

Newsletter



November/December 2006

Compiled by Larry Cross

The Indian summer kindly continued for our October meeting and members took the opportunity to look round the £25 million Airspace exhibition, with many of the exhibits impressively suspended from the vast roof. "A unique exhibition worthy of our magnificent aviation history".

It is expected to be completed by the Spring of 2007. Pictured. *RAF Canberra*



The meeting was attended by 68 members which started promptly somewhere around 13:00hrs.! I was asked to sit at the top table to give my report on the website and dare I say that the view from there was somewhat improved !

Annual Dinner.

The 2007 AGM has been fixed for **Sunday 13th May**, the annual dinner will therefore be on **Saturday 12th May** at the same venue as last year, Heydon Grange Golf and Country Club. Unfortunately rising costs means the event will cost £30 per person. For that you get good company, good food & wine, and a chance to win a prize in the grand raffle! All bookings, deposits, seating preferences, dietary requirements etc to the Secretary **Allan McRae**...

More details nearer the time, book now to avoid disappointment later, seating could be limited.

Web Site

A major problem developed during the initial construction of the web site and in order to get it up and running a temporary diversion was put in place. After a more detailed explanation it was generally agreed that we should continue with the project. The problem has since been resolved by adding a new domain which is now www.olddux.org

A **suggestion** to delete the October meeting was met with a firm rebuttal and indeed, suggestions were invited to make it more of an event. There are various venues available on site e.g. the Marshall Rooms with a capacity of 70-100 .for ...perhaps lunch? ..

Your Suggestions and comments please.

Mystery.

On a recent visit to Duxford Gerry Knight accompanied by an old colleague George Nicol were walking past No2 hanger (Ex 64 Sqdn) when they came across a small etching in the concrete of a scarab beetle, the emblem of 64 Sqdn!

This is at the front left hand corner of the hanger when facing the flight pan near to where the old crew rooms used to be, Gerry who was on 64 circa 1955-1957 does not recall seeing it then, but perhaps there is somebody who knows the answer, please let us know.

Blondie & George send their best wishes to all.

Recruitment Stand September Air Show



At the Sept Airshow the recruitment stand was ably manned as usual by Jim Garlinge and Les Milgate, aided and abetted by Richard Hambly and Tony Harbour (Sat) and on Sunday by John Blake, Doreen Cross & myself

I mention this because Mr. Richard C Smith launched his book, "RAF Duxford a History in Photographs. from 1917 to the Present Day"

.I found Chapter V of particular interest "The Jet Era, 1946-1962". as it is of course relevant to our time there. Richard who by the way runs a museum in Purfleet, approached Jim, seeking his help because of his connections with Duxford and Jim kindly made some photographs available to him.

Because we were part of the history too so to speak, we were asked to take part in the book signings at the same table as the B of B pilots and I admit to feeling very much out of place among such illustrious company.

However a free copy was presented to the association and a good plug for us was printed on the back page... and we still made contact

with 4 potential new members !. A copy of the book may be offered as a special prize at the forthcoming dinner.

New Members

We welcomed four new members, Rod Whiting (64Sqdn). Barry Davies (64Sqdn A/F 59-61). . Trevor Bliss (StnWorkshops 59-60) and Roy Monk Ass. Member. Since the meeting, Peter Stephenson (65 Sqn Ins.59-61) and Terry Betchley Ass. Member

In Memory

Sadly we have lost 12 members this year, 10 of whom were mentioned in the Spring Newsletter. More recently (notified) Ron Preston ex 66 Sqn. and Peter Gates. A Minutes Silence was observed to their memory. Peter was a founder member and his funeral in Luton was attended by Bob, Allan, Jim and Ann and Trevor Brinkley.

Wilf Hodgkinson would like to hear from any member that was present at the final parade at Duxford in Oct 1961

John Rogers would like to hear from anyone who had particularly fond memories of Bet's Café anecdotes and photographs would be most welcome. Tel.01462 731506

I would like to hear from anyone!!

Many thanks to those 53 members that did reply to my attempted survey. In hindsight I should have done it differently .However it is not now necessary to return the slips and the newsletter will continue to be posted to all members, unless they inform me that they have internet access. Thanks to the 10 that have already done so. **L.C.**



**WISHING ALL OUR MEMBERS
A VERY HAPPY
CHRISTMAS
AND A PEACEFUL NEW YEAR**



The COMMITTEE

The Twelve Days Of Turkey'

On the first day of Christmas my true love said to me
"I'm glad we bought fresh turkey and a proper Christmas tree."

