

In the lands of Legends

Robin Powney, a Legends virgin, discovers the wonders of warbirds. Pictures by Gary Parsons

Once a year, Duxford becomes a bigger magnet for warbird fans the world over than any other... yes, it's that time of year, and Flying Legends is upon us again. The time of year when the UK's already bristling warbird scene gets an internationally visible beacon stuck above it. It's the time of year when the same warbird scene gets bolstered by some very interesting temporary imports - thankfully, the people in charge not only pulled off a coup in booking certain participants but also procured some blue skies and sunshine for us. Flying Legends 2005 also marked the first time your author ventured into the land of the Legends, and it won't be the last.



Legendary line-up: BBMF



Light Transports



Spits



Saturday morning, and having driven through sunshine and into the kind of conditions I normally only see in Buxton, I was questioning the sanity of going to a mist-bound warbird show. The closer I got, the more I thought about swinging the car around and heading back to the sunnier climes of 'up North'. As luck would have it, I caught a weather forecast which was steadfastly sticking to its guns in that it claimed the region would get warm and the skies would clear - still not quite believing it, I entered the car park and parked up (at 10:00, with no queues of any note to contend with either - magic!).

Having been to the VE/VJ Show, I had an idea of what to expect in terms of aircraft lineup (I had not seen an expected participation list on the 'net) but what Duxford had in store was, quite simply, beyond my wildest imagination. Never have I seen so many warbirds lined up and in such great condition. I decided not to bother with the museum as the place is in upheaval as the AirSpace superhangar is being built and the cool misty weather seemed to have forced people inside, making already difficult photography nigh-on impossible, so I headed towards the flightline walk to get 'up-close' with the Flying Legends.

This flightline walk is nothing more than a wander down the taxiway, just off which the flying programme participants are parked. £4 for this seems an awful lot of money, especially when people are being charged £27 to get in - even more so when you consider the photo opportunities offered aren't that great and 'close' isn't too 'close'. On the upside though, you do get the chance to take photos of period-dressed volunteers next to the warbirds, providing some evocative and timeless images.

Just after midday, with Duxford now bathed in blue skies and sunshine (seems the forecast was about right after all), the stage was set for a classic Legends. Kicking off proceedings was the BBMF, although without the Hurricane IIC (the last Hurricane ever built) which made it to the end of the runway and no further due to a slight engine issue. Whilst the BBMF have been in for a bit of stick recently with regard to their restrained routine (your author questions exactly what people want from one of only two flying Lancasters in existence!), it has to be said the BBMF pair put on an impressive display, especially the Spitfire IIa. Contrary to what commentator Sean Maffet said (twice if I remember correctly), the Lancaster didn't make any 'bomb doors open' passes as it had been filled with the poppies to be dropped over The Mall on Sunday - one suspects the opening of the said doors would result in Stu Reid, occasional E-3D pilot being quite unpopular with those who have to pack the poppies! There is only one other RAF display act that can stop the public in its tracks and make them turn their heads skywards like this outfit manage to do with ease.



True to unwavering form, ex-Red One Ray Hanna once again put on a superb display in the OFMC's Spitfire IXb - plenty of turning and high energy maneuvers plus the seemingly customary impression of a lawnmower as he brought MH434 in very low from the Land Warfare Hall end at quite a rate of knots. One cannot fail to be impressed by the sight of a Spitfire at almost rabbit-ears level with the sound of a Merlin chucked in for good measure. This maneuver perhaps helps to explain why some of Supermarine's finest have clipped wings - it lets them get in amongst the flora and fauna! Just prior to Ray's stunning performance, we were treated to the Spitfire tailchase - I didn't know which way to point the camera or look. Left, right, right, left, left, right,

Legendary lineup: Mustangs





right. What a sight!



The P-51 duo of *Princess Elizabeth* (P-51C) and *Twilight Tear* (P-51D) was one of the best examples of a pairs routine I've seen anywhere for a good while - it was almost as if they had their wings riveted together. If it hadn't have been for the fact that the P-51C and P-51D look physically different, you could have come to the conclusion it was a trick with mirrors!



