



*King  
For A Day*



There's a hiss of static in my headset, and then I hear the voice of pilot Steve Jones.

"Right, we'll do a victory roll now," he says, with the laconic ease of someone for whom such manoeuvres are as routine as buttering toast. "We'll simply roll the aircraft over until we return to our current position. No drama. Here we go."

And roll we do. The sunlight flashes on the Spitfire's wings as the aircraft smoothly inverts. It whirls on with unfettered ease until we're back where we started from. As we revolve I whoop with excitement like a child on a rollercoaster, because that's what it feels like. The action is so clean and fluid that it almost feels as if the aircraft is secured to a gigantic overhead rail.

How much of this is down to the pilot's

skill or to R J Mitchell's brilliant design is impossible for me to judge. What I do get a feel for is the dazzling power of the machine, its agility, its potential to pounce at its pilot's bidding.

As the blurred impression of the ground, 4,000ft below us, sweeps around my head in a second exhilarating manoeuvre, I decide that I could do victory rolls in a Spitfire all day long. I don't tell Steve this – just in case.

We are flying in Supermarine Spitfire Tr.IX ML407, known to most British aircraft enthusiasts as the Grace Spitfire, and right now we are kings of everything. We've taken off from Sywell where the aircraft is based, and the skies over Northamptonshire on this April morning are an unblemished blue. There is no wind, and below us, a radiant English patchwork of green, yellow and brown bathes in the sun.

We're probably too high to attract the attention of anyone on the ground – but had anyone seen us, they would stop whatever they were doing, they would squint into the blue and they would carry on looking until they

couldn't see us anymore. Because to most, the Spitfire has grown into something that Mitchell could not possibly have envisaged. It is a clarion call to observe the lessons of history, a Last Post salute to the sacrifice and courage of a generation. It is a bird of prey that now quite beautifully symbolises the sanctity of peace.

"She's a wonderful machine, isn't she?" says Steve. I manage to say something, but there is – I readily confess – a lump in my throat.

## A family affair

The reason I'm here is all thanks to Carolyn Grace and her family, who now base their operation at Sywell, having previously been at Bentwaters in Suffolk and before that, Duxford. Carolyn's son Richard, a superb pilot, runs family business Air Leasing at the airfield – the company restores, maintains and operates historic aircraft, and its burgeoning reputation has ensured it is in constant demand. Its modern hangar is host to a bevy of exciting machines, including Hawker Fury FB.11 SR611, Supermarine Seafire LF.III PP972 (see August 2016 issue) and a pair of Hispano Buchóns (see June 2016 issue), ➔



Below left Steve Jones and Steve Beebee in Supermarine Spitfire Tr.IX ML407 flying over rural Northamptonshire on April 19. ALL IMAGES BY DARREN HARBAR UNLESS NOTED



The Grace Spitfire has been a popular airshow attraction for decades – but now passengers can seize the opportunity of a flight in the legendary fighter. **Steve Beebee** visits its owners at Sywell and straps in for the trip of a lifetime

Left Steve Beebee flying in the Spitfire on April 19. COURTESY CAROLYN GRACE



Right  
Steve Beebee attempts to  
put on a flying suit.



Far right  
Messrs Beebee, Hodgetts  
and Willis walk out to the  
aircraft.



Below right  
Pilot Steve Jones.

Below  
Steve Beebee examines  
the rear cockpit.



Right  
As pilot Steve Jones  
prepares the front  
cockpit, Carolyn helps  
Paul Willis get strapped  
into his parachute pack.



both of which flew during the production of the 1969 film *Battle of Britain*.

Spitfire ML407 has been owned by the Grace family since 1979 (see panel on page 106) and with the approval of the CAA, Carolyn has been able to offer flights in it for many years, in exchange for financial contributions towards operating costs. In the light of new CAA approvals a few years ago, it has become easier for operators to fly

passengers, so Carolyn has been able to whittle down the previously lengthy waiting list, and offer more flights on a more regular basis.

Having once been limited to around 60 passenger flights per year over a maximum of ten days, the company can now provide up to five flights per day – with the aircraft flying for up to 100 hours per year. Relocating to Sywell has also been key to this development. The airfield is a welcoming, public-facing operation, and a prime venue to help fulfil the family's ambitions.

"It's a very central location and ideal for what we are doing," says Carolyn. "It was Richard who persuaded me to sell the house and move up here. It was a good decision – the airport here at Sywell has proved to be



**"You are not viewing history through a modern cocoon, you are a part of a real, visceral experience"**



absolutely perfect for us.

"The organisation here doesn't have that distant feeling that some airfields have. This one is unique. Here at Sywell we have the facilities to make it a family experience for those who come along with the person who's going to be flying. The Spitfire is easily accessible so in most instances we can take friends and family out to the aircraft and they can get up close to it and feel part of the experience. We encourage that. Being at Sywell makes it possible."