On the second day of Christmas my laughter could be heard
As we tucked into our turkey, a most delicious bird.

On the third day we entertained the people from next door
And the turkey tasted just as good as it did the day before.

Day four, relations came to stay and the kids were as good as gold,
We finished up the Christmas pud and ate the turkey- cold.

On the fifth day of Christmas outside the snowflakes flurried
But we were nice and warm inside and ate our turkey, curried.

Day six, I must admit the Christmas spirit died,
The children fought and bickered and we had turkey rissoles - fried.

On the seventh day of Christmas my true love saw us wince,
As we sat down at the table and were offered turkey mince

On day eighth day of Christmas the dog, he ran for shelter,
As we downed our turkey pancakes with a glass of alka-seltzer.

Day nine, the cat left home and by lunchtime dad was blotto,
He said he had to have a drink to face turkey risotto.

Day ten and the booze had gone, except our home-made brew,
And if that wasn't bad enough we suffered turkey stew.

On the eleventh day of Christmas the Christmas tree was moulting
The mince pies were as hard as rocks and the turkey was revolting.

On the twelfth day of Christmas we smiled and licked our lips,
The guests had gone, the turkey too, and we had good old fish and chips.



Ground Force

Most Gardeners would be happy with a gnome or fountain in their garden, but not Neil Airey, a cousin of one of our members, Bill Lancaster. Neil, an ex Sqn Leader flew helicopters with the RAF between 1979 – 1996 and now lives in Spark Bridge near Ulverston. Incredibly, he privately purchased an English Electric Lightning Mk.Ia (minus the engine) and after going through the 'normal' planning procedures planted it in his back garden.

XRM 172 it's official Reg No .was one of 28 aircraft built at Warton and saw front line service with 56 Sqn. It was retired in 1974 when it was placed on Gate Guard at RAF Coltishall.



The aircraft is well screened from the road and access to view is by prior arrangement. There, visitors will be allowed

to donate money to the Spark Bridge village hall restoration fund!

Neil's aim is to preserve a unique piece of British aviation history as it was the last totally British fighter aircraft and only one of four Mk.Ia Lightnings still in existence. **"3 Cheers for Neil"**



The Pressie

A young man wanted to purchase a Christmas gift for his new sweetheart, and as they had not been dating very long, after careful consideration he decided a pair of gloves would strike the right note : romantic, but not too personal. Accompanied by his sweetheart's younger sister, he went to M & S and bought a pair of white gloves. The sister purchased a pair of panties for herself. During the gift wrapping, the clerk mixed up the items and the sister got the gloves and the sweetheart got the panties. He then wrote the accompanying letter.

Dear One, I chose these because I noticed that you are not in the habit of wearing any when we go out in the evening. If it had not been for your sister, I would have chosen the long ones with the buttons, but she wears short ones that are easier to remove. These are a delicate shade, and the lady I bought them from showed me the pair she had been wearing for the past three weeks and they were hardly soiled. I had her try yours on for me and she looked really nice. I wish I could be there to put them on for you the first time, as no doubt other hands will come in contact with them before I have a chance to see you again. When you take them off, remember to blow into them before putting them away as they will naturally be a little damp from wearing. Just think how many times I will kiss them during the coming year. I hope you will wear them for me on Friday night.

All my Love,.....

P.S. The latest style is to wear them folded down with a little fur showing.

At the time RAF Duxford was home to 64 (NF) Sqn's Meteors and 65 (F) Sqn's Hunters and in 1956 the unit CO Grp/Capt. H. M. Pinfold was the only person authorised by the AOC to fly this spitfire. The last four spitfires held by the RAF had been withdrawn from flying duties leaving SL542 bearing the dubious title "The Last Spitfire", and the main reason for it being on the unit strength was to lead the Battle of Britain flypast over Buckingham Palace, a once a year event.

Grp/Capt. Pinfold flew SL542 on several sundry air tests, (all legitimate of course), as well as the B of B rehearsal flights 1956 (The actual flypast was cancelled due to inclement weather). There was a 20-minute air test flight on Jan 24th 1957; this was to be the last occasion he would fly in SL542!

