

Signed Spitfire scrambles to lift nation's spirits

Exactly 80 years on from the Battle of Britain, an unarmed blue Spitfire has been lifting the spirits by touring the UK to say 'Thank You NHS' to those on the front-line battling Covid-19 in hospitals. **TIM ROBINSON** FRAeS reports from the Aircraft Restoration Company (ARCo), Duxford, home of the 'NHS Spitfire' – which is now raising money for NHS Charities.

Some 80 years ago the sight and sound of Merlin-powered fighters scrambling from RAF Duxford airbase lifted the spirits of those living through the dark days of the Battle of Britain when, for the person in the street, the country was in wartime lockdown, Nazi invasion could occur at anytime and no one had any idea when this would go on for.

Today, a single blue Spitfire, with 'Thank U NHS' painted on the underside, is also bringing a spark of joy to those on the front line of the fight against Covid-19 by performing flypasts of Britain's hospitals. It is also flying with a rapidly growing number of handwritten names of the lost loved ones, friends, doctors, nurses and essential workers in aid of NHS Charities Together.

The initiative is the brainchild of warbird pilot, engineer and owner of Duxford's Aircraft Restoration Company (ARCo), John Romain. A legendary figure in the vintage aircraft display and restoration circuit,

Romain was hooked on aviation from an early age from watching the 1969 film, *The Battle of Britain*, filmed at Duxford in a time when, oddly, there were few Spitfires and almost no Hurricanes flying.

Today, Romain is one of the the most experienced warbird pilots, with over 4,500 hours (over 1,000 of these on Spitfires), as well as hours on the type's WW2 deadly enemy, the Me109 – both in the Spanish Buchon and the original Emil. As well as warbird display flying, Romain is also much in demand for aerial stunt work for TV and films, flying a Buchon in Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk*, as well as flying a Cessna floatplane in the upcoming 007 film *No Time To Die*.

Meanwhile, ARCo, formed in 1991, has developed a reputation, under Romain's direction, for engineering excellence and pristine rebuilds of unique and rare historic aircraft, from the Bristol Blenheim to the 'Dunkirk Spitfire' and the 'Silver Spitfire' that flew around the world in 2019. It also performs heavy



maintenance for the RAF Battle of Britain Memorial Flight's Lancaster at its Duxford base.

Full circle

If there is a sense of history repeating itself in a Spitfire being used to raise morale during a national crisis, then for this particular aircraft and its owner, there is also a sense of events coming full circle. Romain and this PR MkXI 'L' go back a long way and, ironically, it was the first ever Spitfire he saw in the flesh in 1969 at an air show in Old Warden, Shuttleworth. "I have a picture of my mother and my brother and I standing in front of that actual aeroplane outside the restaurant. That was the first Spitfire I had ever seen as a young boy."

Once raced by ATA woman pilot Lettice Curtis (whose signature is on the fuselage), the Merlin-powered PR XI, with a one-piece unarmoured photo-rece front canopy, is now Romain's 'personal' Spitfire and pride and joy, with only himself and one other ARCo pilot allowed to fly it.

"It is not just the sky blue PR scheme of this sleek aircraft that make it suitable for the task," says Romain. "It's just the right aeroplane for the message we're sending out because it never carried guns. It's just a beautiful Spitfire that carried cameras. So it's right for this job."

Its speed and, as a reconnaissance machine, its range, also make it perfect for covering the ground and overflying the UK's hospitals which, as Romain ruefully notes, there are a 'surprising' number of, something that was not apparent when he gave himself this challenge.

How it started

How then did a couple of local flights by a private warbird owner snowball into a national aerial tour of NHS hospitals and flying tribute to front line health workers?

Like all good ideas, it started almost by accident. With the country in strict lockdown earlier this year, all private GA flying was curtailed. However, that was eased to allow essential engine flight tests to take place but only within a 10mile radius. John Romain explains: "It started during the lockdown period when no one was flying. 'L', our MkXI Spitfire, was just coming to the end of a repair. We decided to spend some of the lockdown period repairing her and getting her finished. By the end of that time, of course, she needed air testing and we were allowed to carry out necessary air testing but only within 10 nautical miles of Duxford. We got her airborne mid-afternoon on one Thursday and did the first air test."

The flight saw ARCo's phones ring off the hook and a deluge of emails when John returned from this flight. He takes up the story: "The phone started ringing. It was all people who had seen the aeroplane flying close to Duxford near the villages

● GENERAL AVIATION

NHS Spitfire

around here. They all called in support and just said "Thank goodness, how lovely it is to see a Spitfire flying again". Like many other towns and villages over the country, they were doing the 8 o'clock 'Clap for Carers' for the NHS that week. So we decided to do the second test flight at 8 o'clock, which we did. We centred it on my home village and then did a few others where some of my relations live, all within this 10 mile radius of Duxford and the response from that was huge. People absolutely loved it."

After some local flights, the idea grew further before the final 'Clap for Carers' when John's son George noticed the similarity between the RAF photo reconnaissance blue scheme of the aircraft and the NHS blue. A light bulb went off. Relates Romain: "We thought, well, we'll obviously do the last one and then my son George said "We should write underneath 'Thank You NHS' for the last of the claps." So we marked it all out, we painted it on with removable paint, and flew that last clap. Of course the response from that was even greater because suddenly now we've got an aeroplane that has got 'Thank You NHS' underneath it. We also flew around Cambridge and did Addenbrooke's hospital. That was the first real link of the NHS people themselves actually having seen the aeroplane. Here were people who were actually working in the NHS that were seeing it and reading the message."

