



# SLICES

WORDS: BEN DUNNELL

# of ACTION

Thirty years on from ITV's *Piece of Cake* series, the flying sequences surely stick in the memory the most. Given the great names who were behind them, that's hardly surprising

**ABOVE:** One of the most famous moments in Ray Hanna and Spitfire IX MH434's illustrious shared history — flying under Winston Bridge in County Durham, towards the end of the *Piece of Cake* filming.

HERBIE KNOTT/REX/  
SHUTTERSTOCK

Winston Bridge, County Durham. An impressive single arch across the River Tees, dating from 1762-63, it was Europe's longest such construction when it was built. This fine piece of Georgian engineering, a sturdy sandstone edifice set in a secluded area of wooded countryside west of Darlington, is among the area's most notable sights. But, for anyone with an interest in historic aviation, it has a very special significance. This is, of course, the bridge under which Ray Hanna flew Spitfire IX MH434 during the making of *Piece of Cake*.

Holmes Associates' six-part adaptation of Derek Robinson's novel for London Weekend Television appeared on network ITV three decades ago. In depicting the early

stages of World War Two through the eyes of fictional RAF Fighter Command unit 'Hornet Squadron', it committed to camera many spectacular aerial sequences, flown by some of the leading warbird pilots of their generation. But that moment stands out above all others.

For the late Ray and Mark Hanna, and the Old Flying Machine Company that they co-founded, 1988's *Piece of Cake* was momentous. It was their biggest small-screen venture yet, involving the largest combats between World War Two-era fighters mounted on these shores since *Battle of Britain* 20 years earlier. They numbered five Spitfires and, to play Messerschmitt Bf 109s, three Hispano HA-1112 Buchóns. As Sarah Hanna — daughter of Ray, brother of Mark

— recalls, "Obviously, the situation then with Spitfires and Messerschmitts — particularly Spitfires — was very different to what it is today. There was no suggestion, as there was with *Dunkirk*, that you could only have a MkI or a MkII. There just wasn't a choice. Mark pulled together the fleet."

As many commented at the time, they shouldn't have been Spitfires at all. In the book, 'Hornet Squadron' flies Hurricanes. The complaint was decidedly churlish given that there were then just three airworthy Hurricanes, one of them in Canada. 'Spits' it was, then. The OFMC's own MH434 was joined by MkIX NH238 and PRXI PL983 from Doug Arnold's Warbirds of Great Britain fleet, together with The Fighter Collection's MkIX ML417 and the only MkIa



then flying, Personal Plane Services' AR213. Italian operator Franco Actis was to have provided his MkVIII, MT719, but he withdrew after his son was injured in a hang-gliding accident.

And what of the enemy? Buchóns, let alone Bf 109s, were hardly ten-a-penny in the mid-to-late 1980s. The Confederate Air Force seemed like a good source, with one flyable Buchón and another almost ready. The aircraft owned by German collector Hans Dittes had reflight after restoration in August 1986, while in the UK both Charles Church and Nick Grace had examples under rebuild.

All possible avenues were explored, but doing quite a bit of filming in the States seemed a good idea. Walter Eichhorn, who by then had been displaying a Harvard for many years, carried out the early flying of Hans Dittes' Buchón, D-FEHD. "Word got around that I was flying a 109", he says. "The television people approached Dittes. The ones in England weren't ready, and he said he had a pilot who could fly a 109."



"They originally wanted me to fly a Buchón in Harlingen, Texas, but then that one crashed [N8575 was lost in December 1987, along with pilot Dick Baird]. They still made me go over — I took the whole family with me, my wife and children — because they were hoping to get a second one ready. It was ready except the prop was off it. We were waiting and waiting for the prop, so I spent a week's holiday there. We had a good time, but they didn't get the aeroplane ready. I went home again, and they decided to do it in the UK". Dittes' D-FEHD would join the Grace and Church aeroplanes, G-BOML and G-HUNN respectively.

