

LEND-LEASE SPITFIRE

RECOVERED FROM THE RUSSIAN TUNDRA WHERE IT
HAD CRASHED IN 1945, THIS SPITFIRE HAS BEEN
PAINSTAKINGLY RESTORED TO ITS ORIGINAL WWII
CONFIGURATION

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY DARREN HARBAR

During 1941, the United States created a policy to help the European war effort obtain war equipment and supplies, which included the Allies sending aircraft to other nations. The British government supplied Spitfires to Russia under the Lend-Lease agreement and one of those now-rare fighters has returned to the air in the United Kingdom.

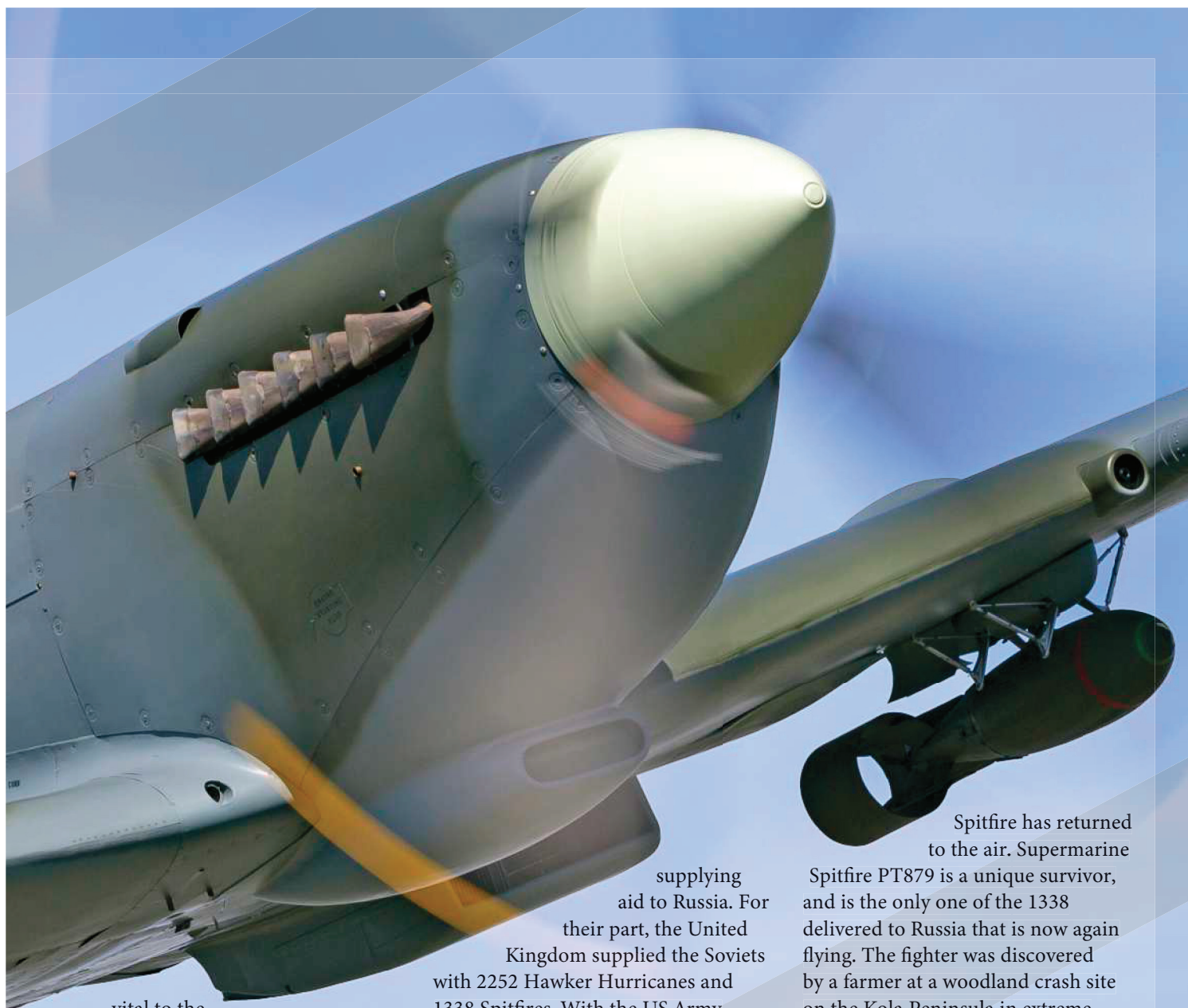
President Franklin D. Roosevelt wanted to provide Britain with as much aid as his administration could,

