

OUR 1950s MOTORING SCENE

THE SPITFIRE AT THE CAPE

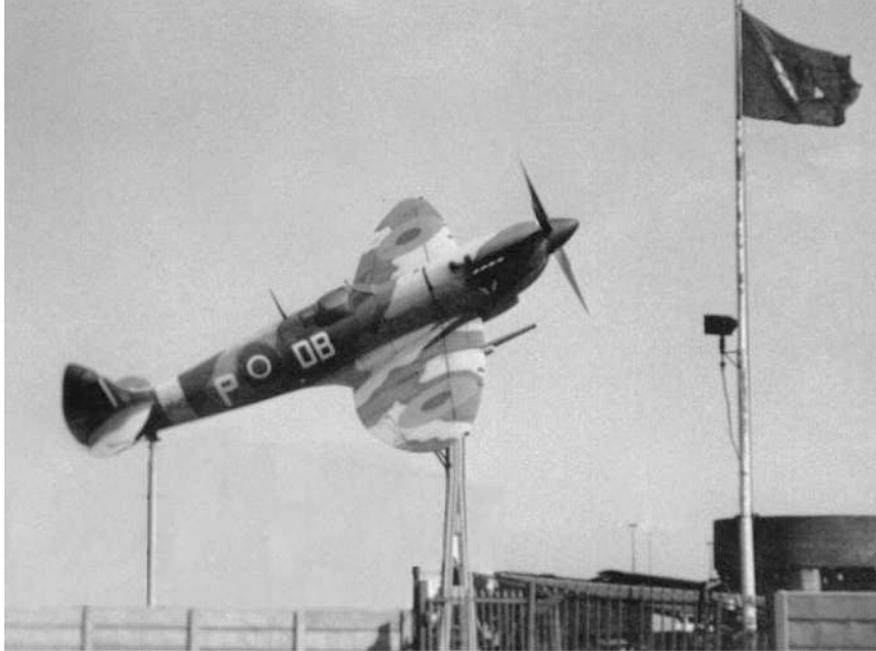
By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

Soaring above the South African Metal and Machinery scrapyards in Voortrekker Road, Salt River during the 1970s and early '80s was an iconic sight - the beautiful shape of a Supermarine Spitfire. With its powerful lines and the unique elliptical plan shape of its wings, it looked drop dead gorgeous, and for passing motorists it was an impressive landmark.

Reginald Mitchell and his team at Supermarine in Southampton had embarked on the design of the Spitfire in 1935. With political storm clouds developing over Europe, the British had identified the urgent need for an interceptor defensive fighter. The company had pioneered technology in the production of a series of racing seaplanes that culminated in the outright win of the Schneider Trophy for Great Britain in 1931. Mitchell and his team focused on installing eight Browning machine guns in the thinnest wing possible, to which they married a slender fuselage snugly behind the new Rolls-Royce combat-rated engine - the Merlin. Production numbers built up rapidly and the Spitfire earned undying admiration with its exploits during the Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940.

In November 1942 the SAAF's 1 Squadron were equipped with these superb fighters in the Western Desert. After the defeat of the Axis force in North Africa, in 1943 SAAF 1 Squadron advanced through Malta to Sicily, where 2 and 4 Squadrons were also equipped with Spitfires, and into Italy.

The South African public was first introduced to the Spitfire in March 1944. As Allied forces battled their way through Italy and Western Europe, the *Liberty Cavalcades* toured South Africa to



The Spitfire mounted above the scrapyards in Salt River

educate the public as to the role its armed forces were playing in the war as well as recruiting for the forces 'up north'. A Spitfire performed several demonstrations over Cape Town to publicize the show.

Some 23 000 of these fine aircraft were eventually built, and they operated in every major theatre of the war. After hostilities ended more than twenty countries were equipped with surplus Spitfires as the RAF made way for the jet age. The Bombing, Gunnery and Air Navigation School at Langebaanweg (later known as the Air Operations School) took delivery of two Mk. IXs in August 1948, the first in the Cape of the 136 Spitfires that were shipped to the Union. The Air Operations Schools served as the combat nurseries of the SAAF and the pilots, flying Spitfires, practiced air-to-air firing against drogues (towed by Harvards and Venturas), dive-bombing and rocket firing. It had initially been intended to equip 2 Squadron with Spitfires for combat in Korea, but the offer of P-51 Mustangs by the United States Army Air Force was too good to refuse and the Spitfires remained in South Africa.

Eventually 63 Mk. IX Spitfires served in the Cape, but sadly, by 1953 these aircraft had been involved in several fatal accidents, mainly due to mechanical failure. Often overlooked, however, is the fact that the SAAF Spitfires had been built many years before when the average lifespan of a fighter was counted in weeks, not years, and the majority of the aircraft had been rebuilt in the UK after severe accidents. By April 1954 all of the airworthy Spitfires had been flown to Pretoria for retirement and all that remained in the Cape were a few wrecks of those still involved in Boards of Inquiry at Ysterplaat. Three or four of these wrecks were sold to SA Metal & Machinery

owned by Harold Barnett, himself an ex-wartime pilot. He had received his wings from 24 Air School at Dunnotar near Springs in 1941, and had served in 2 Squadron, nicknamed the 'Flying Cheetahs', in North Africa, Sicily and Italy, flying Kittyhawks and Spitfires. He had returned to South Africa as a flying instructor in 1944, before being demobilized and moving into business.

