

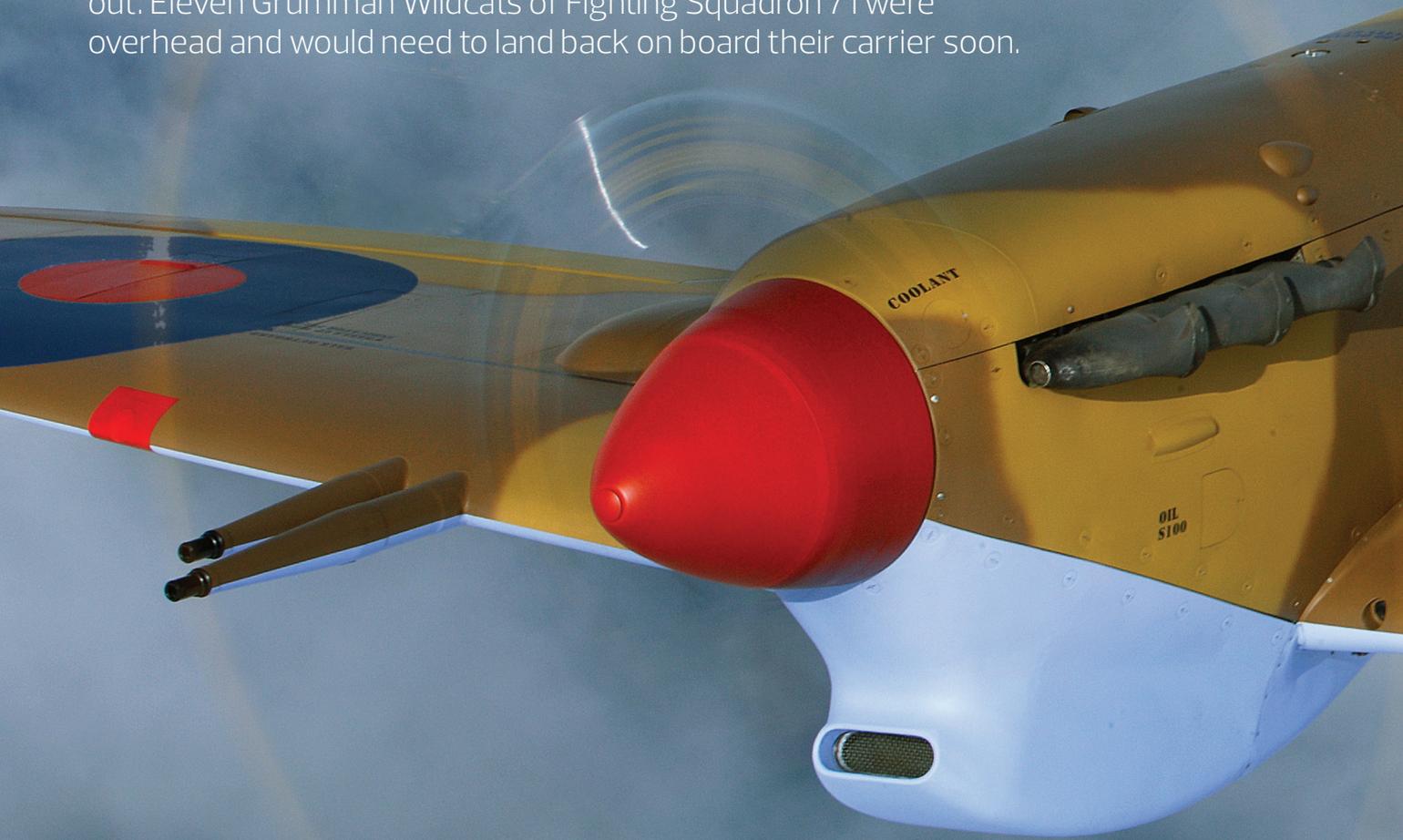
NO TAILHOOK?

BY JACK COOK

NO WAY!

Out-of-fuel Spitfire and a Carrier: No options

As the Supermarine Spitfire Mk Vc approached the stern of the aircraft carrier USS *Wasp* (CV-7), Pilot Officer Jerry Smith, RCAF, knew he was quickly running out of options. His first approach had been high and much too fast, and the 21-year-old fighter pilot knew that unless he was able to land safely on this approach, he would either have to bail or ditch his fighter into the Mediterranean Sea. He was low on options and time was running out. Eleven Grumman Wildcats of Fighting Squadron 71 were overhead and would need to land back on board their carrier soon.





