hangar 42 are fascinating but the facilities are not. A visit is recommended but it is a project-in-progress. Your columnist hopes it will thrive and the team will launch a 'Friends of Hangar 42' as a means of attracting wider support which is

much-needed. Despite their current limitations the Spitfires of Hangar 42 are a fantastic attraction with a great future. The only way is up!



Andrew Harris – www.andrewharris.co.uk – gratefully acknowledges the generous help provided by Mike Fenton of Hangar 42 in the preparation of this article. He is also grateful for Spitfire information procured by Vic Burrows of Wigan plus help from his son Duncan Harris and IT expert David Bridge to prove (in the first picture) that a camera can lie! Both the pictures of Spitfires really flying are by kind permission of the Ministry of Defence.