BR601 (SAAF 5631), the aircraft that he mounted above his scrapyards, had first flown in June 1942. Earlier that year Britain had been fighting for survival against Germany. The new Focke Wulf 190 fighters had decimated the Spitfires

protecting the bombing raids over Europe, 300 Spitfires had been shot down and had been withdrawn from service over Europe. In desperation, the Air Ministry ordered that 50 of the existing airframes be converted to take the new 1600 hp supercharged Merlin Mk 61 engine, and BR601 was the sixth of these Mk IXs to be assembled. The performance of the new design, particularly above 20 000 ft, proved to be outstanding, and gradually Britain regained control of the air as some 5600 Mk IX Spitfires were built. BR601 was assigned to 64 Squadron RAF and after a strenuous flying career which included a serious landing accident, was shipped to South



BR601 emerges from the Atlas paint shop in 1976



Tony Gaze in the cockpit during WW II

Africa aboard the *SS Clan Mackellar* in March 1949. Issued to the Air Operations School at Langebaanweg in March 1951, the aircraft was involved in three further accidents and, following limited repairs, served in a ground instructional role with 7 Squadron at Ysterplaat. In February 1954 the SAAF declared its Spitfire fleet redundant and Barnett acquired the remains of BR601.

During the 1970s the legendary Colonel Peter McGregor, officer commanding the newly-established SAAF Museum in Pretoria, approached Barnett with a proposal; if the museum could secure a Sikorsky helicopter and the parts for two Spitfires, it would get Atlas Aircraft to restore one of them in exchange. A deal was done, and in 1976 BR601, then only a fuselage without wings, was restored to static condition and mounted on a pylon above the scrapyard. On Barnett's request, the plane had been painted in the wartime colours of 2 Squadron, resplendent with a 'Flying Cheetah' logo on the front of the fuselage.

Over the years searches at Metal & Machinery had revealed valuable parts for a Beaufighter, a Kittyhawk, and an engine from a Beaufort, and in 1979 Colonel McGregor returned to spend more time rooting around. For months the museum had been rebuilding another Spitfire to exhibition standard, but many important parts were needed. The intention was to swap the Spitfire for one of the only six surviving examples of a WW II Beaufighter belonging to the Portuguese Air Force Museum in Lisbon. They found two Spitfire wings, a rusted Browning machine gun and a propeller boss. In addition



Tony Gaze lapping an MG Special in his Ferrari, Eerste Rivier Circuit, 1955

he hit the jackpot with a number of parts for a Miles Master, a Ventura, an Airspeed Oxford, a Hawker Audax, a Westland Wapiti and two Cheetah engines for an Avro Anson.

It was a shock for motorists when, in 1986, the popular landmark on Voortrekker Road suddenly disappeared; Harold Barnett had retired and the Spitfire had been shipped to England to be sold. The aircraft's incredible history then emerged. BR601, flown by two Ace pilots and with a history of 116 combat missions, was arguably the most significant surviving Allied fighter aircraft in the world!

75% of the early Mk IX Spitfires had been destroyed in combat operation, and BR601 was the only survivor of the initial 100 built. The first of the Ace pilots to fly her was Colin Gray, DFC, DSO, who was appointed 64 Squadron Leader in September 1942; he became the top

New Zealand fighter of WW II and ended the war with 27 kills. The second was an Australian Ace, Tony Gaze, DFC and Two Bars, who commanded 64 Squadron later that year and ended the war with 11 kills.

Several museums and groups considered the restoration of BR601 but were deterred by the complexity of the project. Eventually, in 2008, she was taken to New Zealand to be restored to airworthy condition. After 64 years on the ground she flew, with great acclaim, at the 2015 Goodwood Revival. Named *Spirit of Kent*, she is now based at the historic Battle of Britain fighter airbase, Biggin Hill.

After the war Tony Gaze became Australia's first F1 driver, competing with success in Europe, Australia and New Zealand. In 1955 he and Peter Whitehead caused great excitement when they

stopped off in Cape Town while returning to the UK after a racing season 'down under'. They attracted a record crowd of 34 000 when they competed in their Ferraris in the Seventh Van Riebeeck Trophy at the Eerste Rivier track. Little did he know at the time that one of his favourite aircraft was lying in a scrapyard only 30 kilometres away.

Both Harold Barnett and Colonel Peter McGregor had a passion for aircraft, we can only be grateful to them for helping to preserve an icon in the history of aviation.

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A magnificent Spirit of Kent in flight over the English coast