



Getting to grips with the Supermarine Spitfire!

Latest news and upcoming events

Dear Reader,

TV coverage has reminded us that 2010 is the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. Archive footage of Spitfires and Hurricanes duelling with the enemy in frenetic dogfights in the skies over Britain has filled our living rooms, alongside the grim reality of the blitz as our cities took a hammering. It was a battle we simply had to win if Britain was to avoid being invaded. Outnumbered and suffering horrendous losses the so-called famous ‘few’ pilots of RAF Fighter Command held firm and won the day – just!

But what was it like to be at the controls of the most beautiful fighter aircraft ever conceived?

In my Special Operations series of adventures, Finn Gunnensen dreams of following in his father’s footsteps and becoming a Spitfire pilot. When writing my books I do loads of research and there’s no substitute for getting hands-on experience. It certainly beats sitting in front of my computer.



Recently, I was fortunate enough to get behind the controls of a real Spitfire based at Solent Sky in Southampton. Such aircraft are rare these days and worth a fortune.

It was one of the last Mk 24s built and remarkably is in almost perfect original condition.



Getting into the cockpit meant climbing onto the wing before carefully dropping down onto the seat behind the controls. What struck me instantly was how tiny and cramped it was inside – very little elbow room. Having done my ‘homework’ I already knew the layout of the instruments but I took a few moments to familiarise myself with the ‘real’ thing, the spade, the gauges, flap controls, throttle lever and the elevator trimming wheel, to name just a few. The temptation to flick on the ignition switches and hit the engine starter button was almost too much (That’s the Finn Gunnensen inside me). The experience was AWESOME!



Solent Sky is also home to the R.J Mitchell Memorial Museum, a tribute to the man who designed the Supermarine Spitfire and many other aircraft – although tragically he died before war broke out, so he never got to witness the prowess of the Spitfire in combat or see it turn into one of the most keenly remembered icons of WWII and the fight for freedom.

I’ve been busy visiting locations used in my stories too over the summer. Close to Chichester (W Sussex) is Tangmere aerodrome. It played numerous important roles during WWII. Not least were the clandestine Special Operations missions flying secret agents in and out of enemy territory. Many agent drops and pick-ups used the Westland Lysander aircraft (Pictured here and as featured in *Dogfight*, and in my next book, *The Hunted* – more on that in future newsletters).



These flights formed part of 161 Squadron’s actions, also known as the Special Duties squadron or the *Moon Squadron* as they flew at night and navigated by moonlight. One of the famous pilots was a man called Per Hysing-Dahl and like my heroes, Finn, Loki and Freya, he was Norwegian too. He escaped from Nazi-occupied Norway by boat to Unst in the Shetlands and subsequently flew numerous Lysander missions – during his last in 1944 he was hit by anti-aircraft fire forcing him to ditch into the sea, eventually being rescued by ship. Two of his three passengers didn’t

survive the ordeal. After the war he entered politics and in the 1980s was elected President of the “Storting”, the Norwegian Parliament.



Prototype Spitfire (K5404) in its original blue.

The museum at Tangmere has several stunning full-size replicas of Spitfires, one being of the early prototype, built by workers from the Spitfire factory.

Try guessing the answer to this: Tangmere also has a pretty cool updated exhibition about the real Special Operations, including many of the gadgets used by secret agents in the field. I’ve come across hundreds of ingenious devices during my years of research but I spotted one there I’d not seen before – small, hollow plastic balls, about the size of golf balls. They were covered with fluorescent paint so they glowed in the dark. Can you guess what they were used for? *Answer at the end of this newsletter.*

Amazing Feedback/True Stories

I’ve been thrilled by the response to my latest book *Wolf Squadron* which was published a couple of months ago. Those of you who’ve read it will know that it is set in Holland, in and around a seaside town called Scheveningen. Recently I received a letter from a teacher (she’d just read *Wolf Squadron*) married to a Dutchman whose family came from there and several of whom, as teenagers, got up to a ‘lot of mischief’ during the war in the Resistance. One was captured and shot in the dunes by the sea but amazingly survived – even today he still has the bullet lodged in his head. And I thought I’d given Finn a hard time! It was a reminder though of just how dangerous life could be back then.

A little known fact: Dutch can be a tricky language to speak – some words are really hard to pronounce. The name of the town *Scheveningen* is just such a word, and



the Germans found it especially difficult – so much so that the Dutch Resistance sometimes used it as a codeword.

Forthcoming Events & Appearances

Between now and Christmas I have various school events booked around the country. If you'd like me to visit your school, please discuss with your teachers/librarians and ask them to contact me.

Advance Notice: Book now to avoid disappointment

Wessex Children's Book festival at the Winchester Discovery Centre

I'm taking part in a panel discussion with fellow authors Andrew Norris & Mark Walden about how we go about writing our amazing books

Why not come along and meet us?

Tickets are just £4 (Box Office Tel: 01962 873603, or visit www.discoverycentres.co.uk/winchester)

The event is on Wednesday 27th October from 10.30 – 11.30am followed by a book signing

This is a terrific book festival with a galaxy of star authors showing up, including Jacqueline Wilson, Rick Riordan, Chris Riddell to name just a few.

Also I'll be at...

24th November: International Kids' Lit Quiz (Regional heat) in Havant

30th November: International Kids' Lit Quiz (UK National finals) in Oxford

And finally

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www.craigsimpsonbooks.com

Answer: Clandestine Lysander pilots often had to land on foreign fields at night. Local resistance fighters would mark out the makeshift landing strip using either torches, flares, small fires or the fluorescent balls mentioned

above. Placed in the grass they were often invisible to those on the ground but their glow could be seen by pilots several hundred feet up.