without
committing
the United States

to actual war. He sold the idea to a skeptical nation and equally skeptical Congress by suggesting it was like lending items to a neighbor, who would return the items once finished with them. Signed into law on 11 March 1941, and titled the "Act to Promote the Defense of the United States," the program supplied countries deemed to be vital to

American defense.

This included the United Kingdom (and British Commonwealth), France (prior to German occupation), the Republic of China, and latterly Russia with supplies like food and oil, aircraft, and other military hardware. The aid was in most cases supplied free of charge, with the intention of the hardware being returned once the war was over (or purchased outright or scrapped). In return, the United States was offered leases to bases in Allied territory. Despite the United States entering the war in late 1941, the Lend-Lease agreement was continued and proved



vital to the fight against Germany in Europe.

A Reverse Lend-Lease scheme also existed, that resulted in the British supplying Spitfires to the United States when they first entered the war. The first United Kingdom-based American units formed in 1942 (334th, 335th and 336th Fighter Squadrons), were equipped with Spitfires supplied by the RAF. These squadrons were partially formed from the personnel who had fought during the Battle of Britain in the volunteer Eagle Squadrons. Supplying Supermarine Spitfires to other nations was something that continued as the arrangement of the Lend-Lease agreement became blurred with both Britain and America

supplying aid to Russia. For their part, the United

Kingdom supplied the Soviets with 2252 Hawker Hurricanes and 1338 Spitfires. With the US Army Air Force now having significant numbers of fighters based in Britain, it relieved the pressure on the RAF and the Hurricanes and Spitfires could be released to Russia, along with other fighters from America that included Bell P-39 Airacobras and P-63 Kingcobras, Curtiss P-40s, and Republic P-47s. The Roosevelt administration specifically did not want the Russians to get P-51 Mustangs.

Over the decades, a number of war-time Lend-Lease aircraft have been discovered at crash sites around Russia — from lakes, forests, and open countryside. A few have been restored but, to date, just one Lend-Lease

Spitfire has returned to the air. Supermarine

Spitfire PT879 is a unique survivor, and is the only one of the 1338 delivered to Russia that is now again flying. The fighter was discovered by a farmer at a woodland crash site on the Kola Peninsula in extreme northwest Russia, and the wreck was in a remarkably complete state having been untouched since May 1945. The remains were recovered during 1997 in conjunction with the Moscow Preservation Society and United Kingdom-based Spitfire restoration expert/pilot Peter Monk, who returned the fighter to England.

The Mk. IXe Spitfire was originally built at the Castle Bromwich factory, and rolled off the production line in 1944. The fighter then passed through No. 39 Maintenance Unit at Colerne in August 1944, before heading to No. 52 Maintenance Unit at Cardiff in September that same year, for dismantling and shipping to

Peter Teichman display the classic lines of Spitfire PT879, but with a twist — this is the first flying Spitfire with Soviet markings. The paint scheme was completed before the Russian invasion of the Ukraine and after that just about everything Russian became unpopular in the Free World. However, history is history and we must remember the Soviets suffered catastrophic losses fighting with the Allies against the Nazis.