All proceeds from the flights directly benefit the aircraft. At the time of writing, all profits – from flights to merchandise – were funding overhaul of a spare Rolls-Royce Merlin engine.

"Most importantly, it helps us to safeguard the future of the aircraft," adds Carolyn. "It is a family-owned aeroplane and we want to ensure it remains that way for generations to come. We are not in this on a purely commercial basis."

"Obviously, the passenger flights eat into the 100 hours [annual flying time], but then the air display world has changed a lot, and we don't do as many as before, so it's not the issue that it might have been several years ago. The aircraft has never been heavily booked for shows – people often think that we decide what events to do, but the reality is that it's incredibly competitive out there."

"I once did anything up to 28 off-site displays per annum. I then stopped flying at airshows because there were relatively few of them, and because I wanted

Richard and our other pilots to get some experience."

If you book a flight in ML407, the names of those rostered for the front cockpit reads like a 'who's who' of modern Spitfire pilots. As well as Steve, there's chief pilot Pete Kynsey, plus Paul Bonhomme, Stu Goldspink, Dave Evans and several others. You'll also be treated to at least 25 minutes of time in the air, or around 35 minutes in total.

"That's a key element," nods Carolyn. "We are not interested in getting into a price war and while we may not be the cheapest overall, our price per minute is lower than other operators, because we include a minimum of 25 minutes airborne. Although we don't have a long waiting list now, we do have people who want to do it next year or even the year after, so if you're interested, we'd urge you to get in touch. The 25-minute flying time is a format we intend to stick to, and another difference with us is that no other two-seat Mk.IX has the history of ours."

Intriguingly, the growing selection of historic aircraft at Air Leasing means there is at least the potential to expand the flight experience operation. North American TF-51D Mustang *Miss Velma* is expected to arrive later this year, and being a two-seater it's feasible to fly in – or alongside – that, or perhaps in formation with the Seafire. Whether any of the above will happen has yet to be decided, but there is no doubt the level of warbird activity is rapidly escalating at Sywell.

## Getting airborne

On the morning of our visit, I am listed as third to fly. Before me is

Paul Willis and Dave Hodgetts, both of whom are here with family and friends. Next door to the briefing room is the excellent Aviator restaurant and bar – its lawn is an agreeable place to have a coffee and watch the action. The Spitfire awaits just metres away on the other side of the fence.

I coerce my ridiculous, lanky frame into one of the provided flying suits as Carolyn begins the pre-flight talk. She takes all three of us out to the aircraft where we're given a detailed tour of the cockpit. It's important – and interesting – to realise that while we are obviously passengers, we are sitting in a real, working cockpit, with moving levers, gauges and switches. You are not viewing history through a modern cocoon, you are a part of a real, visceral experience, virtually unchanged from the original.

Our feet will be resting on the rudder pedals and we will feel every input the pilot makes. The control column between our knees is completely 'live' and will enable us to fly the aircraft, providing Steve is happy to allow it. At two points during the flight, shortly after take-off and shortly before landing, we'll need to straighten our right leg to enable a lever to move past where our knee would have been. This allows the pilot to change from one fuel tank to the other. Steve will activate the control, but he will need us to co-operate when the time comes. Passengers we may be, but we are most certainly *involved*.

Some of Carolyn's brief is sobering – but essential to know. We're ➔



Below  
The Spitfire, with Steve Jones and Paul Willis on board, taxiing at Sywell.





Right  
Steve Beebee climbs into  
the Spitfire on April 19.



Right centre  
An elated Paul Willis is  
greeted by Carolyn after  
his flight.



Far right  
Dave Hodgetts is strapped  
into his parachute prior  
to flight.



Right centre  
A smoky start for ML407  
on April 19.



my canvas headset and goggles on, my 6' 3" frame only just fits. There's talk of removing the seat cushion, but in the end it isn't necessary. The harness is tightened so I don't slide around in the seat. I lower my head to allow the canopy to slide shut. There's just enough room.

I place my feet gently on the rudder pedals. I must keep them there,

**"My view of the sky turns into a view of the ground, and then the colourful patchwork vista unfurls below my head. It is not too quick and it is not too slow. It is utterly spectacular"**



shown how to escape from aircraft in the case scenario.

to keep your right hand on the webbing of your parachute pack," she says, "because otherwise you won't find the D-ring to pull the ripcord."

It's fantastically unlikely that the unthinkable will happen, but once again, this is part of the process of flying in a historic aircraft, and today we lucky few are part of it.

