

REVIEWS

Paul Beaver, *Spitfire People: The Men and Women who Made the Spitfire the Aviation Icon*. Sherborne: Evro Publishing, 2015. 256pp. ISBN 978-1-9105040-5-2 (Hardback). Price £25.00.

As the author observes, the Spitfire is the iconic fighter of the Second World War, and while there were more Hurricanes involved in the Battle of Britain and they were credited with more victories it is its Supermarine rival which attracted greater attention. The author explains this was because the Ministry of Aircraft Production put the Spitfire at the head of its publicity campaigns including organising collections to fund the fighter.

Beaver's approach to the Spitfire story is unique. Most writers, including the reviewer's late cousin Ted Hooton and Dr Alfred Price, have followed the traditional path in aircraft books by telling the story of the technical development, operational history, variants and details of production, horsepower rather than humanity. By contrast Mr Beaver looks at the people who were key to the Spitfire story, aided by access to Supermarine's records as well as numerous interviews. The result is a series of sketches which makes for an extremely readable book which still manages to challenge many traditional beliefs.

The book looks at those who conjured the Spitfire from their own imagination and experience, the politicians who made the key decisions, the pioneers who helped produce the fighter, the commanders who deployed it and those who flew it. The last covers RAF, FAA and women delivery pilots. There are three appendices sketching over the Spitfire's post-war service, those who are keeping alive its heritage and an outline list of all 63 variants, each accompanied by a coloured illustration.

This seemingly lightweight publication still manages to make some important observations. While Reginald Mitchell was the overall designer of the Spitfire, its success actually owed more to Beverley Shenstone (wing with Alf Faddy) and detailed designer Joe Smith, who succeeded Mitchell as chief designer at Supermarine. Mr Beaver also reveals that Mitchell disliked the name 'Spitfire'. Surprisingly, one of the 'heroes' of the Spitfire story is the much-maligned Neville Chamberlain. It was Chamberlain who loosened the Treasury's purse-strings to fund the expansion and modernisation of the Royal Air Force in 1935 and, as the book points out, this included funding for radar, Very High Frequency communications and

high octane fuels, all foundations of the successful defence of British skies in 1940. Perhaps it is time for a re-evaluation of Chamberlain in the pre-war period.

While the Great and the Good feature in this book it also looks at those whom history has regarded as, at best, footnotes and at worse spear-carriers. There are accounts, for example, of Charles Craven (Supermarine's managing director), works manager W.T. (Wilf) Elliott and works engineer Len Gooch who played key roles in Spitfire production. Craven's entry provides an insight on Beaverbrook which others might wish to exploit.

The commanders and pilots are often well-known names but some are less well-known such as Squadron Leader Henry Cozens, whose suggestions improved the aircraft, American Eugene 'Red' Tobin and Norwegian Rolf Arnö Berg. The section on women pilots is especially interesting, and especially the entry on Flight Captain Joan Hughes whose film work has been seen by many readers. The book does not neglect the women who produced the aircraft or those, like Dr Beatrice 'Tilly' Shilling, whose 'orifice' – a fix for the Rolls-Royce Merlin engines which prevented engine flooding in a dive - helped many a Spitfire pilot to fight another day.

It seems amazing that the Spitfire is still in production, albeit rebuilding rather than new aircraft, and that pilots for these aircraft, including one woman, are still being trained. This heritage is skilfully explored in an appendix and a photograph on Page 12 shows the author enjoying a victory roll.

The only quibble about this book, and given the limited size it is trivial, is that it would be interesting to see a little bit more about those who produced the Spitfire.

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