This is how the wreck looked after it was recovered. Note the missing tail. The pilot bailed out after PT879's tail was cutoff in a mid-air collision with another Spitfire. As can be seen, it appears the fighter impacted the tundra while in a near-flat spin. (Peter Arnold)



The Soviets had a voracious appetite for any type of combat aircraft. With losses incredibly high, they needed constant resupplies not only from their own factories but also from Allied nations. The student fighter pilots are gathered around a Mk. IX Spitfire that has been locally converted to a dual-control trainer. The more experienced pilots preferred the American fighters since they were more rugged than the Spitfire when operating from unimproved air strips. (Alpha Archive)

Russia. As a number of Spitfires were shipped to Russia at the same time, the dismantling teams stencilled all removable parts such as cowlings, wingtips, and panels with the aircraft's serial number, so that they could be reassigned to the correct airframe upon arrival. Having been crated up, PT879 along with 16 other Spitfires was sent to Salford docks and loaded aboard a ship to join North Atlantic Convoy SS256 bound for Murmansk on 13 October 1944. The fighter arrived and was unloaded on 30 October 1944 to start life with the Soviet Armed Forces.

The Spitfires were shipped in their original factory gray/green camouflage schemes, which included Royal Air Force roundels, tail flash and fuselage

band. Allocated to the Murmansk Air Defense Force's 2nd Squadron, 767th Fighter Aviation Regiment, 122nd Division, the RAF markings were overpainted on arrival with a Soviet light green and then Russian red stars were hand-painted onto the side of the fuselage and under the wings. Due to the aircraft being employed in a ground attack role, the top surface of the wings didn't receive stars, as the pilots felt they stood out too much and increased the chances of being spotted from above. The markings were clearly visible on the wreckage when it was recovered from the crash site, which has enabled the restoration to faithfully reproduce the aircraft as it would have looked in 1944.

Sadly for PT879, on 18 May 1945, with just 18 hours and 29 minutes on the airframe, pilot Junior Lieutenant Semyonov was flying the Spitfire when it was involved in a mid-air collision. It was on a training sortie and Semyonov was flying with Lt. Babonim along with another pair of Spitfires. The four aircraft from the 767th Fighter Aviation Regiment had been maneuvering during a practice dog-fight over the Kola Peninsula, when Babonim, who was leading the second pair of Spitfires, lost sight of Semyonov in PT879 who was number two in the first pair. Bobonim's Spitfire collided with Semyonov's wing and cut off the tail of PT879, with both pilots having to bail out of their stricken fighters. The Spitfire slammed into the ground and



Although it may look like junk, many valuable parts and fittings were recovered from the downed fighter.

lay as surface wreckage in the Russian tundra until it was discovered in 1997.

The fighter was initially owned by Peter Monk, but was subsequently sold to Angie Soper who decided to start the restoration process with renowned restorers, Airframe Assemblies on the Isle of Wight in southern England. Once delivered to Airframe Assemblies, the fighter was unloaded from the container and spread out on the floor, where the extent of the recovered wreck could be clearly seen, as could its original markings that included the yellow serial stencilling applied in Cardiff prior to shipping to Russia. The Spitfire was registered on the United Kingdom civil register as G-BYDE but the restoration didn't progress very far at this stage, and was soon put into store. Move forward to 2002, and the project was purchased by Peter Teichman, who had already been building a collection of vintage aircraft with his Beech Staggerwing and highly-original P-51D Mustang, under the Hangar 11 Collection banner, based at the former Battle of Britain airfield of North Weald, to the north of London. Adding a Spitfire to Hangar 11 was something that Peter had wanted to do for many years stating, "The P-51 Mustang is an incredible aircraft, wonderful to fly and amazing to own but any Brit pilot yearns to fly a Spitfire!"

Anyone who knows of the Hangar 11 Collection, and indeed Peter Teichman, will be aware that he has a desire for originality. It's no surprise therefore that he didn't just want any Spitfire; he wanted one with a great history. At the time, the Spitfire project had been stored at Angie Soper's farm, which was close to Peter's North Weald base. An excited Teichman arranged to go and see the fighter, remarking "I drove over to Angie's farm with a real sense of excitement as I would be getting closer to my ultimate goal of a Spitfire. As the 20-foot container was opened up, the enormity of the task became clear. It was a mass of aircraft metal from end to end; engine sat near the doors, prop hub and other system parts, plus a mass of aluminium and painted parts — just amazing. I agreed to a deal in a hurry, as this was clearly



The original Rolls-Royce Merlin 66 was destroyed on impact with the tundra. Another variant would have easily fit the Mk. IX but Peter Teichman is a perfectionist when it comes to the Spitfire and he decided to go on the hunt for a replacement Merlin 66. It wasn't easy.