Paul is the first to fly, followed by Dave. Both men return looking absolutely elated. Both declare it was exactly as they dared to dream it would be. The only issue that surprises Paul is how different the sound of the Merlin is from the inside – it's more of a rugged cackle than the smooth, multi-toned rumble we're used to hearing at airshows. Dave praises the responsiveness of the controls, saying how simple it was to move the aircraft around the sky. Like all who book a flight in ML407, he takes away a signed certificate, a

the worst-

"You need

T-shirt, a DVD and (while stocks last) an authentic swatch of fabric, removed from the Spitfire's elevator during maintenance in 2012.

Then, after slightly more than one trip to the toilet, it's my turn. I stride across the grass towards the Spitfire, feigning an air of nonchalance. Carolyn assists me in strapping on my parachute. I'm shown how to climb into the cockpit and again, there's a strict procedure to follow. There are bits you can stand on and hold on to, and there are bits you can't. It's important to have someone check the soles of your shoes for stones before you enter – there is no 'floor' as such in the Spitfire and losing any small object into the fuselage is potentially dangerous.

My bizarrely long limbs and complete lack of physical co-ordination mean getting me into a Spitfire is a bit like coaxing a large spider into a matchbox – not that we recommend such an endeavour. With

but without applying any pressure that might impede Steve's input. I look with some awe at the control column between my knees, and the firing button at the centre of the circular grip. I won't be touching any part of this, or anything else, until Steve invites me to. I resolve to keep my hands on my thighs and just watch as everything unfolds around me.

With Steve settled in the front 'office' and a successful intercom test accomplished, the Merlin starts in a crackly gust of smoke. For a moment, you receive a noseful of the fumes as smoke brushes the Perspex, but it dissipates almost immediately. We taxi, and I wave at onlookers. Steve explains why he is weaving from side to side – in common with many taildraggers, it's impossible for the pilot to gain a clear view of what's directly ahead without doing so. The actions required are clear to me – I can



feel it through the rudder pedals and through the movement of the control stick, which waggles in front of me as if gripped by phantom hands.

We're at the end of the runway, and once something Cessna-like ahead of us has disappeared, we've got nothing but tarmac and sky in front of us. "Right," says Steve, happily, "let's go." He opens the throttle and the Spitfire almost instinctively accelerates towards its natural domain.

## Flying the legend

We are lifting into the sky and it feels serene. There is no sense of danger at all, and I am grinning. We climb, turning. I gaze out at the legendary 'elliptical' wings, the camouflage markings and roundels. They look the same as they would have done in World War Two, as do the fields below us.

"And you're in a Spitfire," announces Steve.

I am, and furthermore my thoughts are with those young men who flew them over 70 years ago. I try to feel what they must have felt. It is an intoxicating cocktail of conflicting emotions.

We are at height now and sometimes when we turn, the aircraft is almost on its side. This feels completely natural. Returning to straight and level we look for the Vans RV-8 camera ship (flown today by Michael Wright from Leicester Aero Club) from which photographs for this article will be taken. Steve spots it at the 10 o'clock position, high above.

For the first time I gain a sense of what the Spitfire is truly capable of, as Steve effects a fast, climbing turn. The g-force pushes my belly into the seat and I work to keep my head up. I groan slightly but I'm secretly enjoying it. The RV-8, which was a tiny dot a few seconds ago, is now aeroplane-shaped.

We speed towards its underbelly and cruise gracefully around to its port side. I ponder that had this been World War Two and the Vans been a Messerschmitt, we would have hammered it with fire at this point.

With the RV-8 alongside, a face looms from its rear seat. It's not a German gunner; it's my friend, photographer Darren Harbar. The basic rule in air-to-air photography is that the camera ship leads, while the subject (us) formates on it. Darren communicates with Steve via a series of clear hand gestures. Steve alters our position accordingly. I just smile.

The two aircraft are obviously flying in close proximity, but I have no concerns. Steve, a retired British Airways captain, is probably best known to airshow crowds as one half of the Matadors aerobic



**Below left**  
Built in 1944 and flown in action on D-Day, Spitfire G-LFIX now flies from Sywell, Northants.

**Below**  
Steve Beebee in the cockpit.





## Keeping the dream alive



Carolyn and Richard Grace with Spitfire ML407 at Sywell.

Supermarine Spitfire Tr.IX ML407 (G-LFIX) has been flown in the capable hands of the Grace family for 32 years.

It was built as a single-seat Mk.IX in 1944 and ferried into RAF service from the Castle Bromwich factory by ATA pilot Jackie Moggridge. It became the 'mount' of 485 Squadron's Fg Off Johnnie Houlton DFC - the 'V' on its unit code 'OU-V' was for Vicky, his future wife. At the controls of ML407, Johnnie made the first air-to-air 'kill' on D-Day, downing a Junkers Ju 88. More victories followed, and by the end of the war the Spitfire had served with seven units and survived 176 'ops'.