The Spitfire Mk Vc entered service in early 1941, featuring the "universal wing" permitting a variety of armament. Most retained the typical two 20mm cannon and four .303 MGs but some mounted two cannon in each wing. Malta Spits were further modified. Nearly 6,500 were produced into 1943. The prominent chin inlet housed the Vokes carburetor filter for tropical and desert use that reduced top speed by about 10mph and climb rate by 600fpm. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

Smith had taken off from the *Wasp* just an hour prior with 46 other Spitfires of No. 601 Squadron en route to the island of Malta, but one had crashed due to engine failure. Safely airborne, Smith immediately switched to feed fuel from his 90-gallon “slipper” auxiliary fuel tank attached to the Spitfire’s belly. Suddenly, the Spitfire’s Merlin engine began to sputter from lack of fuel, and he switched back to his internal tank. Smith returned to the *Wasp* while watching the 45 remaining Spitfires continue toward Malta. Being an RAF-trained pilot, Smith had never attempted a carrier landing. More importantly, his Spitfire had no arresting hook. He would have to land on a moving runway and stop before running off the end into the sea. To his knowledge, no Spitfire had ever done what Seafires did regularly — landing on board a carrier.

P/O Smith and his Spitfire were part of *Operation Bowery*, which was a follow-up to *Operation Calendar*. The purpose of the two missions was to reinforce the beleaguered island of Malta, under daily bombing raids from German and Italian aircraft from Sicily and Libya. From 1940 through 1942, Malta’s defenders endured at least 3,000

PILOT OFFICER SMITH ... KNEW THAT NOT BEING ABLE TO ACCESS THE FUEL IN HIS AUXILIARY TANK MEANT HE COULD NEVER REACH MALTA, SO HE TURNED BACK TOWARD THE WASP. HE CHOSE ATTEMPTING A LANDING, RATHER THAN BAILING OUT OR DITCHING

bombing raids. The previous *Operation Calendar* was both a great success and a dismal failure. Forty-seven Spitfires were successfully delivered but the Germans had prior knowledge of their arrival, and within days most all had been destroyed in aerial attacks.

Planning for *Operation Bowery* was put on the fast track, and the *Wasp* returned to Shieldhall, Glasgow, Scotland, where she loaded another 48 Spitfires. The *Wasp* sailed from Scotland as part of Force Z on May 3, 1942, and was joined near Gibraltar by the Royal Navy aircraft carrier HMS *Eagle* with an additional 17 Spitfires. On the morning of May 9, the *Wasp* and Force Z had reached the designated point and turned into the wind to launch 11 Grumman F4F-3 Wildcats of VF-71 to provide a combat air patrol over the task force. The Spitfire launch began at 6:43 a.m. but the 23rd plane suffered an engine failure and crashed into the sea, which claimed Flight Sergeant Sherrington. The rest of the 63 were able to take off successfully, form up and head for Luqa Airfield on Malta.

Pilot Officer Smith, flying Spitfire Mk Vc BR126, knew that not being able to access the fuel in his auxiliary tank meant he could never reach Malta, so he turned back toward the *Wasp*. He chose attempting a landing, rather than bailing out or



PO Jerry Smith talks with Flt. Lt. Sims RAF engineering officer on the flight deck of the USS Wasp moments after his successful landing. The chalk writing under the Spitfire's canopy indicates its guns are loaded. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)





A Spitfire Mk Vc is hoisted aboard the USS Wasp at Port Glasgow, Scotland. The Vc's enlarged air filter, four 20mm cannons and 90 gallon auxiliary fuel tank are visible. The Spitfire's wingtips have been removed to increase space in the carrier's hangar bay.

ditching, primarily due to the briefing given to all the pilots the evening before by the Wasp's landing signal officer (LSO). Lieutenant David McCampbell (the same David McCampbell who finished the war with 34 kills and a Medal of Honor), advised the pilots that if they were to attempt a deck landing, they should keep their speed down and watch their altitude so that when they cut their engine, they would touch down as close to the stern as

