

Repaired, Reworked... and Lifting Our Spirits

Assistant Editor **Jamie Ewan** talks with the Aircraft Restoration Company about its Spitfire PR.XI, which is being used to raise funds for NHS Charities Together

On May 7, 2020, the quiet spring sky above the Aircraft Restoration Company's (ARCo) hangars at Duxford in Cambridgeshire was filled with the distinctive note of a Merlin engine and a dash of blue. After eight months on the ground being reworked following an accident, PL983 – the Supermarine Spitfire PR.XI affectionately known as 'L' – was back where she belonged. With owner John Romain in the cockpit, it was the start of

yet another chapter in the history that has intertwined both for more than five decades. John explained: "I first saw PL983 at Old Warden [Bedfordshire] when I was ten years old – it was the very first Spitfire I had ever seen." However, as he looked on at the weatherbeaten machine, there was no way the youngster could have known he would later own and fly that very aeroplane, let alone use it to share a glimmer of light during the dark times of the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic

by saluting the heroes of the UK's National Health Service (NHS).

Road to ARCo

Built for Vickers Supermarine in 1944 by one of the firm's shadow factories in Reading, Berkshire, the Spitfire that was destined to become 'L' was initially ordered as a Mk.VIII on June 2, 1943. However, with the directive amended to cover the need for photo reconnaissance platforms, PL983 was to lose its guns before they were even fitted.





LEFT Spitfire PL983 'L' reveals a special message while banking towards a rainbow during a recent photoshoot, flown to capture content for the NHS Spitfire Project. GEORGE ROMAIN

BOTTOM LEFT Amanda and John Romain by the tail of 'L' as more names are added shortly before the NHS Spitfire headed to Humberside Airport to fly one of the official hospital routes. GEORGE ROMAIN

RIGHT Martin Overall starting Spitfire PL983 'L' as he takes the aircraft for one of the initial test flights following the winter repairs. Note the new (and more accurate) fishtail exhausts.

GEORGE ROMAIN

With its first flight taking place down the road at RAF Aldermaston during October that year, PL983 was sent to 6 Maintenance Unit at Brize Norton in Oxfordshire, before hopping across to the Photo Reconnaissance (PR) HQ's 1 Pilots Pool at Benson to receive cameras and other operational equipment the following month. Delivered to Second Tactical Air Force's 34 Wing in early January 1945, PL983 served with both 2 and 4 Squadrons across Europe as World War Two entered its final months.

The tale of how the aircraft settled at Duxford is one that has been reported throughout the world and has involved post-war service in Germany, an air attaché, more than 20 years sat out in the open, auctions, the son of a French World War One flying ace, several rebuilds, periods of storage and a tragedy. The story even features famed Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) pilot Lettice Curtiss, air racing and breaking records.

Arriving back in the UK in mid-1946, PL983 was deemed surplus and slated for disposal in May



at Eastleigh [Hampshire] to be converted as a high speed courier."

Curtiss' racer

Although he had asked for a Spitfire, Satterthwaite had no experience on the type and at the time was flying the flight's T-6 Harvard from RAF Hendon, near central London. "Enter Lettice Curtiss!" explained John. "Lettice was a good friend of Tony's and offered to fly the aeroplane – then registered NC74138 – to Hendon

where it was officially handed over on January 27, 1948." Despite Tony qualifying on the machine the following month, Lettice became its primary pilot and soon started racing it on behalf of the embassy.

Nicknaming it the 'American Spitfire', she won her debut event on August 15, 1948 – a handicap race organised by the Wiltshire Flying Club – with a median speed of 318mph (512km/h). Two weeks later, Lettice broke the Women's National 100km closed-circuit speed record of 292.601mph (470.8km/h) with an average speed of 313.208mph (505km/h). John explained: "Lettice was a remarkable pilot, an incredible female role model and a pioneer of women's rights in an industry dominated at the time by males. As such, when we

"... it was decided to emblazon the message 'THANK U NHS' under the wings"



ABOVE John Romain (in cockpit) and Martin Overall conducting full-power engine runs on the tie-down, in preparation for the first post-repair flight.

GEORGE ROMAIN

RIGHT Martin Overall, the pilot and chief engineer of the rebuild and repairs on Spitfire PL983 'L', preparing to fit the starboard radiator fairing.