It was converted into a two-seat trainer for the Irish Air Corps in 1950, and after retirement ended up with the Strathallan Collection in Scotland. Nick Grace, a successful engineer with a keen passion for flying, bought it from there in 1979. Meticulously restored over the next five years, Nick flew it for the first time - with Carolyn in the rear cockpit - on April 16, 1985.

"The provenance of this aircraft, the fact that it is an original aeroplane, meant a lot to Nick," Carolyn recalls. "During the restoration he painstakingly took everything apart, cleaned it back to bare metal, tackled any corrosion, and put it back together again. There were no significant replacements."

Tragically Nick was killed in a 1988 road accident. In the aftermath, Carolyn resolved not only to keep the Spitfire flying but learn to fly it herself. She went solo in ML407 for the first time at White Waltham, Berks, on July 17, 1990. For the next quarter of a century Carolyn flew the Grace Spitfire at airshows, gaining a reputation not just for her beautifully judged displays, but also as a trailblazer for women in aviation.

Fittingly, she took Jackie Moggridge aloft in the Spitfire from Duxford in 1994. Johnnie Houlton had also flown in it, with Nick, several years earlier.

Carolyn smiles as she reflects on the long journey that has now brought her and the family business to Sywell. "I am personally very proud of my children - Richard heading our Maintenance Organisation Air Leasing, together with Daisy, Richard's wife and his sister Olivia, though in America, in full support on social media," she says.

"I am so thrilled that ML407 is still flying, because that's firstly what Nick wanted. After Nick died, it became my goal to keep the Spitfire flying for generations to come, and I'm delighted that this aircraft, with its great history, will continue to honour the past that has enabled our future."



ship peels away and we move off in the opposite direction. Steve suggests that I fly the Spitfire for a bit. Holding the grip with the fingers and thumb of my right hand, I move us around the sky gently, from right to left, and then up and down. I handle the control in the same way I would handle the outstretched arm of a baby. It's very sensitive - hardly any physical input is required. You can understand why pilots described the Spitfire as becoming almost an extension of themselves rather than an actual machine. It's as if the aircraft is a sentient being that *wants* to do what you want it to do.

With ML407 back in Steve's hands we do a victory roll - and then a loop. We dive to gain speed then climb up and over. I grin, or gurn, or something, as the 'g' pins my head back at the top of the loop, and I watch as my view of the sky turns into a view of the ground, and then the colourful patchwork vista unfurls below my head. It is not too quick and it is not too slow. It is utterly spectacular.

For a moment, the g-forces make me light-headed, but it passes almost instantly. It's enough to make you realise how easy it would be for pilots to become dizzy or disoriented during the turning, diving dogfights over occupied Europe.

I'm invited to take control again, and after that we head for home. We descend and the scenery is once again a stirring sight beneath those famous wings. I can see the airfield in the distance and my thoughts drift back to what might have been going through the minds of those young men as they neared home.

Low now, we turn and fly over the runway. I can see in perfect clarity the shadow cast by the Spitfire on the ground below, passing over houses, gardens and then the airfield. It's another unforgettable, strangely poignant moment, a



personal confirmation that this is really happening. We turn, and Steve lowers the undercarriage. The gear selector, visible to my lower right, shows whether it has come down or not. It has. We're on finals now and I'm bracing myself for a bump. None comes. Compared with the Hawker Hurricane, the Spitfire could be tricky to land due to its narrow undercarriage, but Steve greases it on to the tarmac with delicate precision. There's loads of rudder input - I can feel that through my feet, and the tail seems to shudder in the slipstream until we slow right down.

All we need to do now is taxi across the grass, wave at onlookers, and climb heroically from the cockpit. I'm probably talking absolute rubbish to Steve at this point, and he kindly humours me. Darren Harbar is back on *terra firma* and is there to capture this moment of glory.

To give an idea of how special this experience was, the following day Key Publishing's group editor Nigel Price asks me what item I will place on my 'bucket list' now that I've done this. After pondering the matter for several minutes I still haven't come up with anything. All I can think of is this - I'll have to save up some money, go back to Sywell and do it all over again.

For more information on the Grace Spitfire including how to book a flight, e-mail: [flights@ML407.co.uk](mailto:flights@ML407.co.uk) and see [www.airleasing.co.uk](http://www.airleasing.co.uk) ●



**Top right**  
Steve Jones and Steve Beebe taxiing back in at Sywell on April 19.

**Inset**  
Carolyn presents Steve with a signed certificate.

team. He and team leader Paul Bonhomme are the best in the business when it comes to formation flying, and these are probably the simplest manoeuvres Steve has flown for a while.

After a few minutes, the camera