

Deus ex machina



Boulton's unique Flight Academy brings the dream of flying a Spitfire into the realm of reality. Pat Malone reports. Pictures mostly by Andrew Annable

It's only metal, that's all. A bit of aluminium, some steel tubes – it's just a machine. What's so special about it that it moves grown men to tears? What magic takes the breath away when you hear it coming, what mesmerises you at the sight of it? Why on earth would sensible pilots lay down thousand of pounds to get their hands on it for a few minutes, and in such numbers that there's a queue into the middle of next year?

Because pilots appreciate beauty, that's why. Because we understand the alchemy that makes this machine fly in the air. Because we have a sense of history, and because we think we have a tiny inkling of what it was like for young men, little more than children really, to climb into one of these machines and go and fight and die in the sky. Because as pilots we are all touched by the spirit, and we really can see 'god in the machine'.

And also because it's bloody good fun. Those who have put their money down will tell you the Spitfire handles beautifully, although they don't explain it very well. "Wow... brilliant, fantastic... lost for words," said the otherwise lucid and articulate Barry Bailey as he stepped from the cockpit, eyes spinning in opposite directions. "Magic, incredible, words fail me," said Lee Dixon, grinning, as he took

off his leather helmet. "Complete sensory deprivation, sorry," said first-timer Colin Stagg. "I just give thanks to providence that there's somewhere in the world you can do this."

Steve Brooks's Boulton Flight Academy at Goodwood is one of those mad ideas that people have, but which usually wither on the vine for want of the energy, the money, the bloody-minded persistence that turns them into reality. But Brooks has a track record of mad ideas and bloody-minded persistence, having crossed the Bering Strait in an ice vehicle powered by an Archimedes screw, flown his R44 helicopter from the North Pole to the South Pole and done lots of other neat stuff, including turning £7,000 into more than £1 billion in the commercial property business in 20 years. Buying a Mk IX Spitfire at auction was one of his more mainstream ideas, even at £1.7 million.

G-ILDA was never intended to be his personal plaything; he said at the time that he wanted as many people as possible to fly it, to instruct on it, to work on it – he wanted to create a new generation of Spitfire people to perpetuate the machine and the memory of those who flew it in extremis, lest we forget. The last survivors of that time are leaving the stage, and when they're no longer around to remind

us, steps will have to be taken to jog our memories. Brooks and his willing helpers got hold of a Tiger Moth and some Harvards to give people a taste of the training those boys had in wartime and dangled the Spitfire in front of the pilot population. Even at £5,500 a pop, they were trampled in the rush. Plus VAT.

You might find this hard to believe, but the CAA was all for it. While keeping at the forefront of their minds the fact that if anything at all goes wrong, heads will roll – theirs – they've been unfailingly supportive, imposing no unreasonable restrictions and throwing up no game-stopping obstacles. Really. The fact that the Spitfire is on a Permit means that special arrangements have had to be made to allow it to be used for remunerated flight instruction, and it can only be used for continuation training or type rating instruction. That means you have to have a PPL to fly it. For their part, those who run the Spitfire School know they have to prove they can do the business professionally, safely and to the highest standards – and when you look at their pedigree, that's a given.

Where do you find Spitfire instructors? Well, if you buy a Spitfire, brilliant pilots will materialise like the baseball legends walking out of the corn in that daft film.



Right: instructor Derek Spicer and student Barry Bailey with the Chipmunk
Below: contact... many wartime Spitfire pilots started their training on the Tiger Moth
Below right: airline training captain Colin Stagg ready for some tailwheel action in the Tiger Moth

common with them is that you'd rather fly than eat.

Today the operation is being overseen by Brian Jones, Boulton's Director of Ground Operations and incidentally Hawker-Beechcraft's UK agent, who is ready with a run-down of the history and philosophy of the Flight Academy. "We're not in the business of dumping you in the aircraft and giving you thirty minutes of screaming time," he says. "We aim to teach the students to understand and fly complex taildraggers, and if appropriate to take them to solo standard in the Spitfire. When we open a student's notes, we never close them without the student's consent. That means we treat you as though you are to go on to become a qualified Spitfire pilot, because that is what this Academy is all

finally half an hour in the Spitfire. The little planes condition the pilot to the tailwheel, and the flying time is spent mostly in the circuit. "Overall experience levels are not as important as you think, although tailwheel time is an advantage," Brian Jones says. "Much of the course is standardised, but it has to be tailored to the individual, which is not difficult as the instruction is very much one-to-one."