Sometime after it's arrival at Duxford a decision was made that the Spitfire should participate in 'Air Days' at other RAF units and that Grp/Capt Pinfold would be the pilot. As these were mainly weekend events he foresaw that his weekend get together with his family were in jeopardy, so he appealed to the AOC to allow a young single pilot to share the demonstration duties. The AOC agreed but laid down strict conditions as to the qualities of the chosen pilot. This turned out to be F/O Melaniphy a Hunter pilot from 65 Sqn. who had some previous experience of piston engine tail wheel aircraft, gained when flying Harvard's.

His first Spitfire flight took place shortly after Grp/Capt Pinfold had returned from his (last) air test and all went according to plan until he ground looped the plane on landing. When asked by one of the crash team if he was OK, he replied with those immortal words "F*** it". Grp/Capt Pinfold was said to be absolutely shattered when he saw the result of the crash, I believe that he knew this meant the end of SL542's flying career with the RAF.



The crash damage was originally classed as Cat 3 and repair work was commenced on the prop, oleo legs and wingtips but further inspection revealed severe damage to the starboard wing main spar and as a result was reclassified as Cat 5 and therefore unfit to fly. She continued to be looked after by Station Flight, cleaned and polished and pushed outside on sunny days. She was normally parked just outside the control tower resplendent in her pale blue colour scheme (not silver as some have reported) and returned to the hanger at the end of the day. In August 1958 she was moved to a permanent site by the

tower and picketed there. Sometime later she reverted to a camouflage colour scheme with the coding (SH) for 64 Sqn. on the port-side and the coding (YT) for 65 Sqn. on the starboard side. Although I am unable to confirm this I believe this was done to mark the occasion when both Squadrons received their Standards at the same ceremonial parade on the 6th July 1960.

When RAF Duxford ceased to be an operational unit in 1961, SL542 was issued for display as a gate guard at RAF Horsham-St- Faith, (now Norwich airport) and was mounted on a pylon at the main entrance to the camp. I believe this was the first example of a Spitfire to be displayed in this way. There is a story (unsubstantiated!) that shortly after it was put on display a motorist returning late one foggy evening from the nearby Firs Public House suddenly came across a plane looming out of the fog seemingly about to crash into him. The evasive action that followed resulted in him coming to rest in the hedge surrounding married quarters.

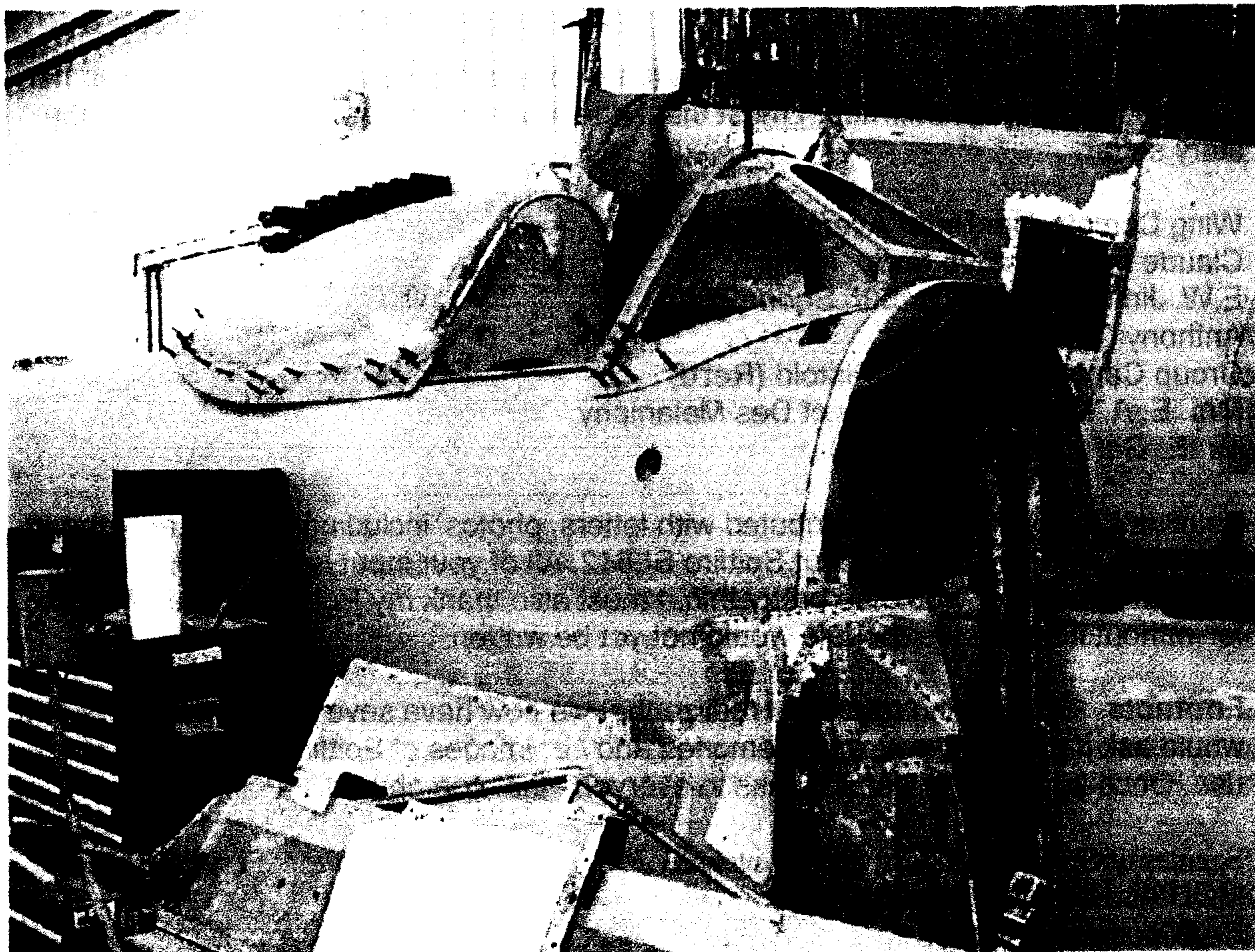
When Horsham closed in 1963 she was transferred to nearby RAF Coltishall, once again for gate guard duties where I believed she stayed for 25 years. During Coltishall's Battle-of Britain air show on 14th Sept 1968 she was dismounted from her concrete column and was seen in one of the hangers as part of the static display.