Some shooting was still done in the States. The CAF contributed its CASA 2.111, to represent a Heinkel He 111, and Spitfire IX MK297. Efforts to bring the CASA to Britain unfortunately came to nought, as did similar plans relating to an example owned by David Tallichet. However, as associate producer — and co-author of the book on the making of the series — Robert Eagle points out, filming there wasn't ideal. "The landscape below you in Texas definitely doesn't look like the South Coast", he says.

Always, though, it was planned to do most of the filming in Britain. Aerial cameraman Simon Werry was working for Cornwall-based Castle Air, specialists in using helicopters as camera platforms, when producer



Between takes at Charlton Park in February 1988: from left to right, 'Hoof' Proudfoot, Mark Hanna, Old Flying Machine Company engineer Roger Shepherd, Ray Hanna and Stephen Grey. PETER R. MARCH



One of many memorable images shot during the production by photographer Herbie Knott — the smoke from burning tyres at Charlton Park, part of the special effects for an airfield attack scene, is swirled by a Spitfire's prop wash. HERBIE KNOTT/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK



Andrew Holmes came to discuss *Piece of Cake* over lunch. “My father was an aerial cameraman”, Werry recalls, “so I was brought up with all kinds of stories about *Battle of Britain*, ‘Skeets’ Kelly, Johnny Jordan and all those guys... I knew that to do proper air-to-air with these aeroplanes we would need something like a B-25 or a Harvard. The helicopter stuff was going to be fine, but you were never going to get the really powerful shots without flying formation.”

After lunch, Werry asked Holmes if he'd yet given any consideration as to who was going to be aerial cameraman. As it turned out, he hadn't. Simon got the job. “I kind of blagged it, really”, he says, “but I couldn't miss the opportunity.”

A Mitchell was earmarked, and Werry went to Burlington, Vermont, to take a look at it. What he found was B-25J N1042B, a veteran cameraship from many past film productions during its ownership by Tallmantz Aviation. “It had a one-piece Plexiglas nose, all the ports were opened up and had camera mountings, and the tail gunner's position was modified so you could put a cameraman on the back with his legs hanging out, with a camera on a tripod between his legs”.

The aircraft was bought by UK-based aviation film specialists Aces High and ferried across the Atlantic. Mike Woodley's company also provided a non-flying CASA 2.111, the former G-AWHB, for a crash scene and CASA 352L G-BFHG to depict a Junkers Ju 52/3m ambulance aircraft.

Also pressed into service as a camera platform was the OFMC's Harvard IIB, FT391. “The tail was painted the same colour as a Spitfire”, says Simon Werry, “so you could pan through and do some interesting dogfight sequences. It meant we could really ‘rock and roll’ it, do slow loops and things like that, so we could get some feeling of dogfights.”



The series begins with ‘Hornet Squadron’ stationed at ‘RAF Kingsmere’, supposedly in Essex. In reality, this was the former RAF airfield at South Cerney, Gloucestershire, then as now in army hands. As a 1930s RAF Expansion Scheme aerodrome, it met the series' needs admirably. It was also conveniently close to another of the main locations: Charlton Park, a Jacobean mansion near Malmesbury, Wiltshire. The Earl of Suffolk's

property had its own airstrip, rendering it a perfect choice for the role of the squadron's French château base at ‘St Pierre’.

However, Charlton Park presented a few difficulties. Ray Hanna brought MH434 in for a press day in November 1987, and found the grass decidedly soft after several days of rain. This situation hadn't materially changed once filming began during February 1988. Strong crosswinds initially forced the Spitfires to divert into RAF Lyneham, but eventually Mark Hanna managed to land at Charlton on 24 February and the others soon followed, joining the Feggans Brown-built plastic replicas that were a major feature of the production. When the crew returned there in May, the site was in perfect condition for Spitfire flying.

For Mark, *Piece of Cake* presented a wonderful opportunity. He was officially credited as deputy chief pilot, his father Ray being chief pilot, but he found himself in more of an aerial co-ordinator role. “He was masterful at it”, says Sarah Hanna, “and *Piece of Cake* was the first time he had been put in charge of a fleet of aircraft like that.”

