



Heirs and Graces...

This month we talk to warbird restorer and pilot,
Richard Grace of Air Leasing

Welcome Richard, can you tell us something about your career?

I went to school in Cambridge, and when I left, I swiftly began working for our family business and gaining my pilot's licence. Now I am the chief engineer of Air Leasing, based at Sywell, and also fly the aircraft that we maintain, which are primarily WWII era single engine fighters.

What started your interest in aviation?

I very much grew up in aviation. The rebuild of our family Spitfire, ML407, was finished before I was even a year old. I spent pretty much every weekend when I was growing up at an airfield or an airshow, which means I have always been driven to achieve a similar standard to those I watched when I was young.

In what, where and when was your first flight?

My first flight was on my mother's lap in our family Stampe SV4C, G-AXNW, when I was 18 days old. I first held the controls as soon as I could reach them!

Where did you do your flight training?

I initially trained in our Stampe with my mum, and with our chief pilot Peter Kynsey. However, my first official flying school training was a brief stint at Cambridge

Main Richard's preferred mount if he had been a WWII pilot – the P47.
Photo John Dibbs

Flying Group in the Tiger Moths when I was still at school. The school wasn't keen on me not attending, just so that I could go flying on a Wednesday afternoon, so that curtailed that activity. Once I finished school

I immediately went to Australia and did a fair bit of flying in Canberra. Then I discovered that an Australian licence didn't readily convert to a UK licence, so I came back pretty sharpish and completed the licence at Earls Colne. I eventually had my licence at 18.

How many types have you flown and for how many hours?

I've flown around 55 types and have around 1,850 hours total time, with 1,700 of them being tailwheel.

Do you have a favourite and worse type flown?

There are too many favourites to list. I have been very lucky to get the opportunity to fly a variety of the finest aircraft ever made. If I had to pick one, I would have to say our own Spitfire IX, it's just fantastically harmonised and flies effortlessly – both very fast and very slowly.

I once flew a Topsy Nipper from Perth in Scotland to Manchester Barton for its new owner. I think that would have to be the least enjoyable flight I have had, as a Topsy Nipper isn't the finest of cross-country machines. I'm sure it's brilliant for 10 minutes round the patch but I'm 6ft 1in tall and after an hour I was ready to jump out!



What are your current- and past-owned aeroplanes?

I currently own a Pitts S1, an RV-7 and a Cassutt Racer project. As a family we have a Spitfire and a Stampe.

Tell us something about you and Dave Puleston flying as the Trig Aerobatic Team

Dave and I have displayed together for around nine years now with the two Pitts Specials, and we've done displays both in the UK and mainland Europe.

The display flying is very enjoyable as the immense satisfaction of doing a good job at a tricky site (like displaying between the piers at Blackpool) makes the beer taste all the better in the evening.

Dave and I tend to not practise too much as we are very busy with our full-time jobs, but we have always achieved the minimum required to display by the CAA.

When we were building the sequence a few years ago we practised a lot (at least 20 hours' worth) and if we do something new, we will practise that until we can consistently perform it without fault.

What is the most challenging aspect of flying WWII machines?

The main difference between the WWII and more contemporary types is management of the aircraft and its associated systems. Also, you need to become accustomed to the speeds, as well as climb and descent

Top Richard with P51D *Contrary Mary*, back in the UK following repairs by Fighter Rebuilders at Chino.

Photo Neil Wilson.

Above left The Trig Aerobatic team of Richard Grace and John Puleston displayed in the UK and Europe for nine years.

Photo Neil Wilson.

Above right The start of the legacy – the two-seat Spitfire IX ML407 that Richard's mother Carolyn Grace operated after her husband's untimely death.

Photo Neil Wilson.

rates, involved in carrying out low level aerobatics.

The reason one gets to fly such machines is that the owner, and insurer, trust that you are capable of safely dealing with a problem should one occur.

It is therefore necessary to get thoroughly ahead of the aircraft, so when something does occur you have the spare capacity to deal with it well.

When you start flying aircraft of this ilk it can feel rather like you are tied to 200ft of rope attached to the tailwheel. It is incredibly important to swiftly get to the stage where the aircraft is tied to 200ft of rope behind you.

Was the Grace Spitfire the aeroplane you learnt to fly warbirds on?

Yes, it was. I was very lucky that through the engineering expertise of my father and the determination of my mother, we own a two-seat, dual-control Spitfire. This meant that I was able to train on that as soon as I was capable. The first loop I ever did was in a Spitfire, which I would imagine is fairly unique!

You must be very proud to keep the Spitfire flying after what your parents have achieved with it?

I am immensely proud of my parents for what they have done, and I hope to continue their legacy and pass it on to my own children.

It must be thrilling to fly the P-47 and Sea Fury, how do they compare?

The P-47 and Fury, although similarly sized, are remarkable different. The Fury is one of the finest aircraft ever built and has handling characteristics that are simply incomparable.

The P-47 is a wonderful aircraft but due to it being a somewhat earlier design than the Fury, it would be unfair to compare the two. The P-47 is better compared to the P-51; the 51 is light and agile but the 47 is rugged and strong.

Of all the aircraft I have flown, if I had to take one into war it would unquestionably be the P-47.

Your company flies many types for customers, you must feel honoured to be able to keep the memory of those who serviced and flew them in anger alive.

I have been very lucky to have been hanging around for long enough in the right places to meet a lot of our veterans, and it is always a pleasure to see them turn briefly back into 19-year-olds and discuss the differences between aircraft and what they did to survive.

How did you hear about the LAA?

Through purchasing my first aircraft, a Cassutt Racer, when I was 19.

How long have you been a member?

I have been with the LAA since buying the Cassutt Racer. I now own an RV-7.

Is the RV-7 fulfilling what you hoped for?

The RV-7 is just what I expected; it cruises at 150kt in comfort. The builder, Philip Wright, did a fantastic job and since we bought it from him in July, we already have 30 hours on the aircraft.

To have the ability to pop across to Le Touquet with my wife will be brilliant, although we haven't managed it yet, of course!

Do you have a best aviation moment or flight?

My first solo in a Spitfire on 4 October 2007. The reason is probably obvious, but in doing so I

had essentially realised my life's ambition. However, the problem was I was only 23, so then I needed another life's ambition!

Do you have any aviation heroes?

My mother Carolyn, who after the untimely death of her husband, and with two young children to bring up, decided not to sell the Spitfire for the money, which we greatly needed at the time.

Instead, with only 170 hours total time, learnt to and successfully flew, for a number of years the Spitfire on which everything we have subsequently achieved is built.

Have you experienced any 'hairy' aviation moments?

Nothing of mention. I am a very careful person and do not take anything lightly.

I'm sure one day something will bite but for now nothing out of the ordinary has happened, considering the type of aircraft I fly and the nature of the flying I do.

Do you have an aircraft or vehicles wish list?

As you can imagine, I'm very much satisfied with my lot as it is!

Are there any aviation books you would recommend?

Airborne by Neil Williams is a book that every pilot should read. It is a fascinating read from one of the most remarkable pilots who has an interesting, educational and witty story about most of the extensive types he flew.

Do you have any non-aviation hobbies or interests?

Not really, I am really very fortunate that my hobby is my job!

Any advice for fellow pilots?

If you're an owner or a pilot my advice is the same – make sure you know exactly how your aircraft works and is constructed. This could stand you in good stead when it all starts to go wrong. ■

Below One of a number of The Battle of Britain film Hispano Buchons (Spanish built Bf109) restored by Richard and his team.
Photo Neil Wilson.