Original armament for PT879 survived the crash.

an opportunity not to be missed. As a sad footnote, Angie Soper passed away on 21 April 2021, a lovely lady and I wish her family well."

A deal was done, and the Spitfire was now part of the Hangar 11 Collection, and it was moved to a storage facility before eventually heading to North Weald. Restoring a Spitfire is, of course, not a quick process, and Peter decided in 2004 to purchase another Spitfire that was already in flying condition to "fill the gap" before he could fly PT879. His rare PR Mk. XI example (PL965), flew 45 photo reconnaissance missions from Belgium with RAF No. 16 Squadron between 1944 and 1945 and continues to be part of his collection, which over the years has included a P-40 Kittyhawk and Hawker Hurricane.

While Peter had another Spitfire

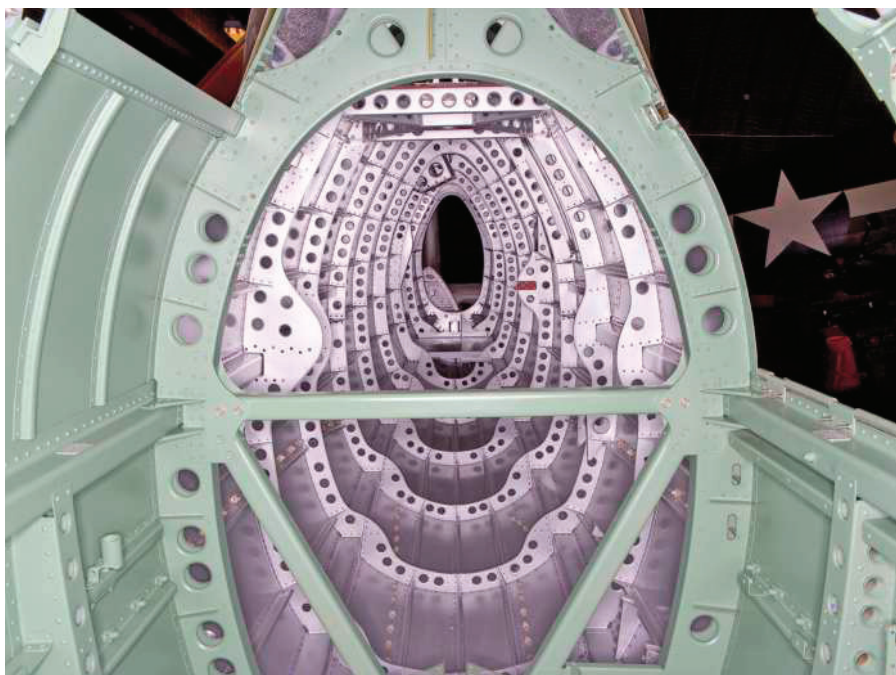
to fly, the restoration of PT879 was not put on hold; in fact, it was an important project on his agenda. The Russian tundra is generally a dry and cold environment, so the wreck had been pretty well preserved over the years. Despite large portions of the structure being destroyed or damaged in the crash, hundreds of vital parts had all survived in excellent condition. As is to be expected, the integrity of each part had to be checked for safety but many could be used again, which greatly added originality to the Spitfire restoration. Peter commented, "Peter Monk recovered the wings, fuselage, engine, prop and so much more from Russia. We were able to salvage hundreds and hundreds of original castings, forgings, fittings, inspection hatches, pintles, gear doors, landing gear legs, etc, etc." The salvaged parts







Rebuilding the fuselage began at Airframe Assemblies in 2011.



Looking aft inside the new-build fuselage. None of the interior components have yet been added.

were painstakingly removed, before being carefully cleaned, labelled, and then stored. The flaps, ailerons, and wing tips were all pretty much intact as were the aircraft's original guns and cannons.