It was a first for several others, too. Brian Smith had not long started





All five Spitfires involved in *Piece of Cake* fly in formation. While the series may never have been repeated on British television, some of the flying sequences have been used in other programmes, including ITV's popular wartime detective drama *Foyle's War*. HERBIE KNOTT/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK



B-25J Mitchell cameraship N1042B at South Cerney on 6 May 1988. The Aces High-owned machine was mainly captained for its *Piece of Cake* duties by veteran Confederate Air Force pilot Vernon Thorp, with Anita Mays as co-pilot. ADRIAN M. BALCH



flying for OFMC, and — along with the Hannas, Stephen Grey, 'Hoof' Proudfoot, Pete Jarvis, Carl Schofield and John Watts — was among the *Piece of Cake* Spitfire pilots. "It was an eye-opener", Brian reflects. "I was quite new to the warbird game in those days, and it was a learning experience, trying to present the aeroplane to the cameras as opposed to the normal airshow type of flying.

"When I look back on it, it was pretty challenging flying. Operating out of Charlton Park, I think there was one way in and one way out, and the conditions on the ground weren't that brilliant at the time of year we were doing it. We were doing as much as we could out of Charlton, but also using Kemble, which was adjacent and had hangarage and a hard runway."

Charlton Park had been turned into apartments, and the majority of residents were more excited by the filming than inconvenienced by it. Even so, the pyrotechnic smoke generated by some of the explosions during the airfield attack sequences did cause a degree of irritation. Brian Smith describes the flying for those scenes as "pretty feisty". Along with fellow Buchón pilots Nick Grace and Reg Hallam, Walter Eichhorn was ➤

Nick Grace's Buchón, G-BOML, in front of the house at Charlton Park in May 1988, by which time the airfield was in perfect condition for warbird operations. ADRIAN M. BALCH





**RIGHT:** Ray Hanna about to climb in to Harvard FT391/G-AZBN, with aerial cameraman Simon Werry already installed in the rear seat. Another of the Harvard's regular pilots for *Piece of Cake* was John Romain. PETER R. ARNOLD

one of those doing the attacking. "I killed more than one [replica] Spitfire on the ground", he says. "I'd do a low pass over them and one of them would be blown up. I'd fly over them from one side, then from another angle."

"Some of the flying was very demanding and commanding", says Sarah Hanna. "They were different times, and there was more latitude. My father had been very much a low-level fighter-reconnaissance pilot, my brother had done a lot of low-level in Phantoms in the Falklands and elsewhere... there was a fighter pilot dynamic, and there was an attitude there that was very receptive to flying — even if they weren't ex-air force or ex-navy — in a certain way. Testament to that are those amazing sequences you see at Charlton Park, with that extraordinary runway carved out between the trees, and flying down over that beautiful English landscape. I know it's meant to be France, but we all know it's England, and it feels so quintessentially right for Spitfires to be flying in that environment."

A lot of the Buchón flying was done from Duxford, though at least



one of them also landed at Charlton. The trio was only together in the UK for three days, bad weather having delayed Walter Eichhorn's attempts to get across the Channel. Once he was there, though, he describes the experience as, "great fun, super fun. I had been in England before, so I knew some of these guys and they knew me. But it was challenging because, don't forget, it was the early days of my 109 flying. There was a lot I learned during that filming, flying up against guys like Ray Hanna. He

was way ahead of the game. I didn't have that much formation experience. When we had a briefing, whenever Ray said something, that was it. I thought that was excellent."

Ray's skills were put to good use on the ground, too. Simon Werry remembers, "At South Cerney, day one, I was intent that we should have a bit of a talk about safety. There were a lot of people wandering around the Spitfires and the B-25, and everyone was getting over-excited. We had the press down there, we had the CAA down there. I wanted to sit down with all our crew, and I got Ray involved with this. We did this briefing, and Ray gave a great speech, which just got everyone to calm down a bit."