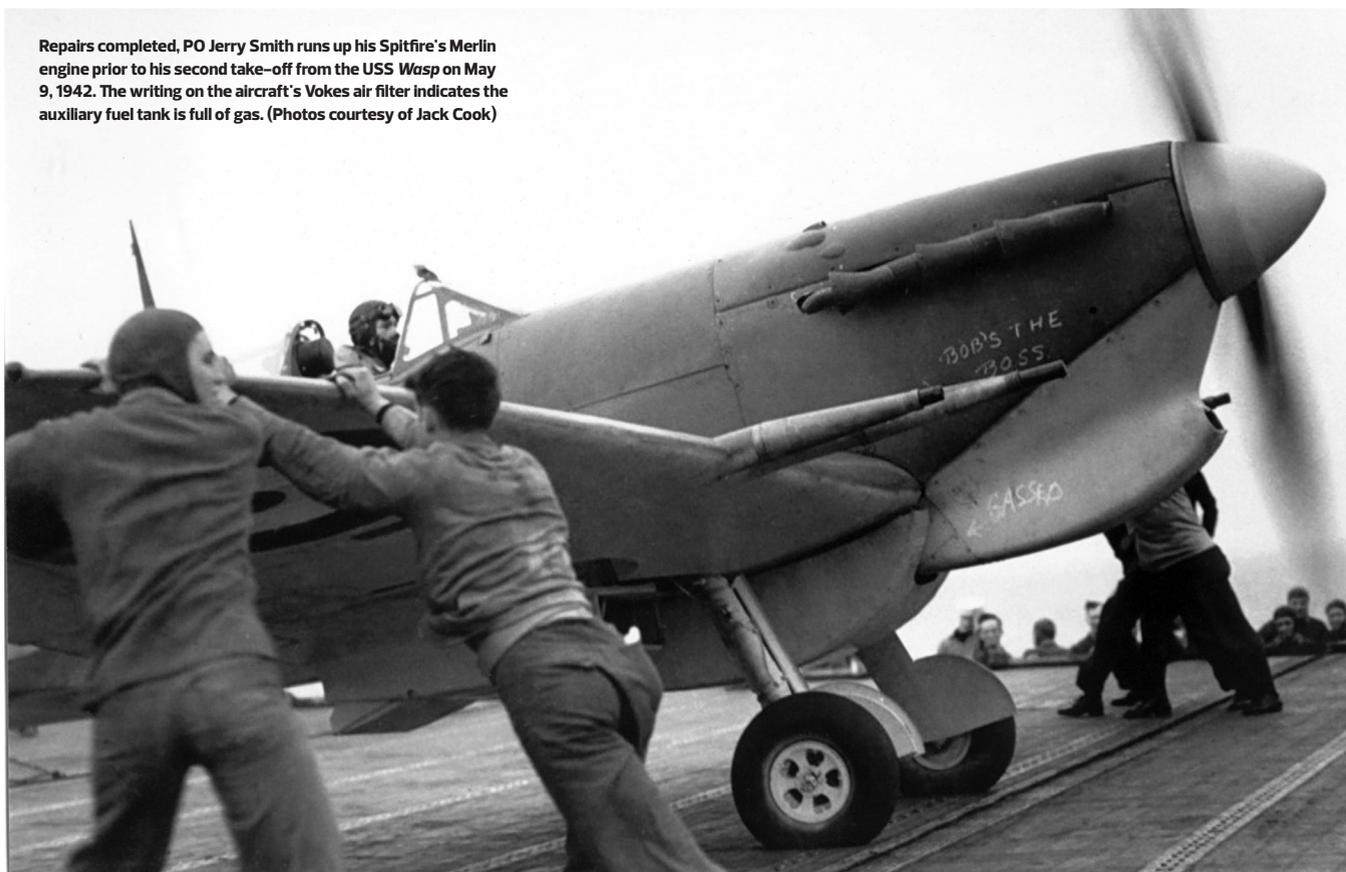
possible. McCampbell also added "...if he liked their approach he would give them the 'cut' signal but if they saw him dive for his escape net that they should go around and try again!"

