



FLIGHT-WATCH



VOLUME 170

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JULY, 2006



THE DUXFORD FLYING LEGENDS AIR SHOW – THE EPITOME OF AIRCRAFT, TALENT AND ATMOSPHERE

It is early morning in the English countryside. The sky is overcast to broken with a ceiling of two thousand feet. The sun pops in and out as breaks in the cloud cover become more frequent. The temperature is about sixty degrees – almost chilly for July. The wind is from the southwest at 20 knots. As you look skyward you note strange twin engine biplanes cruising about. These taper-wing aircraft are reminiscent of dragonflies. This artistic creation of Sir Geoffrey De Havilland, the Rapide, earned its keep plying air routes between the British Isles and the continent during the 1930's and continued to provide air transport service with the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe.

Next, you spy a lineup of perhaps twenty Spitfires and Hurricane fighters adorned in various camouflage patterns of brown, green and dark grey upper surfaces with light blue under surfaces. Some bear less conventional paint schemes such as a black Hurricane with red trim on the spinner and forward cowling or an all blue photo reconnaissance Spitfire.

Milling about the perimeter of the grass runway is an army of airmen, engineers, volunteers and reenactors. Many wear Royal Air Force and

American Army Air Forces uniforms complete with appropriate gear such as helmets, parachutes, mae wests, flare pistols, and the host of accoutrements that convinces you that you have stumbled into a time warp. This must not be 2006, sixty one years after the end of the greatest conflict in world history. It appears to be between 1941 and 1944.

The American air services are well represented in this festival that honors the sacrifices and heroic acts of the greatest generation of British Commonwealth and American servicemen and women. You gaze upward at B-17 Flying Fortresses bristling with machine guns. These ancient instruments of warfare appear ready to be dispatched eastward to attack industrial targets in Germany. A brace of P-51 Mustang fighter planes stand poised on the grass. As the sun breaks out, these purpose-built killing machines glisten with morning dew and condensation.

A P-47 Thunderbolt aptly nicknamed “No Guts – No Glory” awaits the appearance of its pilot. The fighter is decked out in a silver paint scheme with a white and black checkerboard nose, and the nickname appears in yellow cursive script below the cockpit of the massive, eight gun pursuit plane.

A pristine F6F Hellcat fighter adorned in dark blue upper surfaces, light blue middle surfaces and white under surfaces appears ready to be launched for an intercept mission against Japanese fighter and bomber planes intent on destroying an American task force somewhere in the Southwest Pacific in 1943-44. This aircraft is, in fact, a combat veteran in which a U.S. Navy fighter ace, Lieutenant Alex Vraciu, destroyed a number of Japanese aircraft during the Great Pacific War.

An American F4F Wildcat stands on alert beside the Hellcat. The Wildcat proudly wears the colors of the British Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm including grey and sea green upper surfaces and white under surfaces together with the red, white and blue British roundels on the outboard wing panels and fuselage. The paint scheme is further complicated by black and white bands (invasion stripes) painted on the wings and fuselage of the stubby fighter plane. In truth, this aircraft was built under license by Eastern Aircraft and

was officially called an FM2. The Fleet Air Arm simply called it the Marlet.

A dark blue F8F Bearcat and dark blue F7F twin engine Tigercat (both in U.S. Navy markings) evidence some of the final evolutionary phases of American Navy fighters prior to the emergence of jet-propelled fighter planes. The objectives of the design team that formulated the Bearcat were simple: bolt the largest available powerplant on the smallest, most nimble airframe one could conceive, and put this speedy and agile fighter into the skies of the Western Pacific.

Suddenly, the serenity of the English countryside is interrupted by the roar of Rolls Royce Merlin engines. Three of these machines are mounted on test stands. One features a counter-rotating set of two propellers. As the engines roar to life, you hear the staccato pops and backfiring as power settings are adjusted from idle to full power by technicians who are seated behind these power-generating dynamos that many would argue represent the ultimate evolution of the liquid cooled, inline aircraft engine. The sound of these powerful engines draws the crowd to this venue like a magnet. Rows of small fences separate the crowd from the whirling propellers that unleash a whirlwind of propeller blast against the technicians seated on power consoles behind each engine.

In time, the army of volunteers, safety personnel and marshalls usher the crowd away from the rows of aircraft. The grassy taxi areas, tarmac and grass runway must be cleared if the aerial display is to commence. As the crowd retreats from the flightline, Colin Wilsher provides color and background to the festivities as he interviews pilots, writers, and aviation personalities who relate stories that provide context to the event. Among the honored guests are the Doolittle Raiders, the courageous airmen who took off from the American aircraft carrier *Hornet* in April of 1942 and bombed Japan. A pilot himself, Wilsher provides informed and meaningful commentary on the aircraft and airmen who made history.

