



CLASSIC WINGS

Neil Wilson meets Glen Fricker, LAA member, commercial pilot, part-time display pilot and DH Rapide pilot for Duxford's Classic Wings

Neil Wilson's feature, the first of an occasional series, sees him visit LAA members who are engaged in aviation partly or wholly in their professional career. It is surprising just how many of our members have fascinating professional aviation lives as pilots, engineers and parts suppliers – all manner of roles across the entire range of the activity.

For this story, Neil travelled to Duxford, to fly with air experience flight company Classic Wings in a DH Rapide, piloted by LAA member Glen Fricker, while wing-to-wing with the ever iconic Spitfire. Glen also flies a Harvard, Tiger Moth and, more recently, a Hurricane, while his 'day job' is piloting a Boeing 737-800 for Ryanair.

Lee Proudfoot edges Spitfire MH434 into close formation with the Rapide

What's at the top of your list of aircraft you would love to fly? For many the Supermarine Spitfire would surely be up there, the looks, sounds and evocative nature of this classic marque being impossible to ignore. While this dream will for most remain just that, there is

a more likely opportunity for the next best thing: to fly at close quarters with a Spitfire in a DH Rapide and indulge in the close attentions of this classic of UK aviation.

For me it was too much to ignore and within a few days of booking my place I received a package of information and detail giving the history of the Rapides that I may fly in, including postcard pictures of both, a certificate of my flight to be filled in later, plus information about Spitfire MH434, which would be flying alongside us. A great bundle and keepsake – I was impressed already!

I was lucky to bag a ride to Duxford with Dave Lucey, a friend from Henstridge, in his Cessna 182, so this rather got me into the right frame of mind, as did being directed to park alongside Boeing B-17 *Sally B* when we arrived.

Classic Wings operates from the control tower, so I made my way upstairs where I was greeted by Terri Butcher and her team. All those who were due to fly that day were booked



Glen Fricker does a 'selfie', and who wouldn't have a huge grin on their face if they were flying a Harvard!



What an absolute beauty. One of two DH Rapides operated by Classic Wings at Duxford.



The high quality Classic Wings information pack makes a nice memento of the flight experience.

in and given a coloured badge, which signified which flight they would be on. I was to be on the last flight that morning – the green team. Coffee and biscuits were served while we watched an earlier team get ready for their flight. As they took off, pilot Stu Goldspink in the Spitfire fired up MH434 and in no time had caught the Rapide for their air-to-air sortie.

MH434 is a MK IX, built in 1943 and originally delivered to 222 Squadron at Hornchurch. It destroyed five enemy fighters before being sold to the Dutch Air Force. Many years later it was operated by Ray and Mark Hanna with their Old Flying Machine Company, and appeared in films, TV and airshows.

As the first team enjoyed its experience, my group was in mid-safety briefing (as per regulations) delivered by the friendly and smiling Chris Schofield (author of the history sheets in the information pack), which included the way to get in and out of the Rapide. The Rapide sits at a very high nose angle to the ground, so climbing into the cabin and walking up the middle of the narrow gangway on the plane is not the easiest of tasks. Chris has a great way of making everybody feel at home, from the experienced fliers to the complete beginners who had received the flight as a birthday present. The result was that in no time everyone was feeling at ease and prepared for what was likely to be a great experience.

As we waited at the top of the control tower for our turn to board, the Spitfire returned, not to land straight away but to do a practice display routine over the airfield. It was terrific to be standing at a high vantage point and take in the majesty of the display, as well as capturing a few precious photos. Once the display ended pilot Stu taxied back to right in front of us and a spontaneous round of applause broke out by those awaiting their flights.

My group watched as the one in front of us got ready, the chance came to have a commemorative photo taken in the front of the Spitfire, and all at no extra fee, a photo that will take pride of place at home!

At this point, Lee Proudfoot arrived for his turn at the controls of the Spitfire and I took the opportunity to chat to him while the

other group was loading. Lee started to fly in the early 1980s, obtaining his PPL at Booker. From there he moved on to aerobatics and display flying in a Stampe, eventually becoming a member of a Harvard display team before graduating to fly with Nigel Lamb as part of a Pitts Special display team, alongside a Beech 18. Added to his logbook was a stint as the pilot on the DH Twin Otter with the British Antarctic Survey team, before joining the Breitling Fighters with Ray and Mark Hanna for about five years, which included taking the controls of a Spitfire, Mustang and F4U Corsair.

It was now our turn to fly. Classic Wings offers three packages for the Spitfire experience, and I had elected to go for the Squadron Leader's Package, which includes: a 30-minute flight with about 20 minutes in formation with the Spitfire; a presentation pack and entrance fee to the Duxford Museum for the day. It also allows your friends who you may have travelled with to get a cheaper entrance fee to the Duxford site, so everyone and everything is catered for in this comprehensive deal.