Smith's first approach was exactly what McCampbell envisioned it being, both high and fast. When Jerry Smith saw the LSO jump into his safety net, he added power, aborted his approach and prepared himself for his second landing attempt. This time Smith kept his approach speed close to 90 knots at a much lower altitude. Upon receiving the "cut" from the LSO he chopped his throttle and pulled back on the stick to bring the Spitfire up to a slightly tail low attitude. BR126 touched down at 7:43 a.m., roughly a quarter of the way down the flight deck. Smith braked as hard as he could without putting the fighter on her nose and came to a stop only 15 feet from the bow. Jerry Smith had beaten the odds and just landed, probably for the first time ever, a high-performance fighter aircraft on board an aircraft carrier without a tailhook.

While the Spitfire was being repaired, its pilot became a celebrity on board the Wasp. Between handshakes and congratulations from the crew, Smith and McCampbell exchanged flight caps, and in honor of his feat Dave McCampbell presented Smith with his naval aviator wings.

As soon as his aircraft was repaired, Jerry Smith once again took off and followed his mates to Malta where they all landed safely. The Spitfires

Repairs completed, PO Jerry Smith runs up his Spitfire's Merlin engine prior to his second take-off from the USS Wasp on May 9, 1942. The writing on the aircraft's Vokes air filter indicates the auxiliary fuel tank is full of gas. (Photos courtesy of Jack Cook)



A Spitfire Mk Vc is shown in flight against a blue sky with light clouds. The aircraft is painted in a yellow and brown camouflage pattern. It features a red nose, a black propeller, and two sets of 20mm cannons mounted on the wings. The wings also have two machine gun ports each. The tail section is also visible, showing the vertical stabilizer and horizontal stabilizer. The aircraft is viewed from a side-on perspective, highlighting its armament layout.

WHEN JERRY SMITH SAW THE LSO JUMP INTO HIS SAFETY NET, HE ADDED POWER, ABORTED HIS APPROACH AND PREPARED HIMSELF FOR HIS SECOND LANDING ATTEMPT

Spitfire Mk Vc gives good view of its armament layout. According to Reade Tilley a 'Yankee' Spitfire ace who served on Malta with 126 Squadron 'All .303 machine guns and two of the 20mm cannons were removed to save weight and increase performance. We also operated under the assumption that if you could hit what you were shooting at you didn't need 8 guns!' (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

Captain David McCampbell, USN (Ret.): The Right LSO in the Right Place at the Right Time

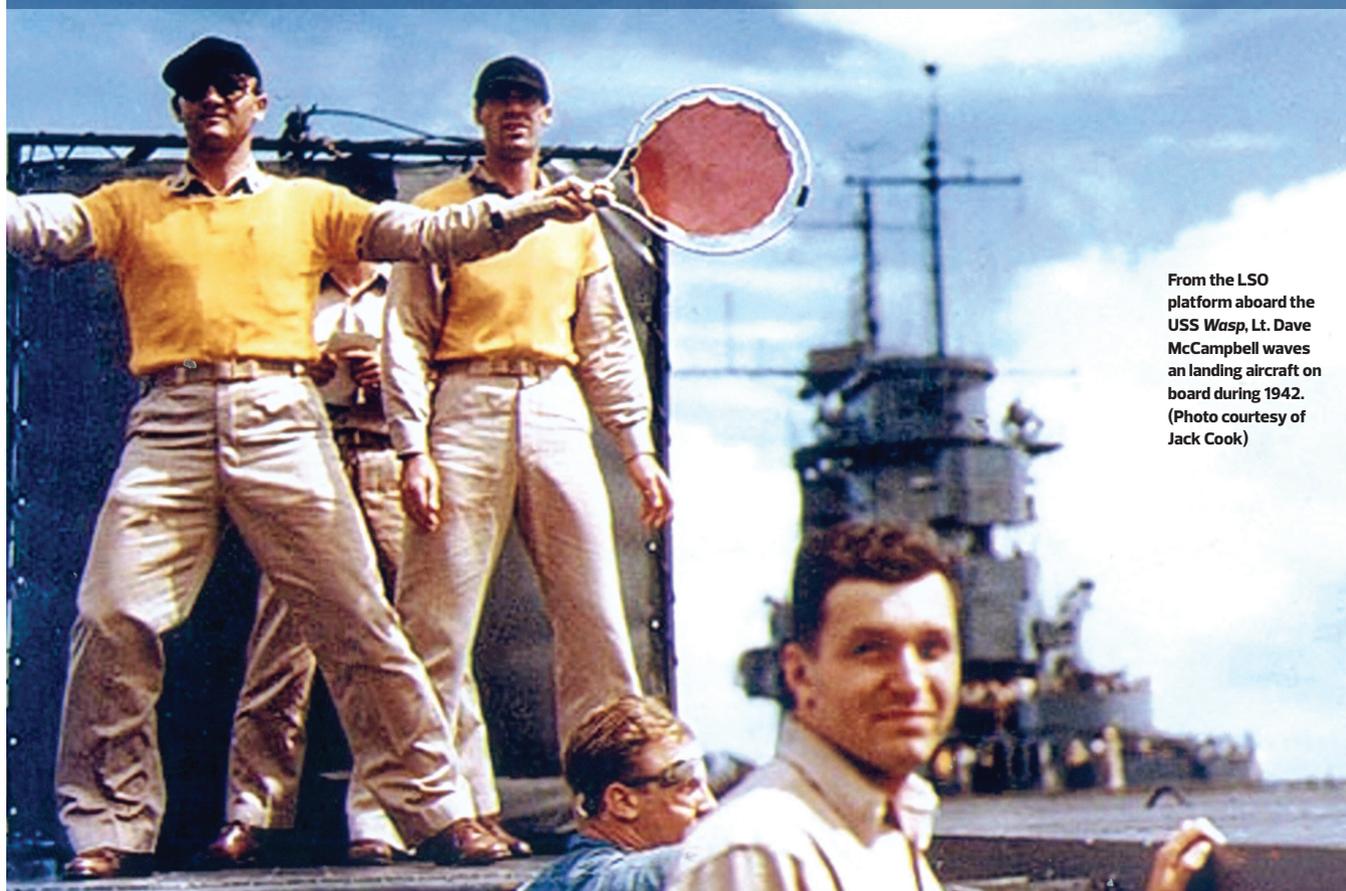
When Pilot Officer Jerry Smith turned final up the wake of USS *Wasp* (CV-7) that day, he could not have been in better hands. The landing signal officer, Lieutenant David McCampbell waited, paddles in hand, on the LSO platform to bring aboard a high-performance fighter without a tailhook.