With so many parts prepared for re-use, the next stage was to get the fuselage restored, and Peter chose to return the aircraft to Airframe Assemblies for this task in 2011. All the recovered fuselage items that would be required in the build were supplied to the Isle of Wight restorers, who utilised them in among newly fabricated frames

and skins for the aircraft. This process took just two years, with the "empty" fuselage and tail section returning to North Weald in 2014, before heading to Vintage Fabrics to be painted in its original Castle Bromwich factory colors with RAF markings. "They say that when you have your 'empty' Spitfire fuselage, that you are barely 25% of the way along, and to be honest that is certainly the case," Peter explained. "The systems that have to be fitted are largely in the fuselage. These include hydraulics, electrics, pneumatics, engine, radio and a maze

of different systems that make up this pretty complex fighter, cutting edge in 1944 as it was," he concluded.

While there were a huge number of reusable parts, there were some either missing or too badly damaged to be recycled, so Peter started the long and time consuming search for these rare original items. Some were sourced via Peter Monk and others from a number of diverse sources. Being an ambassador for originality, Peter explained that he "was determined that PT879 would be the most historically important and accurate Spitfire restoration to date."

By October 2018, the fuselage of PT879 and all the remaining parts, not already reused during the fuselage works including the wing tips, ailerons, flaps, rudder pedals, systems parts, and much more were shipped to Biggin Hill, where The Biggin Hill Heritage Hangar would complete the restoration for Peter. The Heritage Hangar facility is run by Peter Monk who had been instrumental in the recovery of the aircraft from Russia. Peter regards his friend as undoubtedly the world's leading expert on the Spitfire, having the deepest knowledge and the largest parts inventory anywhere on the planet. "If you need a Spitfire widget... Pete will have it and know where and how it fits. Plus, we have been good mates for 20 years, so that counts for a great deal. Their work is the best I have ever seen on a Spitfire!" he enthusiastically remarked. For the Heritage Hangar, the restoration of PT879 was to see them achieve a new milestone themselves, as it was the first project where they had restored a full set of wings in house.

The original Rolls-Royce Merlin 66 engine was one of the items recovered from Russia, but it wasn't a candidate for rebuild as it was too badly damaged. "I had a spare Packard Merlin 266," Peter started to explain, "but it was not the correct engine for a Mk. IX, so I was not keen to use it. I had looked at an engine as far away as South Africa, but the search had proven fruitless." Peter was determined that PT879 must have her correct Rolls-Royce Merlin 66, right hand tractor. After years of searching, a deal was

actually done with Peter Monk to swap the Packard 266 for the correct Merlin 66 and this was sent to England-based Merlin experts Retro Track & Air to be restored.

The Spitfire's wooden propeller was another hurdle as the blades had clearly not survived the impact. The broken blade roots were still in place within the recovered hub, which itself was fully intact and there were signs of grease still in the unit — just amazing. Peter engaged with propeller experts Skycraft to see if the unit was reusable with new blades, but the hub was sadly too far-gone to be made serviceable. He was, however, able to source a very rare and unique “new old stock” hub and that was built up by Skycraft with new blades from German manufacturer Hoffman.

Peter was fully engaged in the entire restoration process and flying over to Biggin Hill every few weeks to monitor progress. Specialist aircraft painters RAS are based at Biggin Hill, just a short distance from the restoration hangar. Working with Steve Atkin from Warbird Colour, RAS helped produce arguably the most accurate and authentic paint job on any Spitfire to date, with that process completed during the late summer of 2020. Peter paid due respect to Warbird Colours knowledge and input by mentioning, “Steve made sure that every detail of the paintwork was correct, right down to the smallest decal, font size, and color shade. After all, they had pretty much the entire aircraft as a guide, so details were easy to replicate. Much of the wartime color scheme, Russian overpaint, and additional detail was clearly visible on the recovered parts.” Peter was keen to point out that his own team at Hangar 11 played a significant role in the restoration. “I was so lucky to have the help of a great Hangar 11 crew notably, Alec Kinane, Keith Rodwell, and Steve Bolt,” he said.

Now registered as G-PTIX, the completed Spitfire was rolled out from the Biggin Hill hangar on 14 September 2020 for engine runs. It had been 75 years since PT879 had last had a Merlin running up front and it was a monumental day for Peter and



Remarkable condition of an original wing tip from the wreck.