In the air, aboard the Harvard cameraship, Simon enjoyed a first-hand demonstration of Hanna senior's





incomparable abilities. “I was trying to get a rolling shot with the Seven Sisters [cliffs] in the background and two Messerschmitts up behind... We had the 109s [...] really close, something like 10ft behind us. We rolled one way, they rolled the other way, and we got the Seven Sisters rolling through the shot. Ray performed a barrel roll, and I never felt a thing. It was an absolutely solid, perfect, 1g barrel roll. Then he goes, ‘Do you want it again?’ He did about three or four of these, absolutely perfect. I’ve never flown with a pilot who had that kind of control over an aeroplane. A special man.”

This was done during location filming from Friston, a long-disused former airfield on the Sussex coast that was temporarily revived for *Piece of Cake*, albeit with reminders of its wartime RAF use still visible in the form of bomb craters pockmarking the local landscape. “I think I enjoyed

that more than anything”, says Werry. “The weather was glorious, the landscape was amazing”. Brian Smith remembers, “doing a bit of looning-around down in the folds of the cliffs there...”

As with Charlton Park, there was no hangarage at Friston, so several times the Spitfires and Buchóns overnighted at Headcorn. This wasn’t the only logistical issue. “Word got around about what we were doing”, says Brian. “We were trying to get some shots out over Beachy Head and the cliffs, and of course it lasted about a day. Then we went down there the second day and there were about 3,000 people there, which rather scuppered what we were trying to do.”

Then there was the issue of crops — one in particular. “There were great

fields of yellow rapeseed growing”, says Robert Eagle, “which was a bit anachronistic as they didn’t have that growing in the war”. Simon Werry concurs. “It seemed to be a summer where the yellow was brighter than anything else. There were only certain areas you could go to where you could avoid all that. East Anglia was rife with it. It was a bit better when we were down at South Cerney.”

What East Anglia did offer, though, was a suitable ‘double’ for Le Touquet. For the purposes of ‘Hornet Squadron’s’ arrival in France, the French airport is represented by the art deco terminal at Cambridge, with Brian Woodford’s King’s Flight-schemed Dragon Rapide, G-ACZE, and the Cambridge Flying Group’s Tiger Moths as set dressing. Another Tiger, Colin Dodds’ G-ARAZ, was used at South Cerney, while

**BELOW:** Cast members ‘scramble’ — away from their Spitfires, rather oddly — during a promotional photoshoot at Cambridge Airport, which depicted Le Touquet.

REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

“ We were trying to get some shots out over Beachy Head and the cliffs, and of course it lasted about a day. Then we went down there the second day and there were about 3,000 people there ”





## THE DISAPPEARING CODES

When *Piece of Cake* was first broadcast, some purists were dismayed at the choice of code letters for 'Hornet Squadron's' Spitfires: NS, in reality the codes used by the Short Sunderlands of Coastal Command's No 201 Squadron. Of course, unless a particular historical squadron is being depicted, film and TV productions always shy away from using genuine codes, and for very good reason. But what eagle-eyed viewers may also have noticed was that the codes disappeared from the Spitfires very early on.

Sarah Hanna takes up the story. "They started off by doing shots with all the aeroplanes with squadron codes on. Then they realised, to their complete horror, that there would be continuity issues; that they

couldn't inter-splice the footage. So they came up with this cunning stratagem of saying, 'We're going to take the squadron codes off after the blue-on-blue incident, so that no-one knows who we are'. That's why, for huge chunks of the series, the Spitfires aren't in squadron codes". In addition, there were problems with the temporary code letters coming off the aircraft during filming.

As an aside, the 'friendly fire' incident Sarah refers to appears in the first episode, when 'Hornet Squadron' believes it has shot down a Junkers Ju 88 for its first 'kill', but it turns out to be a Bristol Blenheim. The producers had originally hoped to use the British Aerial Museum's first airworthy Blenheim for these scenes, but its loss at Denham in June 1987 sadly put paid to that.