Bomber Escorts



Cats



US



Hurricanes



The star of the show for many came in the rather odd shape of a SAAB B17A, Blå Johan, restored to flight by a group of volunteers and in less than six months!

This 1,000hp bomber, one of just 132 built, is the only airworthy example of its type in the world and is painted in the colours of 2 Squadron/F7 Wing at Sâtenäs (now the Gripen Conversion unit). The B17A was admirably flown in a very spirited routine by Kjell Nordström (the only pilot in the world qualified to fly 'Blue Johan'), its startling agility and obvious links to a dive-bombing lineage were shown off to the now lobster-like crowd.

However, Kjell and his B17A steed were not to have things all their own way as, fighting for the star billing with the B17A and P-51C was TFC's latest acquisition, the world's only airworthy Curtiss Hawk 75. Wearing Armee de l'Air GC II/5 Lafayette markings (the aircraft itself being a veteran of the Battle of France) and flown with gusto by Stephen Grey, I couldn't really decide whether the slightly more energetic Hawk 75 display overcame the massive presence and rarity of the B17A. However, considering the Hawk 75 now lives at Duxford and the B17A had to be brought across the North Sea especially for the show, the honours have to go to the Swedes as the Hawk will get plenty more chances to shine in the skies over Duxford.



Another handful of mainland Europeans brought over for the event were the French B-17G *Pink Lady*, the Duke of Brabant's Air Force B-25C Mitchell from Eindhoven and the stunning liveried B-25J Mitchell operated by the 'Jet Alpine Fighters' and from Sion in Switzerland. Just one of two B-17s in Europe that remain airworthy, *Pink Lady* flew with Duxford's own *Sally B*, recently spared from insurance-induced grounding, and a P-47 Thunderbolt. Various, and probably European, rules and regs prevent any actual *Pink Lady - Sally B*



formation flying but a few turns meant the eagled-eyed camera wielder could have got a shot of both in the same frame.

Resplendent in a new US Navy all-over white scheme, Plane Sailing's PB5-5A Catalina managed to stand out in the 'static' and in the flying when it was her turn to display. This new white scheme is a million times better than the aged red, yellow and green 'Rasta Cat' scheme and it couldn't do anything else than make people look and her display was also quite spirited - clearly showing off the amphibious nature and design of the Cat.

Further notable attendees were those of the Vacher Hurricane I, the only Hurricane that can actually have its history traced back to the Battle of Britain; the four mighty Grumman Cats (Bearcat, Wildcat, Hellcat and Tigercat); the P-39 Airacobra and the tiny Russian I-15bis biplane. Legends 2005 also marked the first time I had seen TFC's AD-4NA Skyraider fly - ten tons of whoop-ass and a true lumbering brute, but one whose display is quite simply, brilliant! Never before, save for the Mustang pair, I have ever seen vapour off the wingtips of a warbird.

However, due to TFC's pilots being very busy flinging the Hawk 75, Spitfires and the like around the deep blue Cambridgeshire skies, the said Hurricane remained on the ground for the duration of the show. A shame to not see (and,



Return of a Princess

P-51C N51PR had been restored by Pete Regina from a 'B' model wing and the forward fuselage of an Israeli Defence Force P-51B, which had been in the Holz Technical School in Tel Aviv from 1960 through 1975. First test flown on 11 June 1981, the aircraft was painted as Don Gentile's 'Shangri La' and modified with spraybar equipment and raced at the Reno National Championship Air Races in 1982.

Joe Kasparoff of Van Nuys, California acquired N51PR in February of 1986 and painted it in its all-over red 'The Believer' scheme that it wore for ten years before being acquired by The Fighter Collection in December 1996. Steve Hinton inspected the aircraft on the TFC's behalf and flew it from Van Nuys to the Fighter Rebuilders facility at Chino where the paint was stripped completely, a 'new original' instrument panel and rollover structure were installed, and the engine overhauled. On 3 July 1997 the dismantled and crated machine arrived at Duxford, leaving just nine days to get the aircraft back into flying condition before the Flying Legends show took place that year.