On this particular day the experience levels of the four students ranged from Lee Dixon's 200 hours total time on piston singles at Earls Colne to airline pilot Colin Stagg's 19,500 hours. Few people would be better placed to judge the quality of the instruction than Stagg, a Cathay Pacific training captain on the Airbus 330 and 340 and a former RAF C130 pilot. He



Men whose aviation accomplishments would make your head spin meet at the coffee machine at the Boulton Flight Academy – test pilots, airline training captains, ETPS graduates, all anonymous in olive-drab flight suits and displaying the self-effacing modesty that only those with most to brag about can carry off. And they treat you one-to-one as if you really matter, when in fact the only thing you have in

about. For many reasons it's not for everyone, and some of our students will never want more than half an hour's stick time on the Spitfire, but we give everyone a proper foundation on which to build should they elect to go on."

The course covers two days and encompasses six hours of ground school and flying time on either the Tiger Moth or the Chipmunk, then the Harvard, and

describes the ground school as very, very good. "I've been around aviation for 40 years and I'd say it was superbly handled by super-professionals – the kind of briefings that give you a warm feeling of confidence," he says. They have a very well put together programme, the information content is excellent given the time constraints, and it enables you to understand precisely what will happen and how. The individual briefings before each flight were first class, and when you realise you're being spoken to by a Typhoon test pilot or some other fantastically able professional, it puts your own experience into perspective."

For Colin, flying the Spitfire was the fulfilment of a lifelong ambition. "I was

born and raised in New Zealand,” he says, “and with a lot of New Zealand’s aviation heroes, the Spitfire is part of the story – I was weaned on Al Deere’s *Nine Lives*.” He was aware of being short on taildragger experience and did five hours on a Citabria at Dunkeswell before going to Goodwood. “I would have liked to do more, but it helped me get the best out of the course,” he says. “I had 30 hours on Chipmunks but that was in 1973... I’d say that anyone who’s not current on taildraggers would benefit from a refresher before they go to Boultonbee.”

He opted for the Tiger Moth starter. “I wanted to feel the wind in what’s left of my hair,” he says. “There’s something special about aerobatics in an open-cockpit biplane, and I may go back to Boultonbee to do more flying on the Moth and the Chipmunk. The Harvard was a new experience for me, but it was great to find that my Harvard instructor was Chris



Hadlow, who was a student of mine on the Bulldog at Wales University Air Squadron many years ago. Then of course there was the main event, the Spitfire, and that was something else entirely.”

Colin flew with Dave Ratcliffe and was invited to follow through on the controls for take-off, then to take over when power was reduced at 1,000 feet. “The noise inside the Spitfire is mind-blowing,” he says. “I was warned to expect it, but even so there’s complete sensory deprivation when the Griffon opens up. I took control until the final run-and-break and I tried a couple of loops and rolls... the controls are beautifully harmonised, although it’s not as quick in roll as I expected. In pitch it’s just beautiful, and when you run that long nose around the horizon you keep expecting to have to lower it or add power, but even when you roll to 90 degrees it stays exactly



Top: BBMF engineer Mark Crosby manoeuvres the Harvard with Boultonbee’s historic tractor
Upper left: Boultonbee’s Ground Ops Director Brian Jones helps student Justin Wooley strap into the Harvard
Left: the Harvard’s Pratt & Whitney radial makes 600 hp and a lot of noise and smoke

where it’s put. It feels like a very short half hour, but it’s one you’ll spend a long time reliving.”

At the other end of the experience spectrum, Lee Dixon’s appraisal was more emotional. “It’s nerve-racking, waiting your turn,” he says. “You’re desperately concentrating on what you’re being told and praying, please god, don’t let me screw up...”