This tribute produced even more of a response from those hard-pressed health workers that looked up and saw the Spitfire and its message, with Romain and ARCo then getting in touch with the NHS directly to inquire about which hospitals had been hardest hit and might appreciate a flyover of thanks.

Flights for your lives

With word now spreading fast and support growing, the NHS Spitfire flypast has now turned into a routine flying operation, in partnership with the NHS. A route is planned, with hospitals circled, timings worked out and then forwarded to the NHS which then

push it out to their hospitals to be on the look-out for the flypast, as well as sending to local press. The aeroplane also flew for the 72nd anniversary of the NHS, as well as over the Silverstone Grand Prix, spreading the message even further.

For Romain the challenge is not only finding the smaller hospitals from the air (a task that the WW2 recce pilot would be intimately familiar with) but also in circling the building to display the message painted underneath while keeping clear of restricted airspace and watching for other airspace users before flying on to the next hospital. Says Romain: "There is a little bit of choreography which comes with it to make sure that, firstly, I'm not flying over something I shouldn't be and, secondly, to make sure they get the message."

From the air, people are often out in car parks, gardens or even on the roof to wave at the Spitfire overhead. "The feedback from the ground is great with a lot of people watching. You can definitely see them and the bigger response on the ground, the better."

Having covered most of the southeast of England (including NHS Nightingale) in this tour of UK hospitals, ARCo and Romain plan to tour the rest of the UK, including Wales and Scotland before the aircraft will appear at the Battle of Britain 80th Anniversary Air Show at Duxford on 20 September. This will see the NHS Spitfire fly with the Red Arrows to close the show on both days – a fitting finale to this aerial tour of thanks to frontline workers.

Sign for a Merlin

Having captured the public's attention, expressions of support and love that came flooding in for these impromptu flypasts also set off another idea. Says Romain: "We had more emails and more calls from people who wanted somehow to support it. We thought about that and decided that we aren't looking for people to sponsor this aeroplane, so what we'll do is to form a JustGiving page (www.justgiving.com/fundraising/nhsspitfire). They can make a donation (minimum £10) which goes to the NHS Trusts

Below left: John Romain's wife, Amanda, hand-writing the names on the Spitfire.

Below right: John Romain and 'L' – his Spitfire PRXI – 51 years ago, this was the very first Spitfire he saw at an air show.

George Romain/ARCo

George Romain/ARCo





Together charity and, in recognition of that donation, they can nominate a name which will be handwritten actually on the Spitfire.”

The idea of paying tribute to your personal pandemic heroes and heroines with their name handwritten (by John's wife Amanda) on the NHS Spitfire is proving to be massively popular. He adds: “That's brought us obviously a huge amount of remote interest from people who have wanted to have their names or the name of their loved ones or the name of the doctor or a ward in an NHS unit. They are being written onto the Spitfire as they come in. Currently, there are over 1,600 names on the aeroplane and the fund to the NHS charity is going up by the day.” The Spitfire has space for 80,000 signatures over it.

The emotional impact of having your friend, family member, doctor or nurse's name flying on a Spitfire paying tribute to the NHS's own 'Finest Hour' has sometimes been overwhelming, says Romain: “I don't know what it is about the Spitfire but they find attachment and certainly putting the names on it has created even more of an attachment. So they feel part of it, which is great. We've had people in here last night just randomly call from a local village to say that their daughter worked in an intensive care unit and her name was on there. They came in, spent half an hour looking at the aeroplane, found her name and got pictures. They said: “We feel part of it now. It flies over, we see it and we know our daughter's name is on it. It's fantastic, we love it.”

Giving people the opportunity to say thanks, pay tribute or feel like they have a personal stake in a fighter that is carrying a message is yet another link to 1940, where the public were encouraged to turn 'Saucepans into Spitfires', or clubbed together to donate money to 'buy' Spitfires that would then be painted with the names of the towns, boroughs, clubs, newspapers, organisations and companies – as well as some pilots who had been lost in battle.

Symbol of hope

Some cynics might argue that any comparisons between that summer of 1940 and 2020's 'Darkest Hour' are unhelpful and ill-judged. Why, one might ask, use a warplane, (even an unarmed one) to reinforce jingoistic myths, when the enemy is not Luftwaffe bombers but a cold and indifferent virus that will be stopped by a vaccine and good hygiene, rather than aerial heroics?

However, this perhaps misses the power of symbolic gestures to strengthen and comfort us in times of crisis. Many of us, as in 1940, have sacrificed much in trying to defeat this virus, some have paid the ultimate price and the overall battle is still not won. In times like these, symbols of hope, common effort and national unity are needed, whether it is 'Dig For Victory' or 'Clap for Carers'. A solitary Spitfire, with its unmistakable shape and Merlin growl, flying over the UK in lockdown has been able to connect and touch so many people, isolated in their homes, as the ultimate symbol of defiance, survival and eventual victory. Indeed, with pilots from New Zealand, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Canada and the US coming together to defend Britain, it can be argued it is an international emblem of freedom. It is this attachment and love that people have for the Spitfire – that Romain, ARCo and the NHS Spitfire have tapped into by giving people the opportunity to put their Covid-19 heroes' names on this symbol of hope. When the NHS Spitfire closes the Duxford Air Show in September, there is unlikely to be a dry eye in the house.

The Spitfire is more than an aerial machine of metal, more than a piece of history - it is now an immortal icon that says simply 'never, ever surrender', whatever the odds or however bad things seem. Some 80 years on, it still has a place in our hearts and the ability to lift them when it is really needed.

**Get your Covid-19 hero's name on the NHS Spitfire here:
www.justgiving.com/fundraising/nhsspitfire**