On 18th Sept 1971 at that year's Battle of Britain show she was back on her column once again and was still there when spotted during Coltishall's Families Day on the 28th May 1983. She was given a face-lift in 1984/1985 and reappeared bearing 695 Sqn. coding (4M) and a new serial number although this (8390M) never appeared on the airframe. Finally on 31st Dec 1988 she was sent to 19 MU at RAF St. Athan to be stored pending disposal instructions.

In 1991 a deal was brokered on behalf of Capt. Jeet Mahal by Mr Peter R. Arnold and the aviation authorities for SL542 to be exchanged for the wreckage of a WWII Hamden Bomber that the RAF Museum were very interested in acquiring. After periods of storage at various locations around the country she was eventually sold, and after two changes of owner went by sea to the USA where she was allocated a civilian serial No N2289J and again stored. At long last SL542's much needed restoration work began at Harry Stenger's Aero Fabrications & Restoration workshops in Bartlow, Florida, on behalf of her new owner, businessman Anthony Jurak.

Harry Stenger had reported that the airframe structure was in good condition but all the skins would have to be replaced.

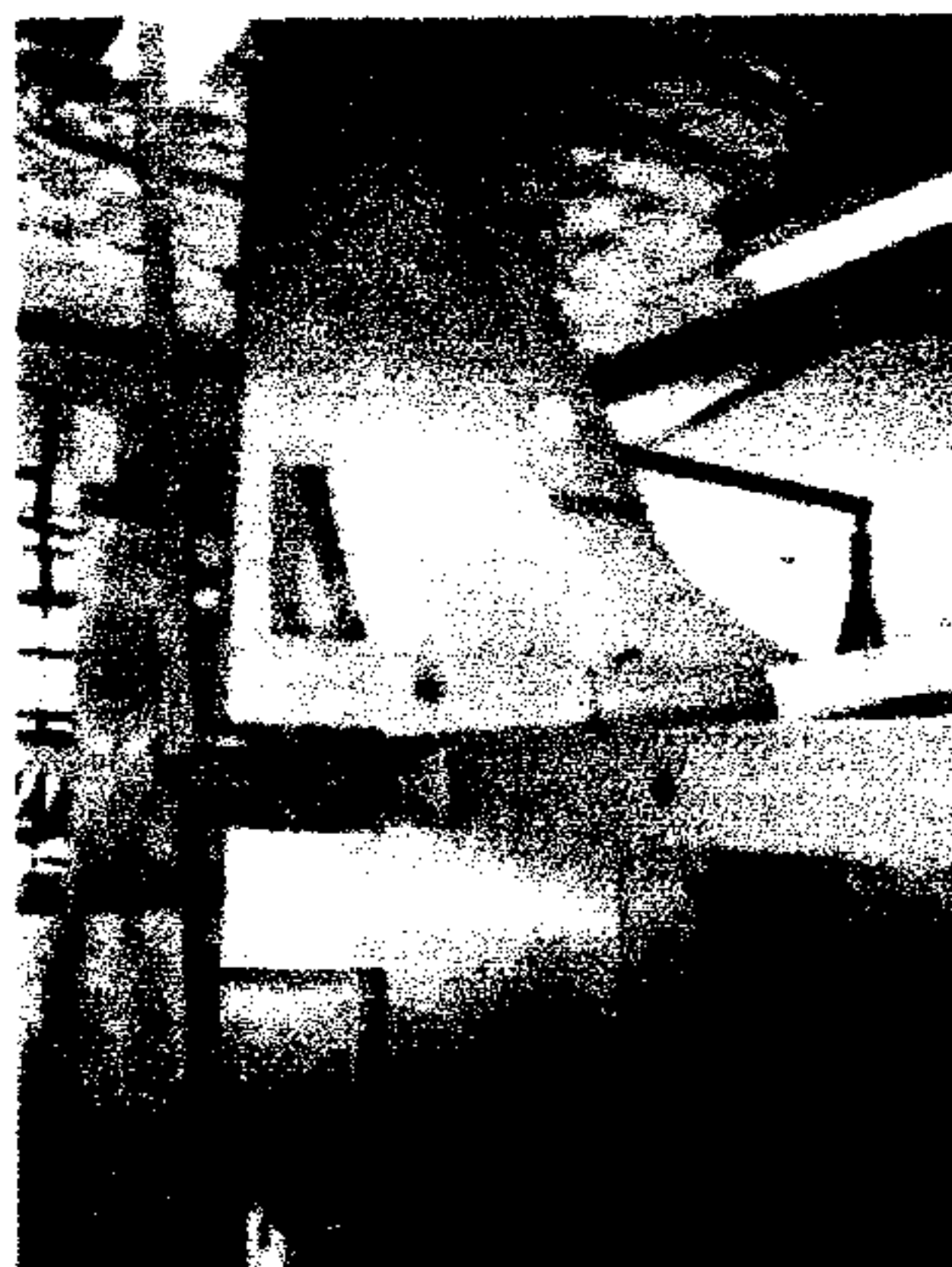