After the flightline has been cleared, there appears to be a lull in the program. Suddenly, there is the thunderous noise of a dozen Spitfires climbing skyward. Forming up into two flights of six, the screaming fighters return and scream over the grass runway at Duxford. After the first flight six Spitfires zoom down the runway in single file at an alti-

tude of one hundred feet or so, the lead aircraft climbs skyward and breaks left. The five Spitfires after him follow suit and fan out above the horizon. The second flight follows with climbing turns to the right. The airfield is alive with the sound of twelve screaming aircraft that are positioned on alternate sides of the runway and the crowd.

The Spitfire demonstration lasts for perhaps fifteen minutes, and the crowd is thrilled by the exciting flying reminiscent of the exhibitions over Royal Air Force airfields during the Battle of Britain. As the snarling and growling Spitfires land and taxi to the end of the grass runway, each aircraft is met by an engineer (aircraft mechanic) who jumps onto and sits on the horizontal stabilizer of the aircraft to decrease the prospect of a nose over accident in the event the pilot should be required to suddenly apply the brakes of the aircraft.



The Spitfires are followed by a host of rare and exciting aircraft including Polikarpov I-15 and Yak-3 Russian fighter planes, three Chance Vought F4U Corsairs, and Leroy Gruman's superb series of Second World War fighters, the Hellcat, Wildcat, Bearcat and Tigercat. Next, the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight puts on a spirited display with a Spitfire, a Hurricane, and finally an Avro Lancaster four engine heavy bomber. Lufthansa's Junkers JU-52 and Messerschmitt ME-108 make an attractive display in their silver and black aircraft. The Spanish-built version of the German Messerschmitt Bf-109 fighter is flown in conjunction with the British Hawker Hurricane fighter giving the audience an appreciation for the performance capabilities of the two former enemies.

In time, American B-17 Flying Fortresses take to the air, and the audience is reminded of the role these heavy bombers played in crushing the industrial might of Nazi Germany. American P-51 Mustangs beat up the

airfield with a series of low level, high speed passes followed by climbing and zooming turns similar to those exhibited by the two flights of Spitfire fighter planes. There is also a display by a Curtiss Hawk 75 fighter flown by Steve Hinton and a license-built variant of the Morane Saulnier 406 fighter, both aircraft being painted in the colors of the Armee de l'Air.



While Sir Stephen Grey of the Fighter Collection Museum puts on an impressive aerobatic display in the F8F Bearcat, a formation of forty warbird aircraft assembles south of the airfield. As Grey concludes his performance, Wilsher announces the approaching formation called a “Balbo” in honor of an Italian military theorist. As the Balbo approaches and then passes overhead, the roar of aircraft engines reaches a crescendo. Observers on the ground point skyward as the massive formation of aircraft pass overhead. The Balbo formation is reminiscent of aerial displays staged by the military for heads of state before and after the Second World War.

After this climax in the air show, elements of the Balbo formation depart the formation sequentially and land while the remaining elements circle around and pass in review again. With each pass, elements of the formation depart the Balbo and land until finally it no longer exists and all the aircraft are on the ground.

As the air activities at Duxford Airfield draw to a close, there are still a number of attractions to consider. There is the American Air Museum which is a striking steel and glass structure that houses American aircraft and pays tribute to Americans who served alongside British and Common-

wealth airmen in the defeat of Axis forces in World War Two. Hangar Four features a Battle of Britain display including BF-109E Messerschmitt in its battle damaged condition after being shot down from British skies. A variety of rare aircraft are housed in Hangar Two operated by Sir Stephen Grey’s The Fighter Collection. Among these is a Gloucester Gladiator bi-plane fighter, a Bristol Beaufighter twin engine fighter which the Japanese dubbed “whistling death,” and a First World War Bristol fighter.

If your travel plans permit, a day spent at Duxford Airfield in the midst of an air show is an exciting and nostalgic event. Thanks are in order to Colin Wilsher, Sally Welsh, Chris Farmer and Nick Waller who extended their hospitality to the author during the Flying Legends Air Show, which was remarkable and very exciting.

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**MUSTANG
“BIG BEAUTIFUL DOLL”**



**LINE UP OF A
HURRICANE AND
SPITFIRES**



**STEVE HINTON
TAXIES OUT IN A
CURTISS HAWK 75**

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