ALL ABOARD

Then it was time to climb aboard the Rapide. I was put right at the front on the right-hand side, where I could see the cockpit and pilot of the Rapide, fellow LAA member Glen Fricker. The Rapide is an unusual aeroplane, as each passenger has a window seat (ideal for this type of operation) as well as it being a single-seat cabin, so the pilot is up front by himself. Seeing the cockpit, it is a real step back in time, as everything is analogue dials, switches and pulleys made of solid metal, as well as loads of glass all around the cockpit.

We took off, with the MH434 taxiing out behind us. After a few minutes of looking over our shoulders wondering where the Spitfire might be, suddenly there it was, looking fantastic and getting ever bigger on our right-hand side, against the blue sky and white lumpy clouds. Everyone started taking

pictures ten to the dozen. Lee put MH434 at the classic rear ¾ angle, so that we could all get a good shot, then moved slightly back and dived away, only to pop straight back up on the other side for more photos from the port side.

Glen then performed a slow left-hand turn, with Lee staying in tight formation and never taking his eyes off the classic biplane. After a few minutes Lee moved back to my side and moved in closer still, which allowed a fantastic view as it was closer than I thought he may get. I was taking my pictures through some of the Rapides flying wires, which was a bit restrictive, so I caught Lee's eye, gave a 'please move along a bit' signal and he gladly obliged, so we ended up literally wing to wing with a Spitfire. Fantastic.

With our time coming to an end it was all too soon time to head back to the airfield. As there was no other traffic, we flew all the way along the Duxford flight line, giving those on the ground a fantastic photo opportunity. This was a great moment, as I just sat, watched and captured the moment in my mind, flying

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LAA's Neil Wilson (left) with Member Glen Fricker, moments before boarding the Rapide for his Spitfire experience.

just a few metres from a Spitfire over this historic Battle of Britain airfield.

As Lee peeled away to thrill the onlookers with a practice display for the coming season, Glen gave us a quick tour of the local area before lining up and making a perfect landing. Once we had disembarked I grabbed the chance to speak with Glen about his career and flying with Classic Wings. Born into an aviation family, his late father John Fricker was an aviation journalist who also ran an aircraft sales business from Stapleford Tawney and was a founder member of the ULAA (Ultra-Light Aircraft Association).

Glen's first recorded flight was on his mother's lap in a Chipmunk G-AKDN aged about three months. His first official logbook entry was at Stapleford in 1977, although in truth he had been handling the controls since he was big enough to reach them!

A FULL LOGBOOK

Fast forward a few years and Glen began work as an apprentice aircraft engineer with Pat Morris of Light Aircraft Engineering at Elstree.

After deciding that being a pilot and being paid was the way forward, he moved on to an instructing job teaching basic PPL at Stapleford in 1978 before graduating to the London Flight Centre at Stansted and completing an Instrument Rating and Commercial GFT training on single and multi-engine aircraft. At Topflight he renewed his instructor's rating in 2007 and continues to instruct on the Harvard, Tiger Moth and Boeing 737.

In between Glen has worked for various airlines, flying the DC-3 and DH Heron with Air Atlantique out of Coventry, and with Air UK flying the Fokker F27 turboprop and jet engine Fokker 100, as well as the BAe 146. He currently flies the Boeing 737-200 and 800 for Ryanair.

Glen's display flying started with a Bucker Jungmann in the early 1980s, before adding a Harvard, Stampe, Fournier RF4 and DC-3 to his repertoire. He's also authorised to perform flypasts, aerobatics and formation flying. With a friend pointing out an advert for Classic Wings pilots back in 2007, Glen jumped at the opportunity and soon found himself at the controls of the Tiger before moving on to the

Rapide. Not long after he also found himself as the part owner of his own Harvard – lucky fella.

The day before I flew with Glen, he had added a Hawker Hurricane to his ever-expanding collection of aircraft flown (now 95 with 24,000 hours), something he described as his proudest moment in aviation, commenting: "I felt very privileged to fly it in the skies over Kent where it made such a name for itself."

When asked about his most memorable flight Glen had a selection of answers to choose from that can only come from a full logbook. "Double engine failure in a DC-3 in 1984, sunset across the Straits of Gibraltar from a 737, flying the Hurricane and wing-to-wing with the Spitfire, I could go on and on..."

And advice for fellow aviators? "You are never too old!" and "never stick your neck out further than you have to."

I would like to thank Glen, Lee, Sue, Terri and all at Classic Wings for making my day and Spitfire experience so enjoyable, and for helping with this article. Go on, book yourself a flight, you won't regret it. For details visit www.classic-wings.co.uk ■