“I would pay good money just to hang out there with those guys and listen to their stories. I was talking to a chap called Willy, just a normal guy, then I found out this is Willy Hackett, he’s got an MBE, he’s a fighter pilot, the test pilot on the F-35



*And they're off...
the Harvard gets airborne from Goodwood's runway 32*

and the Typhoon, and here he is briefing me! It's an unbelievable privilege to be in the same room as these people, and they never once made me feel like an interloper or a Walter Mitty. It would be easy to be utterly overwhelmed, by the machine and by the men, but they make it so easy...

"What made the day for me was when I was waiting on the flight line and a chap came up pushing his father in a wheelchair – he must have been 90 years old, but when he saw the Spitfire you could tell that all of a sudden he was 20 again. There was a lot of noise, with the

Harvard warming up, and the old chap didn't speak very clearly either, but he'd flown Spitfires, and he looked at me in my flying suit with the Spitfire behind me and said something like, you look just like so-and-so... I didn't catch it because of the noise, but he was looking at some other young man in a flying suit from seventy years ago, and it was an incredibly powerful moment."

Lee's grandfather flew several marks of Spitfire during the war; he's been dead for a long time but Lee treasures a lot of his memorabilia. "To get the opportunity to fly the Spitfire was so emotional," he says. "You can't hear that sound and not feel the hairs stand up on the back of your neck. The take-off is an other-worldly experience. When you see the Spitfire fly it looks graceful and sounds powerful, but when you're inside it's just brutal, a real fighter, and the speed with which things happen is not what I'm used to. We had to bank on

All in a good cause



don't have much joy in their lives. Chris says: "We work with Make a Wish, the Starlight Foundation and other charities, and sometimes individuals who are going through bad times are referred to us. For many of them, flying was something they could only have dreamed of, and we give them a good experience and a memory they will always treasure."

Fly2help runs 'Air Smiles' days which offer a day out, centred around a flying experience, sometimes flying individuals, sometimes families. Pilots donate their aircraft and their time, getting involved in the time-consuming business of setting up these experiences to run smoothly. The rewards can be enormous; Chris says: "When a parent tells you it's the first time their child has smiled in years, it's worth any amount of hard work. We tend to take our good fortune for granted, and as aviators we have something unique to give to people who deserve some luck."

Fly2help keeps its own costs to a minimum, but there are two 'Air Smiles' managers to feed and clothe, and some running expenses – cash is always welcome. But volunteers are needed just as badly. Have a look at some of the stories on their website www.fly2help.org and see

Five percent of the course fees at Boulton Flight Academy go to the aviation charity Fly2help, which arranges flights for the terminally ill, the disadvantaged, people whose lives are far bleaker than our own. Fly2help's Chief Executive Chris Hadlow is one of the Harvard instructors at Boulton, and he's on the lookout for helpers to bring a ray of light into some pretty dark places.

Kemble-based Fly2help is five years old and was the brainchild of Rolls Royce's Chief Test Pilot Phil (Pod) O'Dell. Chris Hadlow says: "Pod thought, we pilots are blessed, we've got wonderful lives, a good standard of living, we enjoy ourselves lives, we have sunshine in our office window every day... can we share it with those less fortunate? There's certainly no shortage of them."

Chris, who did two tours on Jaguars, instructed on the Hawk and the AlphaJet in France, worked for BA as an A320 First Officer and is now with TAG as a Captain on Gulfstreams, oversees a tight team

largely made up of volunteers who use aviation to show people who really need cheering up a good time. Sometimes it might be terminally ill children, other times it's the 'Young Carers' who while still at school find themselves working full time to support care for someone with a debilitating, long term disease, and who



if you have something to offer. Chris Hadlow can be contacted via email at chris@flytohelp.org.

Above left: Fly2help's Chief Executive Chris Hadlow climbs into the Harvard on which he instructs at Goodwood
Left: Smiles all round – for some children fly2help gives them the most memorable day of their lives

take-off to avoid the village, and never mind this 15-degrees-of-bank business, we really had to crank it over into a steep turn.