American and British workers prepare a shipment of Spitfires for the Soviets at the secret Douglas Aircraft facility at Abadan, Iran. One American recalled, “The Russians would come in a C-47, look over the Spits and then fly away. They would say very little and were basically quite unfriendly, especially if they were under the control of a political officer.”

the Heritage Hangar team. Watching like an expectant father, Peter joyfully relished the engine coming into life, “What a wonderful moment. I was so excited. Now we had to move onto the final stages before her first test flight,” he recalled. Having completed a number of successful engine runs, PT879 returned to be cowled up and prepared for her final Civilian Aviation Authority inspection and issue of the “permit to test.”

The 26th of October 2020 was an important day in the life of PT879. The weather was kind, a brisk wind blew across Biggin Hill airfield and a few showers clattered through, but on

balance conditions were good. Peter's old friend and pilot extraordinaire Pete Kynsey was the appointed test pilot and he completed some taxi runs before he declared that all temperatures and pressures were good, brakes effective, and he was generally very happy.

“After 20 years of planning and dreaming about that moment, it's all pretty overwhelming. Expect a few tears of joy when the time comes,” were Peter's thoughts that day.

The Spitfire's historic first post-restoration flight took place on Wednesday, 28 October. Peter was watching from the ground as Pete Kynsey lifted PT879 back into the sky







Teichman with the fuselage after painting. The decision was made to paint the aircraft as it had left the factory and then apply the Soviet markings over the British insignia. Little did the collector realize the Mk. IX would occupy two decades of his life.



Detail of the underwing rack and replica bomb.

Lend-Lease meets Reverse Lend-Lease. Just completed PT879 meets a Spitfire that has been done to represent a fighter transferred to the USAAF for use in the MTO.

over Biggin Hill. That flight was really successful and highlighted a few small snags, which were to be expected after a major restoration, and the Biggin Hill team attended to these quickly in readiness for the next flight. Reflecting on a very special day, Peter recalled, "As I watched PT897 climb gracefully away, tucking her wheels up one after the other, I thought wow, wow, we really did make it." Following a series of test flights in the weeks that followed, Peter was excited to de-brief with Pete Kynsey, and his report was just pure magic for him to hear. "She's a beautiful aircraft, engine and prop are smooth throughout, ailerons are light and roll rate excellent, she flies hands off and you could eat your lunch while she flies straight and true," was Pete's assessment of the Russian Spitfire.

Towards the middle of November, the full Permit to Fly had been issued, which opened the door for the moment that Peter had dreamed about for almost 20 years — his chance to fly his Russian Spitfire. It's best he explains in his own words: "So it was on the 19th of November, the weather was mainly dry but there was fog lingering to the south of the airfield and, in fact, the valley was full of it due to the temperature and dew point being very close. So, I was aware of that and ready

to divert to North Weald if necessary, as the weather was much better north of the river. It was very cold, but in my excitement I did not even notice. The team at the Heritage Hangar had run the engine prior to my arrival, so all I had to do was load up my parachute, take some time inside the cockpit to familiarize myself and then hit the start button. Every Spitfire is subtly different, basically the same but switch positions can vary slightly. In spite of the fact that I have over 700 Spitfire 'missions' under my belt, I took my time to be sure that there would be no surprises. PT879 started first blade and then a swift taxi to Runway 03 for my pre take off checks. Power checks were all familiar, but you take a lot of care with these as the tail can come up easily with that Merlin 66 up front. Unless you have a volunteer sitting on the tail, you stay below 1800-rpm and try to point her uphill if you can for power checks. Then as I lined up on the wide Runway 03 at Biggin Hill, I was hit by the enormity of this moment and had to just steady myself as I applied power and PT879 rose serenely into the winter skies. I decided to track north towards the river [Thames] for what I expected would be better weather. Raising the gear, I reduced boost to +4 and 2200-rpm as we climbed to the north towards Swanley and then to +1 boost and 1900-rpm, resulting in a steady indicated airspeed of 220-mph. I have flown a number of different Merlin-powered Spitfires over the years and they all feel a little different of course, but compared to PL965 our Mk. XI photo reconnaissance ship, which is the lightest and fastest of all the Merlin-powered Spits, PT879 felt a little heavier in roll. First thing that I noticed was that she was so stable, taking hands off, I thought that someone had switched the autopilot on! She just sat there; flew straight and true; not falling off left or right; not climbing; amazing and so beautifully rigged by the genius guys at Biggin Hill. I was just starting to enjoy her, the earlier fear being overtaken by sheer joy when I noticed that the weather was getting poorer, visibility was not great and some low 'scuddy' cloud was starting to form and — oh, joy



