

# DON'T JUST STAND THERE, GET ONE UP!

Strap in for a once-in-a-lifetime experience as the legendary Spitfire takes you soaring through history, emotion, and the skies above England.

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**THERE'S A ROAR  
THAT CARRIES  
WITH IT MORE  
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IT'S A TANGIBLE,  
VISCERAL,  
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OF THE MERLIN  
ENGINE**



influence was driving around town with Dad and listening to his cassette of aircraft engine recordings. Like a favourite song on cassette, I only remember listening to the mighty Merlin engine and then rewinding the tape to listen to it again, and again.

Biggin Hill is south east of London and is where green fields and little villages begin. Biggin Hill was an air base during the Battle of Britain and was bombed by the Luftwaffe but these days the only invading forces are celebrities who use the field to land private jets. Sharing the field with Gulfstreams and Bombardiers (and other jets that feature in Just Urbane) is Fly A Spitfire. Their hanger is filled with aircraft that can take to the air or are dreaming of flying again. There's a Hurricane, Kittyhawk, Messerschmitt 109 and jeeps used in the movie Fury, paratrooper scooters and more than I know I'll have time to look at. There's a smell too. It's the smell of engine oil and hot engine parts as they're fired up for testing. It's not a museum smell. This is the smell of aircraft that are alive and just waiting their turn to fly.

To go up in a Spitfire you don't need the courage of flying aces that flew out of Biggin Hill, but you do need to pass a test with a level of self-confidence that only you can judge is right for you. The bail out procedure is an online familiarisation instruction, and it's a preflight video, then you demonstrate it to the flight crew when you're in the cockpit. It's an understanding of how to lower your seat, slide back the canopy, bang open the cockpit side door and jump out with a static

line parachute and if that fails, how to pull a D-ring to open the parachute.

Sitting in the cockpit was my first understanding that this is a fighter aircraft that is over 80 years old. I'm surrounded by rivets and cables that have a function and purpose and represent what makes this machine fly fast with great manoeuvrability.

Then there's a roar that carries with it more than noise; it's a tangible, visceral, immersive wave that sweeps through you and with it comes the smell of the Merlin engine. With the roar of this engine starting up, the aircraft comes alive and embraces me with a firmness greater than my harness. I'm soaked in the smell, I'm shaking with the aircraft's impatience to get into the sky and in the words of 'High Flight', the wonderful poem by Spitfire pilot, John Gillespie, I just want to 'join the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds'. We're ready to go!

And when I say 'we're', there's something else about this experience. I've brought my son Tom with me to have his own adventure. He's going up in the chase plane to enjoy looking at the fields of Kent before being shot down by me in fast flybys.

Tom's description of the Spitfire taxiing on the runway is interesting. The Spitfire is constantly turning to the left and right. Visibility on the ground when taxiing isn't a strong point for fighter aircraft of this era and this is the only way to see what's in front.

Taking off is thrilling. It feels like a lifetime achievement. The absolute core of my bucket list that in reality I never thought I'd achieve.

**T**hat's a line from the 1969 British movie, 'Battle of Britain'. The Squadron Leader is running to his plane and shouts at a young pilot, standing transfixed by the drama around him, to do the same and get a Spitfire into the air.

When I walk into the lounge area of Fly A Spitfire, this quote is rather conspicuously written above the doorway. Also on the wall are the photos of pilots who flew Hurricanes and Spitfires out of Biggin Hill during the Battle of Britain.

I'm here and I'm ready to get one up! Where I am is the end of a journey that started six months earlier, researching

opportunities to fly a Spitfire but perhaps my journey began long ago.

I'm of a generation whose parents heroes weren't characters from the Marvel Universe, they were the servicemen who fought and died in two world wars. My father came back from a trip to London in the 1970's with a poster which had on it all the different variations of Spitfire throughout World War II with brief characteristics underneath each picture.

If the poster wasn't enough to begin my love of Spitfires and the sound of the Rolls Royce liquid cooled V-12 piston Merlin engine then watching movies like the Battle of Britain and more recently Dunkirk certainly pushed me along this journey to Biggin Hill. Another







I'm in the air, gaining height, the wheels are up and I'm bursting every muscle on my face with a smile from ear to ear.

I look down at the remarkable elliptical wing of this aircraft that make it so famous and identifiable. Down below are green fields and small patches of woodland forest and I even get to look at Charles Darwin's house and estate. Just as quickly as I look down I realise that this isn't a scenic flight to see the surrounding English countryside. This experience is the aircraft itself. Another of my Spitfire influences is a book called, 'Sigh For A Merlin', by Spitfire test pilot Alex Henshaw who says throughout his experiences the Spitfire was easy to fly. Now

it's time to see if he's right.

Watching the go-pro footage after my flight, I expected to see how happy I was but watching me take the controls was different. My face looks like I'm doing an Algebra test. I'm focused on the horizon to keep level flight and then slowly banking to search for my son in the chase plane. I wish I'd relaxed for these moments and looked around me but maybe that's what learning to fly an aircraft designed for flying to fight is all about, learning to trust that this perfect design will perfectly respond when called upon to do so.

There's extra time for my flight because of some private jet traffic so there's more

victory rolls and banking the aircraft on its wingtip. Victory rolls by exuberant pilots after combat were frowned upon during wartime because of the stress on battle weary airframes but gosh they're fun! The delirious blue sky rolls its way from the top of your vision to the bottom and then back in its rightful place at the top, along with my stomach.

The sensation of speed is truly achieved as I fly past the chase plane and it looks like it's standing still in mid air. Tom captures some amazing moments of my flight, including the Spitfire close alongside and then banking and diving away, becoming camouflaged with the fields below.

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I've told friends, and now you, that I cried in the air because I wish my dad was here to see this. Then I cried because I'm sharing the skies above England with my son. I couldn't be happier! On the ground and with the engine still, I slide the canopy back and as the flight crew disconnect the cameras they capture a final moment of my face and audio as they ask, "Your dad would have proud of that I bet?", to which I just reply, "Yes".

He would have loved it, but reflecting on Dad can wait. I rush to where Tom is waiting and he is so happy with his experience. He's talking, I'm talking and together we have a

complete story that has made the perfect day.

Double cockpit Spitfires are rare to find and you have to go a long way to do it. While there are a few groups in England that offer the experience of a flight in a Spitfire, for me the passionate flight crew, a historic setting with a hanger full of epic and iconic aviation heritage and the opportunity to make it a shared experience with a better man than I am make this quite literally the experience of my lifetime.🇬🇧

Find out more about flying a Spitfire at: [www.flyaspitfire.com](http://www.flyaspitfire.com)