GEORGE ROMAIN

the following year, despite having been in service for just two years. However, it soon found use in civilian hands as the personal transport for the US Embassy's Civil Air Attaché, Livingston 'Tony' Satterthwaite. As John explained: "In 1947, the aeroplane ended up heading down an entirely different career path that was unique to the type. When Tony Satterthwaite was posted to London, he asked for the use of a Spitfire and, following lengthy negotiations, PL983 was selected to be 'gifted' to the US Embassy Flight. Towards the end of that year it was flown into Vickers



restored PL983 we painted her signature on the aircraft. When Tony transferred back to the US the Spitfire was returned to Vickers Armstrong, which subsequently loaned it to The Shuttleworth Collection.” With the American N-registration cancelled, renowned ATA pilot John Jordan delivered the aeroplane under a B-Class registration – G-15-109 – to Old Warden in late 1950, where it would spend almost 25 years outside at the mercy of the British weather.

As the 1970s rolled by, and with the completion of the collection’s Spitfire Mk.V (AR501) rebuild led by a team from Duxford Aviation Society, their attention soon shifted to returning PL983 to the air. On August 30, 1975, it was taken by road to Duxford and it was there the PR.XI and John’s paths crossed again – the work taking place in the East Anglian Aviation Society’s hangar, where John Romain volunteered. He recalled:

“Before the restoration was completed,



Shuttleworth needed funds and decided to sell the Spitfire at auction in 1983. It was bought by former French Air Force pilot Roland Fraissinet.” Paying £110,000 (more than £318,700 today), Roland entrusted Trent Aero Engineering at East Midlands Airport to complete the work. Re-registered G-PRXI, Rolls-Royce’s then chief test pilot Cliff Rogers undertook its first post-restoration sortie on July 18, 1984. Spending its days frequenting the European airshow circuit, the aeroplane was then sold to noted collector Doug Arnold and joined his Warbirds of Great Britain organisation at Biggin Hill, southeast of Central London, in 1988. Shortly after, John came across the machine once again –

this time in the air. As he explains: “Not long after being sold to Doug, the Spitfire was painted in a Battle of Britain-esque camouflage for the filming of the television series *Piece of Cake*. I was asked if I could fly a Harvard cameraship during the project and PL983 was often sat just off my wing.”

Heartbreak and triumph

In the following years, G-PRXI was seldom seen and was eventually dismantled and placed into storage. Following Doug Arnold’s death in 1992, the machine resurfaced in 1999 under the ownership of Justin Fleming. Sending it to Martin Sargent’s facility in Goldhurst, Kent for refurbishment, the Spitfire took to the skies again on June 6, 2000. However, tragedy struck almost a year to the day, when Martin was killed while flying the PR.XI at an airshow in Rouen, France. John explained: “I had seen Martin and the aeroplane at Duxford a

couple of times and at the odd event in the UK. That afternoon, we were taking part in a mass flypast – I was at the back of the formation. Martin broke off with engine problems and I broke away to follow him. We had been told during the brief there was an emergency grass landing strip we could use if we encountered any problems. I heard him call out over the radio that there were hundreds of people on the strip.” Realising it was not an option, Martin tried to make the runway, but with an all-but-dead engine, the Spitfire stalled and hit the ground almost vertically. John continued: “Had the grass strip been clear, he would have made it.”

Following the conclusion of the

investigation – which determined that the engine failure had resulted from a failing magneto – John purchased the airframe in 2003 with the aim of returning it to the air someday. John’s son George takes up the story: “The crossing of paths between PL983 and dad are quite remarkable. There is also an emotional attachment.

As such, when the time was right, the remains were retrieved from storage and a long-term in-house restoration was started in 2005. However, with the engineers having to focus on our commercial work and a couple of projects ahead of it, ‘L’ was put on the back burner for a number of years.

“During the work, PL983 picked up the nickname ‘Eleven’, which was affectionately shortened to ‘L’ over time – another nod towards the aeroplane’s connection with Lettice Curtiss... you will rarely hear any of us refer to ‘her’ any other way,” said George.

It was decided to ensure the aeroplane’s fidelity was as close to when it was serving during 1944. As such, many components originally destined for the aircraft during its first restoration at Duxford during the 1970s were ultimately hunted down again, including its wartime Rolls-Royce Merlin 70 engine.

Roland Fraissinet had fitted a Packard-built Merlin 266. Similarly, he had opted to replace

the PR.XI’s 14 1/2 imp gallon (65.9 lit) oil tank with a standard 7 1/2 gallon (34 lit) unit and remove the wraparound Perspex windscreen in favour of a three-piece example, usually fitted to the Mk.IX sub variant. George said: “While a lot of the changes made were internal, the biggest visible difference was L being returned to its resplendent PRU Blue scheme it wore with 4 Squadron.”