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Work proceeded on the major components and was fairly well advanced when Anthony Jurak, a Canadian by birth, found an aircraft restorer on his 'own doorstep' and decided to transfer all further restoration work to Ontario. Thanks to the efforts of various interested correspondents I have managed to establish that work on SL542 is still going ahead with the fuselage, tail and port wing now almost fully restored.



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Acknowledgements

Although the story has more to come as the restoration continues and the gaps in her Service history are confirmed, I must thank the following for their contributions to the story so far.

Wing Commander Peter Ayerst DFC (Ret'd)
Claude Fryer (ex 595 Sqdn. Pilot)
E.W. Jimmy' James (ex 595 Sqdn. Pilot)
Anthony Carl Jurak
Group Captain H. Morton Pinfold (Ret'd)
Mrs. E. A. Melaniphy. widow of Des Melaniphy.
Mr. E. G. P. Melaniphy. (son)

To all of those who have contributed with letters, photos including Olivier Lacombe at Avi8.com and anecdotes about Spitfire SL542. All of your input is much appreciated, as without it the story would be pretty thin. I must also thank my Publisher Allan McRae, for without him for sure the tale would not yet be written.

Footnote. Since going to press I realize that we now have several new members and would ask if they too have any memories and / or images of SpitfireSL542 that I could use. Once again my grateful thanks to everyone that contributed.

Sources of SL542's Military Service include:
MOD Air Historical Branch (RAF).
RAF Museum, Hendon
PRO, Kew.