A scheme depicting a machine from the 487th Fighter Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group of the US 8th Air Force was selected and on 9 July it emerged from the paint shop in an all-over silver scheme with a blue nose, honouring the P-51B flown by 1st Lt William Whisner bearing the legend 'Princess Elizabeth'.

It displayed several times over the two-day Flying Legends airshow, and after a busy first season it was decided to carry out a complete airframe restoration of this rare aircraft. It would take nearly eight years to complete the task, the final touches being done just a week before this year's Flying Legends, making 'Princess Elizabeth' one of the most authentic P-51s in existence.



France



DC-3



I-15



SAAB B17A



Balbo



D-Day



Living Legend



Biplanes



PBY



Naval



obviously, hear) it in the air but this afforded many an opportunity to see a truly historic aircraft at close quarters. The Grumman felines purred like no other cats can do and it was a joy to watch the four of them put through their paces - at times it became difficult to focus on one particular aircraft but that's the price for of such a spectacle. In terms of showing off each Cat, it may have been preferential to put them up as solo items to give the crowd chance to savour each aircraft, but then again not much can match the sheer presence offered by all four. Flying Legends isn't about an aerobatic competition, it's a spectacle and multi-aircraft displays and tailchases manage to achieve this goal much easier than a singleton ever could.

Thankfully, most acts displayed close enough to the crowd to enable most to watch the show without the use of Jodrell Bank (unlike the Gazelle singleton at the recent VE Day airshow) and photographers wouldn't have been heard complaining about the distances involved.



Having never been to a Flying Legends show before, I didn't really know what to expect when it came to this 'balbo' to close the show. I've seen the photos, I've heard the rave comments about it, but I hadn't ever seen one for myself. The only word I can possibly think of that comes even remotely close to the impact of that many aircraft (I understand the count was twenty-six, plus the Hawk 75 as

the 'joker') with twenty-nine meaty engines all singing from pretty much the same song sheet is, quite simply put, WOW! It is, in effect, a large cloud of wood, metal and fabric which makes for an extremely impressive sight, it has to be said. Nowhere else in the UK will you ever see that many warbirds all in the air at the same time. Even as a 'jet fan', the Duxford 'balbo' really does rank up there with the best of them in the list of great aviation sights.

In terms of the traffic situation, coming from the North and following the AA signs (although at first it did cross my mind as to why we were being taken off the M11 and whipped off down the A10), no traffic to speak of was encountered on the way in until a few hundred yards away from the car park (by the Land Warfare Hall) entrance but the way out saw the car park snarl up like nobody's business - all because of queues to get to the M11 (and the inescapable fact that a few more rather large car parks empty onto the A505).

Having said that, thanks to where my late (but fortuitous) arrival landed me and a following quick look at a map to devise a 'rat run', it took just eleven minutes to get to the M11 from starting the car. To be fair to Duxford, I don't think there's much more they can do to car parking arrangements other than continuing to do what they're doing - the problem is that the A505 just isn't big enough.

This was my first Legends, and even though there can no substitute for brute force, vapour and shock diamonds, Duxford has another very satisfied customer in your author. To be honest, pretty much the only reason I had never been to a Flying Legends show before was because of the price. At £27 per adult ticket it is not, by any means, a cheap day out. Tack on the £4 flightline walk (not the best value for money but, judging on the sea of people, a popular indulgence) and £4 for the programme and you're at £35 before you've bought any food or drink.

Considering the flying display is only a matter of a handful of hours, it has be said that the show loses out in the value for money stakes (one cannot help but make a comparison to RIAT and its eight-hour display for roughly the same sort of money) but, on the other hand, it does attract the kinds of warbirds that other shows can only dream about so you could argue it's quality not quantity. This view is perhaps reinforced by the huge crowd (I certainly wasn't expecting to see as many as I did!) and it's a good bet that I'll make a return trip in future to the lands of Legends.



Lt. Frank E Oiler, former 78th Fighter Group pilot who flew from Duxford during the winter of 1944-45 (see this month's Aircraft Illustrated magazine for a feature by Frank)



Modern Legend



Flying P-51C Princess Elizabeth was Ed Shipley, famous American warbird pilot. Ed always comes to the UK for Legends and is perhaps the world's leading P-51 jockey.