Ground running the Merlin 66.



Peter congratulates his friend and test pilot Pete Kynsey after the successful first flight.

— my handheld GPS had packed up altogether!

However, I know that area pretty well, so I headed north and when I got to the river Thames, I turned west until I hit the QE2 bridge and then back east towards the Medway towns. I was happy to operate in a box within those confines in the knowledge that the weather was far better towards North Weald if I had to divert.

"I undertook some handling maneuvers, slow flying, stalls both clean and dirty, a few gentle aerobatics and she was just so lovely, amazing. I cannot really articulate how beautifully she flew and handled. Engine and prop were smooth and progressive, no vibrations, all the temps and pressures

were 'bang on' — brilliant!

"Once I was happy with my first sortie and having due consideration for the closing weather, I decided to return to base at Biggin. I set track along the south bank of the river Thames until I got to the QE2 bridge, and then set course of 210 degrees towards Biggin. I did not get sight until pretty close but air traffic control duly instructed me to join for Runway 03 left hand circuit.

"I reduced speed to below 160-mph, manifold pressure to around 0 boost, RPM set to 2000, selected gear down, turned downwind, radiator flaps were set to 'open,' main flaps down below 140-mph, checked the brakes. At this point I found that the parking brake had decided to flip itself on, which was a real





Displaying the iconic Spitfire wing planform.



The Soviets quickly pressed their Spitfires into the ground attack role.

‘gotcha’ as you would arrive with brakes ON. As I turned final, I fiddled behind the stick to release the parking brake and ensure that the brake pressure gauges now read zero on both sides, so I knew brakes were definitely off.

“PT879 landed smoothly on the runway and I was soon taxiing back to the BHHH ramp. As I shut down, I thought ‘job done.’ It took me 20 years and I could never have imagined it without the support of a special person, my wife Karen who has been there every step of the way for me with advice and good council. PT879 is now a unique

part of aviation history and the only Spitfire ever to return to flight out of the 1338 shipped or flown to Russia.”

With the initial flying targets concluded, the restoration wasn’t quite finished, as Peter had a couple of other important things to do. Although the original cannons and guns were recovered in good condition, it was more practical to have lighter reproductions installed and fashioned in every detail in aluminium to save weight. Her Hispano 20mm cannons and .50-caliber Browning machine guns have, however, been fitted with many

original parts so the originality is still preserved and added are a set of shells, both .50-caliber and 20mm. Possibly the most obvious added extras are hung from under the wings of PT879. As a ground attack aircraft, the Spitfire had pylons under the wings that took 250-lb General Purpose (GP) bombs. “We were lucky to have had loan of a real 250-lb GP bomb from the RAF Cosford Museum,” Peter said. “This was taken to a specialist workshop to produce an exact replica mold. From this, a fiberglass shell was produced and then the metal work, fins, impeller were all replicated in the smallest detail. After a drawn-out process, the bombs were cleared for use in flight and this adds to the uniqueness of this Russian wartime survivor.”

This Spitfire is presented exactly as it flew in Russia with the Soviet Air Force in 1945. Hundreds of her original parts have been utilized, making it a truly unique Spitfire with a very different appearance. Of the 1338 supplied, just five have been discovered and recovered from Russia but none restored to flight apart from PT879. The Lend-Lease agreement was critical to the defense of Europe during WWII and a Spitfire wearing Russian stars will tell the story of a lesser-known history of the famous Supermarine fighter.

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