Tales of El Adem by (681187 J/T Tod Slaughter)

I first saw El Adem whilst serving on 64Sqn when I was stationed at R.A.F Duxford. We were on detachment to Cyprus in 1959 with our Gloster Javelins and I was a J/T engine fitter. The squadron personnel flew out in a Beverly, which was quite an experience in itself. and after a four-hour trip from Duxford we refuelled at Orange in southern France before setting out for Malta. Here there was an overnight stay where we sampled the delights of Hop Leaf beer and "The Gut", but that's another (sordid) story. The next morning we set off for El Adem and after a quick fill up flew onto Nicosia. 64Sq'dn had three detachments to Cyprus and on each occasion the brief stop at El Adem had a lasting impression on me. Little was I to know that after being put on P.W.R for an overseas posting where, naively, for my preferred postings I put Germany, Hong Kong and Singapore some sick joker sent me to El Adem, which is situated eighteen miles into the Sahara Desert, south of Tobruck!

Owing to the sensitivity of the countries we were flying over we had to fly out "civvy", which meant flying out from London. On the way across London Under Ground one of the bods went missing, only to give himself up the next day so that he would miss the flight. Unfortunately for him the flight had been delayed for 24 hours so he was unceremoniously marched onboard by the redcaps just before we took off!!

This was in the October of 1961. My first night was spent in a tent, which by the state of it was erected during WW2! Whilst I was lying on my "pit" looking up through the hole in the canvas roof at the stars, out of the corner of my eye I saw a movement and there to my horror what appeared to be an enormous spider crawled across the floor, I later found out that it was in fact species of land crab. Noticing my alarm, one of the other three occupants remarked nonchalantly, "Don't worry about him he comes through here the same time every night!"

The next day I reported for duty only to find out that they had a surplus of engine fitters on Transit Air Servicing Section (TASS) so I was seconded onto the Ground Equipment Section, which went down like a lead balloon as I didn't want to be in the middle of the Sahara in the first place! The irony was that after a year I was transferred to TASS but had to stay on to the November of 1963 before my replacement got posted in!

After a year, or so, I was finally transferred to TASS where I began working on aircraft again. By this time there was only two engine men on the shift when there should have been four. The shifts were, twelve on, twenty-four off followed by twelve on, forty-eight off. That meant nine in the morning to nine at night, with twenty-four hours off followed by nine at night to nine in the morning followed by forty-eight off. At night it wasn't too bad because we could often get our heads down for a few hours but the daytime one meant working through the heat of the day which could be a killer, with daytime temperatures well into the hundreds in the summer. My mate "Ginge" and I refuelled and "turned round" anything that turned up apart from the "V" Bombers because we were not "V" bomber screened! The aircraft we worked on varied from Austers and other "spam cans" to Comets Beverleys Hastings, Brittanias, Shackletons, Hunters, Javelins, etc. etc. what ever turned up! I can't say that I enjoyed refuelling the piston engine aircraft because they were so messy. On Hastings you had to watch the fuel load as the mark 1s and 2s were different. The Beverleys were OK with fuel but if they needed oil that meant either going into the "kennel" to the rear of the cockpit where it was extremely hot or having it pumped up from ground level onto the wing tanks. Comets and Brits were fine as long as you remembered to fill the forward fuselage tanks first on the Comets or you would sit the rear-end on the tarmac!

Of course working only in shorts we got "brown as berries", so much so that one day an elderly DC3 lobbed in taking pilgrims to The Holy Land. One middle aged woman was just at the top of the steps about to disembark, looking around, when she heard me say something to my mate. "Oh", she exclaimed, "You're English!" "Of course we are", shouted my mate, "What do you think we are flipping A-rabs!"

The entertainment on camp consisted of the NAAFI, the cinema and the swimming pool. The only beer in the NAAFI was canned and comprised of Red Barrel, Amstel Lager and Brown Ale, none of which tasted remotely like real beer! Many a jolly night was spent downing these ales with plenty of ribald singing and to the tune of a well-known hymn, "Amstel breweries, Amstel breweries, feed me till I want no more, feed me till I want no-o mo-o-re!" One character, to liven things up at the end of the evening, would stand drunkenly on a table whilst onlookers would toss empty beer cans in his direction for him to head away. After a while some one would get bored with this and sling a full one a bit harder and the entertainment would come to an abrupt end!

The swimming pool was also fairly popular but had been built when the camp held about five hundred people and now it had one thousand! If you dived in it took some time to reach the water as you bounced off number of heads on the way in. It lost some of it's popularity where one of the "erks, after visit to the swimming pool, felt ill and his illness was diagnosed as "swamp fever" by the M.O! The only other place for a swim would be Tobruck, which was eighteen miles away and required one to catch the camp bus. . Swimming in the sea was great but the drive to get there was a pain. There wasn't much to Tobruck either.

