



Ideas, so they say, are easy. It's turning them into reality where hard graft, ingenuity and investment come in. When Steve Burt moved to Kent, his passion for the Battle of Britain and the heritage of the area were combined. He visited the museums in the area with high hopes. "I came away feeling there was a dimension missing - this was an aerial battle, and although the

museums gave a good historical account, I missed the connection with the actual flying - the sight, the sound and the drama." A germ of an idea began and it would not go away. Airshows add another element; the audience can bask in the heady atmosphere of a Hurricane or a Spitfire flying. They might catch a glimpse of the pilot at start-up or afterwards. The flying element is the

important bit... Only a few fortunate people can get to fly in the handful of two-seat Spitfires that operate. So what could Steve do to enhance the notion of a Spitfire in the air? Then that persistent thought turned into a concept - people can't fly a Spitfire - but they can fly with one. The end result is now in its first full season - appropriately the 70th anniversary of the Battle

of Britain. After a lot of research and development, Steve's Action Stations! provides a unique opportunity - to fly with the legend that is the Spitfire. The response from passengers so far has been very encouraging. Steve has an extensive background of design, business development and marketing and had already set up a family business, to license and publish

the work of his wife, the artist Katherine Chippindale. In 2008 they decided to move down to Kent. This being Battle of Britain country it also enabled Steve to follow his passion for the Spitfire and this was the catalyst for what became Action Stations! So, how to fly with a Spitfire... Photographers charter aircraft to fly alongside their subject; perhaps that was the way to

go? It became clear that fixed-wing options limited some of the elements Steve was toying with. Having had a trial flight in a helicopter, the answer came: "In an inspired moment I realised that a helicopter provided all the viewing flexibility I needed. "The view from either side was exceptional - what a fantastic observation platform! For the imaginative, looking over the

pilot's shoulder is not unlike the scene the crew of a Heinkel He 111 would have had during combat." Having researched several alternatives, Steve approached Sky Charter Helicopters based at Kent International Airport - better known as the former Battle of Britain airfield of Manston. Managing director Gary Slater was very encouraging and offered to do a trial flight.

Sky Charter operates the JetRanger's 'big brother', the stretched and more capable version of the LongRanger, offering six seats, each with a panoramic vista. The final element was the Spitfire. The team at Guy Black's Duxford-based Historic Aircraft Collection (HAC) could see the possibilities and their gorgeous Spitfire Vb BM597 would be ideal.

"...people can't fly a Spitfire - but they can fly with one."



Fly with the Legend

Action Stations! offers a unique opportunity - to go flying with a Spitfire. Ken Ellis and Duncan Cubitt sampled the experience



After touch down at Manston, the passengers get to meet the Spitfire pilot.

Helicopter meets fighter

Things had moved from conceptual to practical. Ways and means had to be found to allow the fighter and the chopper to work safely together. Sky Charter liaised with the CAA and then came the first of several dummy runs.

Steve: "I almost despaired with frustration on the first trial flight. We knew that the two machines had totally different flying characteristics, which would present challenges. But it seemed that we were not going to be able to offer more than a short glimpse of the Spitfire hanging on its flaps."

At the tripartite debrief, dejection was replaced by euphoria. HAC's Charlie Brown, a pilot of exceptional experience, had the answer. Certainly there would be a time when the Spitfire came alongside to formate with the helicopter, but the real joy would be to see the iconic fighter in action - manoeuvring around the helicopter, dogfight style.

Charlie's scheme involved a series of slalom-like manoeuvres centred on the helicopter. This way he could keep the Spitfire's momentum up - he would be flying past the helicopter and sometimes across its flight path. This choreography would give a safe but dynamic spectacle of the

Spitfire in its element. Then came Charlie's finale - he would barrel roll around the chopper!

Powers of levitation

Action Stations! offers a series of Spitfire experiences, so let's take you through the 'Platinum Tour' schedule. We met the six passengers in Sky Charter's lounge at Manston - all came armed with a barrage of cameras.

There was a full and careful safety brief from the helicopter pilot. He put everyone at ease, especially as some had not flown rotary wing before: "it's just like being in a car, but one with the powers of levitation!"

The first element of the flight required seamless co-ordination with Charlie departing from Duxford and both aircraft needed to 'acquire' one another for the formation phase. LongRanger Echo-Yankee lifted off at 10:30 and flew along the beach at Reculver - where the 'bouncing bomb' trials took place - to establish a holding pattern at West Bere.

A series of lakes provides a perfect navigational way-point from which both helicopter and Spitfire can make visual contact. In the LongRanger, the pilot showed his 'crew' the sector from

which Charlie would emerge. A glint of light bounced off the Perspex canopy and there was the Spitfire!

The pair flew south towards Folkestone with Charlie providing an intimate view of BM597 and the well-practised slalom. Then came a grandstand view of the impressive National Battle of Britain Memorial at Capel le Ferne - see page 74. Throughout the flight, both the port and starboard 'crew' get exceptional views.

The combo turned eastwards along the famed white cliffs to Dover. Off the South Foreland lighthouse Charlie performed a version of his lyrical aerobatics displays; those on board the chopper witnessing it all from a unique vantage point - out over the sea, looking landwards.

Having nourished the soul, it was time for some sustenance of another kind, and the group headed slightly inland to touch down on the heli-pad at the Wallett's Court Country House Hotel for lunch in the conservatory. The buzz around the table was full of superlatives, awe for the Spitfire and respect for its skilled pilot.

Fully replenished Echo-Yankee conveyed the passengers in style

back to Manston, alighting on the TG Aviation ramp where the Spitfire was positioned. Time to inspect it at close quarters, take more photographs and meet with Charlie. To complete the day Steve and his team had framed signed photos to present as mementos of an experience without comparison.

The six who had taken part while FlyPast was observing could not contain their excitement. All thought it was amazing and exceptional value. Action Stations! has a great web-site and passengers are encouraged to share their thoughts and images with 'surfers' - take a look!

Steve is very pleased with how his brainchild has turned out. He has ideas of developing the concept, perhaps crossing the Channel to further the experience. He also wonders if similar ventures could be staged with larger warbirds.

Steve and all who have combined their talents to produce this outstanding adventure are to be congratulated. What does he most enjoy from these flights? He takes great pleasure in meeting the wide diversity of people who are united in one desire - to fly with a legend.

As FlyPast went to press, airliners all over the place were grounded due to Icelandic volcanic dust. Such things have no bearing on the operation of helicopters! With many thanks to HAC's Charlie Brown, the teams at Sky Charter and Wallett's Court and above all to Steve Burt and the Action Stations! crew. www.goactionstations.co.uk



Top to bottom: Tracking along the cliffs near Dover.

The 'Platinum' crew after the March 6 sortie.

Time to take a closer look.

Left and opening spread: Charlie Brown in the HAC Spitfire V giving the passengers on the LongRanger a unique view. ALL DUNCAN CUBITT - WWW.DUNCANCUBITT.COM

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