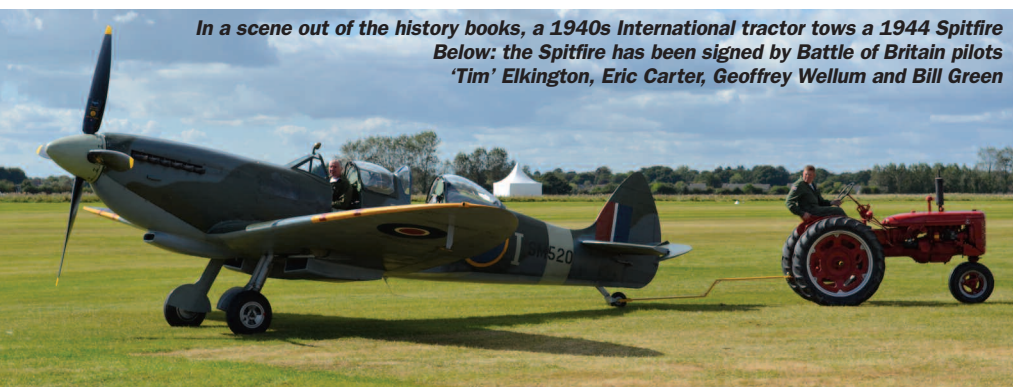
"I thought it was twitchy – I suppose 1,300 horsepower makes a lot of difference – and I suspect I was a long way behind the aircraft almost all the time. I'd barely finished one manoeuvre before it was time to go into the next, a roll and then a loop... then we were running in for the break and my watch had jumped forward half an hour. When you get out and it's over so soon, and you feel yourself welling up. But I didn't screw up, grandad, and I hope you're proud of me."



Gilda is stripped for action



*Right: Spitfire's front cockpit
This photo: G-ILDA makes her entrance,
towed from her hangar by a suitably venerable tractor*



*In a scene out of the history books, a 1940s International tractor tows a 1944 Spitfire
Below: the Spitfire has been signed by Battle of Britain pilots
'Tim' Elkington, Eric Carter, Geoffrey Wellum and Bill Green*



Peter R March



Courses are run from March to October every other week, and more than sixty pilots have gone through so far. They've come from New Zealand, Canada, America, France, Singapore, Australia, Belgium and the UK, and there have been some known faces among them – even the Space Shuttle pilot Rick Searfoss has done a turn. Searfoss, who has a lot of time on Harvards, was accorded the distinction of flying the Spitfire from the front seat – Rolls Royce Chief Test Pilot Phil O'Dell was in the back – and flew over Reginald Mitchell's grave in South Stoneham Cemetery, just across the M27 from Eastleigh, where Mitchell watched the Spitfire prototype take flight in 1936. Only three or four students have flown on their own. "We're very picky about who can go solo," says Brian Jones. "We have to go carefully. We're observed closely by the CAA and credit where it's due, they have done a tremendous job. We're an approved training organisation for the Moth, the Chipmunk and the Harvard, so we can



take a pilot from *ab initio* to PPL on those types then do a type conversion onto the Spitfire. As well as the CAA, we owe a debt to Haywards for insurance, to John Romain and ARCO for maintenance on the Spitfire and to many other people, but the real credit goes to Steve Brooks who's a fantastic individual, full of passion and enthusiasm – even on a down day he'll make you smile. He wants to make not just Spitfire pilots, but better pilots all round."

If you want to book the Spitfire course you'll have to get in the queue and wait until next summer – call 01243 755099 now. The website's www.boulbbeeflightacademy.co.uk ■

Above: instructor David MacKay accompanies Justin Woolley on his Spitfire walk-round
This photo: ready to roll – instructor David MacKay closes the door and taxis Gilda out
Below: student Lee Dixon sets out on the flight of a lifetime with instructor David MacKay
Bottom: another sortie comes to an end as the Spitfire touches down on runway 21



Top right: they all do that, sir... the Griffon bursts into life like a flamethrower
Right: Happy Spitfire pilots – instructor David Ratcliffe with Lee Dixon and Colin Stagg



Did you like that? Lee Dixon shows his feelings as the Spitfire taxis in