There was the "Three Acker Bar" that I never went in and a cinema that I went to only once and that was enough!

There was also TEARS, which was the Tobruck and El Adem Radio Service to entertain us whilst we were flat out on our "pits". At Christmas the RAF got in touch with our next of kin and they would be able to send a taped message and a request. I got one from my parents, which was very welcome.

Once every few months we had to do "Bomb Dump Guard" duty, which in hindsight was a total fiasco. The bomb dump was situated some two miles to the west of the camp and had its own barbed wire perimeter fence and a very rough road leading to it. The only communication to the main camp was by telephone and the wires ran alongside that road so they were easy to find if some "felon" wanted to cut them. We were armed with pickaxe handles which had been used for many years by bored airmen for knocking stones about base-ball fashion so were only a couple of feet long through constant use. Right in the middle of the compound was a rickety old searchlight tower the beam of which just failed to reach the perimeter wire. One windy night it actually fell down but luckily no one was daft enough to be up there at that time, so it was hoisted back up again! I remember a particularly worrying incident while on guard one night, as we were patrolling round the perimeter we could hear groaning from just the other side of the wire. Of course the searchlight was totally useless because of its short beam so we went back to the telephone to report it to the main camp. Nobody answered, probably nodded off, at the other end. We spent a very anxious night unable to locate the source. Finally to our relief, at first light the answer became plain, there about four miles away was a herd of camels and in the still night air their calling had carried to us!

Christmas time was a jolly and drunken time. One room in each block was set up with some sort of Christmassy theme, which at the end of the festivities was judged by the CO if I remember correctly. Actually it was just an excuse for an enormous booze-up! One soldier from the Airfield Construction Unit became very attached to a tyre during this period, which he wheeled about wherever he went during the time of the festivities. Rumour had it he took it to bed with him as well.

Also to the south of the camp was "Tin Town" which was a collection of corrugated huts that the local Arabs lived in. They made a living by stealing anything they could from the base and very good they were at it too. One time a MT bloke got into a lorry cab to drive off only to find the gearbox had been stolen during the night! Personal transport on camp was virtually non-existent so when one of the guys came up with an ancient Ariel Square Four motorbike we got very excited. The head gasket had blown so it took a while to fix it but one Saturday evening we had a test run ready for a day out in the morning. The next morning came and the bike was gone! Tracks led away from the billet to the triple row of barbed wire where they just vanished and on the other side of the wire no tracks could be found anywhere!! That was the last we saw of the bike!

There was a Sycamore helicopter base at El Adem and sometimes a search and rescue exercise was carried out. A Land Rover would take a Mae West out into the desert and the chopper would home in on the SARAHA beacon. One time they just couldn't find it in the expected area so they widened the search and found that it was on the move. Some Arab had spotted it lying about and was carrying it back to his tent. The Sycamore followed him home and then went back to Tobruck to pick up a local copper who they took back to the Arabs tent and got their beacon back, much to the amazement of this bemused Arab!

I only really went anywhere in Libya a couple of times and one was a trip, west, up the coast to Cyrene, which was the remains of an ancient Roman town. We stopped off for a while at Bardia for a look round and as we left the local Arabs threw stones at us. I wonder what we had done to offend them!

After two years and one month it was time for me to return to the UK, but first there had to be a farewell "booze up". As I couldn't stand the idea of getting drunk on canned beer I elected to drink vodka and lime. We were in the NAAFI and my vodka and lime turned up. One and a half pints of it!! A merry old time was had by all but towards the end, things got a bit hazy for me and after a while I can't remember what happened! The next morning me and my mate had to get to the passenger departure block to catch the aircraft home. I was in no fit state to walk about a mile carrying all my kit. Then round the corner of the billet came one of the Airfield Construction lads driving an enormous dumper truck. We climbed into the bucket and he drove us up to departure block and there to the amazement of all the people standing outside he gently lowered the bucket to the ground and my mate and me stumbled out with all of our baggage! The flight home was spent sleeping it off but even when I got home it was remarked how ill I looked.

For a number of years afterwards I often had this nightmare, which was me being posted back to El Adem and by that time I wasn't even in the RAF! Was I glad to wake up and find it was only a dream!!