On May 18, 2018, after more than ten years’ work, PL983 took to the skies again with John at the controls. After that first flight, L became a central part of the organisation’s fleet, as John explained: “The aircraft will always hold a very special place within ARCo. Since completing the work,

LEFT Searching for the first rainbow during the fundraising project photo sortie.
GEORGE ROMAIN



The power of a name upon a Spitfire's wings...

Following the incredibly positive reaction received following the final 'Clap for the Carers' flight, ARCo made the decision to leave the 'THANK U NHS' emblazoned across PL983 for the rest of this year's flying season. The team also began looking at ways that the Spitfire could be used to help give something back to the NHS. The team decided to raise money for NHS charities by offering the public the chance to nominate a name to be handwritten on the aircraft in return for a donation of at least £10. George explained: "Over the course of the summer we are hoping to cover the Spitfire with handwritten names to support the incredible people within the NHS who have been the nation's heroes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. People can nominate anyone from a medical professional to a family member, supportive neighbour or even a close friend who was there for you when you needed it most. The donation window will close on Sunday, September 20, 2020 to align with L appearing at Duxford's Battle of Britain Air Show."

John added: "L is a very special Spitfire with an incredible history – the fact that she has never carried a weapon was a defining point in us deciding that it was acceptable to launch this project."

For more information and to make a donation, please visit: www.justgiving.com/fundraising/nhsspitfire

we have taken L to various events across the UK – including returning to Old Warden – something I really wanted to do. It holds a special place in our stories."

Spitfire salute

On August 22 last year, PL983 was damaged during a landing accident in the Netherlands – thankfully, the pilot was unhurt. George said: "The aeroplane was on its way to the Wings of Freedom airshow at Ede when it suffered a landing accident at Midden-Zeeland Airfield, which is just a stone's throw from Gilze-Rijen, one of the places L called home in 1945."

With the airframe recovered to Duxford by road, the engineers got to work inspecting and repairing the airframe. John explained: "We removed the engine and sent it for a shock load assessment at

Eye Tech Engineering in Suffolk, while the propeller was sent to Skycraft Services across the airfield at Duxford to be rebuilt." Other tasks included checking the fuselage alignment in a jig, replacing the cockpit sides where they had buckled, overhauling the canopy rails and rear hatch, plus completing non-destructive testing on the main wing spar. George added: "With the downtime, we took the opportunity to fit a set of accurate 'fishtail' ejector exhausts, similar to those she originally carried while in service. Not only do they look great, but they add a distinctive 'bark' to the Merlin 70's growl. Given the amount of work the guys carried out, we had to repaint L in her iconic PRU Blue scheme. In all, the work took about eight months."

With permission granted by

the Civil Aviation Authority, John conducted the machine's first post-rebuild flight on May 7 this year as the UK remained in lockdown. George commented: "On landing, he had a huge grin on his face and told us she was even better than before. With another two flights planned, and the fact that it was a Thursday, we thought it would be a nice touch to push back the third sortie to just before 8pm and fly around Duxford village as people clapped for the NHS."

"What happened next was something we couldn't have seen coming. Duxford and ARCo began receiving calls, emails and messages of support from people who had seen L flying. We were asked whether we could do it again as it had lifted their spirits to see and hear the Spitfire."

John added: "Hundreds of people from the local community said how wonderful it was to not only see the aeroplane, but how much it had brought communities together. Having heard the soft rumble of the engine approaching, they had come out to see what it was and, as a result, began chatting to one another."

After performing the flight for a couple of weeks, it was decided to emblazon the message 'THANK U NHS' under the wings for the 10th and final clap – ARCo's Mike Terry working out the dimensions and masking it before adding temporary white paint with a roller.

This planted the seed for the NHS Spitfire project, to find a way to use L to not only thank all of the NHS workers who have toiled so hard to keep the UK healthy during the coronavirus catastrophe, but also raise much-needed funding for the National Health Service (for full details, see the information panel, above left).

George said: "From our perspective, we would love to see L continue to bring people and loved ones together while giving something back to those who have become the nation's heroes over the past 72 years... even more so today during these difficult times. We are immensely proud to be L's custodians and look forward to this next chapter in her story!" **FP**