A native of Bessemer, Alabama, McCampbell had graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in the class of 1933. After serving on board the heavy cruiser USS *Portland* (CA-33) for two years, he reported to NAS Pensacola for flight training and was designated a Naval Aviator in 1938. For the next two years, he flew Grumman F3Fs with Fighting Squadron Four (VF-4) on board the USS *Ranger* (CV-4).

Subsequently, McCampbell was assigned to the USS *Wasp* (CV-

7) as LSO and flight deck officer. He served on board the *Wasp* in the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Pacific Oceans until she was sunk by a Japanese submarine on September 15, 1942, near Guadalcanal. He formed Fighting Squadron 15 in 1943 and led it into combat from the USS *Essex* (CV-9) before fleeing up to command Air Group 15. McCampbell downed 34 Japanese aircraft to become the top naval fighter ace. Among his awards were the Medal of Honor, Navy Cross, Silver Star and 3 Distinguished Flying Crosses.

Following WW II, McCampbell continued his naval career for another 19 years, serving as XO of the USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CVA-42), CO of the USS *Severn* (AO-61) and CO of the USS *Bon Homme Richard* (CVA-31). He retired from the Navy in 1964 and passed away after a lengthy illness in 1996.



From the LSO platform aboard the USS *Wasp*, Lt. Dave McCampbell waves an landing aircraft on board during 1942. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

were immediately dispersed, refueled and ready for action. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was so pleased by the *Wasp's* performance that he transmitted the following message to her: "Many thanks to you all for the timely help. Who said a wasp couldn't sting twice?"

Pilot Officer Smith flew many combat missions over the next three months. On August 10, 1942, in Spitfire BR336 he intercepted a Junkers Ju 88 off of the coast of Sicily and disappeared with neither aircraft being seen again. During his combat service, Smith was credited with 4.2

Ju 88s destroyed, 1.5 probably destroyed, and 4 damaged. Seventy years later, his wartime heroism is largely forgotten. But many people remember the nameless pilot who landed his Spitfire onboard an aircraft carrier without a tailhook. He was a 21-year-old Canadian named Jerold Alpine Smith of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. †

Ed. note: In 1990, Flight Journal contributor Barrett Tillman introduced Dave McCampbell to Jerry Smith's brother Rod, also a Malta Spitfire pilot.