The 'NS' squadron codes on the Spitfires, here displayed by MH434 at South Cerney, were short-lived.

ADRIAN M. BALCH



Michael Astor's camouflaged Rapide G-AHGD *Women of the Empire* appears in a scene at Charlton Park.

While much of this was happening, a good deal of behind-the-scenes discussion was going on as to how the bridge scene could be shot. Once Winston Bridge was chosen, its environs needed some preparation. "They went to have a look", Sarah Hanna recalls, "and it was agreed that they would chop down some scrub on a shallow island on the run-up to the bridge and trim some of the trees on the corner. The CAA graciously allowed permission for father to do it."

Simon Werry says, "It was almost the very last thing we did on the series. We reckoned Ray had 13ft on either wingtip under the bridge, but actually less on some of the tree overhangs running in and running out. I took position in the centre of the river — in those days we didn't have remote cameras. Ray said to me, 'Not only have I got to fly under the bridge, I've also got to avoid you. Maybe move back about 6ft'."

"They had the crew on the bridge and below, down on the banks as well,

so they could get the shot coming through the bridge", Sarah continues. "My brother was on the radio, up on the bridge. Father had said, 'When I do it, I don't want to talk to anyone. I just want to focus on doing it. So, keep the camera on everything I do, because I'm not going to tell you which time I'm actually going to do it — it's just going to happen. Just be sure you're always shooting'.

◆◆◆  
"He did a couple of practice passes, which in the series you can see, because the character, 'Moggy', pulls up as he makes his assessment of it. On the third time, my brother said he knew father had committed, because the aeroplane dropped another 3 or 4ft and really pushed down towards the water. That was when he made his approach and went through the bridge. Mark said he damn near fainted because it was just so alarming for him watching his father coming up to the bridge in this 36ft-span aeroplane — I think the bridge is 90ft at its widest point, but its widest point is at the river bed, so it's narrowing immediately."

Sarah had never been to Winston Bridge until last year. "The scrub has all grown up", she says, "and the trees are back. It's amazing how nature just takes command, isn't it? I stood on that bridge, and I could entirely see why my brother nearly fainted. Then I walked to the other side of the bridge, and there's this beautiful little red iron Spitfire. There's a walk that goes through various important or historic places in Teesside [the Teesdale Way], and they've put this Spitfire in as one of the waymarks. I was moved beyond measure to see that there."

Simon Werry says of that scene, "No other pilot could have done it". It is, without doubt, one of the principal factors in *Piece of Cake* being so fondly and vividly recalled, even 30 years after its original broadcast in October–November 1988. This is in spite of the fact that the series — which helped launch the careers of such excellent actors as Neil Dudgeon, Nathaniel Parker and Jeremy Northam — has never been repeated on British television.

Today, Robert Eagle puts this down to "political reasons". Derek Robinson's original book had always been quite controversial for its approach, which questioned the numbers of RAF air combat kills claimed during the Battle of Britain, and indeed the battle's significance in terms of preventing a German invasion. The TV series was reportedly not popular in some higher echelons of the RAF, who briefed against it.

"The *Express* and the *Mail* took this up", says Robert. "LWT got a little bit paranoid, because not long before that there had been problems with [fellow London ITV company] Thames producing *Death on the Rock*". This documentary about the shooting in Gibraltar of three IRA members by the SAS caused a political storm, outraging Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Though a subsequent inquiry largely cleared it, Thames went on to lose its ITV franchise, in a move often interpreted as revenge by the Thatcher government. "That", Robert adds, "is the background to why *Piece of Cake* wasn't shown again."

Even so, the series has what Eagle calls, "a very strong core of aficionados who still remember it". Given the quality of the flying in particular, that should surprise no-one. Many — too many — of the pilots involved are no longer with us, but *Piece of Cake* represents a very strong element of their considerable legacy to the historic aircraft scene. **A**