# Bad Day in France

## AT A CASUAL FLY-IN, AN HISTORIC FIGHTER RECEIVES MAJOR DAMAGE

**BY JAMES THOMPSON**

On 11 June, spectators and members of a French flying club were enjoying an informal day of relaxing, having lunch on the grass, and flying. From nearby Dijon-Darois, Christophe Jacquard had brought in two of his magnificent Warbirds — a Hawker Sea Fury and a Supermarine PR. Mk. XIX Spitfire. Christoph had flown in with the Spitfire and Cedric Ruet had piloted the Mk. 11 Sea Fury. Recently separated from the *Armee de l'Air,* Ruet had been a display pilot in the Raphael fighter. For the return trip he would be flying the Spitfire (one French newspaper said this would be his first flight, but we have not been able to confirm).

Let's examine this particular Spitfire, which has a long association with the USA.

After WWII, the government of Thailand was beginning to rebuild after suffering bad treatment from Japan. With assistance from the Royal Air Force, plans were put forth to train and equip six wings. Of course, trainers were needed immediately and 41 NAA T-6 Tesans and 20 Miles Magisters were acquired in 1948. These were soon supplemented by ten C-47s obtained from British surplus stock in India.

For more warlike use, 30 rebuilt Spitfire FR Mk. XIV/XIXs were obtained for the recon/fighter role along with ten Firefly FR. Mk. Is that were also listed as recon fighters. What is amazing is that some of the pre-war equipment was kept operational along with war-time Japanese aircraft that had been abandoned by the retreating enemy. Some of these aircraft included Curtiss Hawk 75s, Boeing 100s, Nakajima Ki 43s, and Mitsubishi A6M5s — aircraft that would be worth a fortune on today's market. There were even some biplane Vought V-935 Corsairs still in service so a visit to a Thai air force ramp at this time would have yielded an eclectic collection of flying machines.

With the communist threat building, America began supplying more military equipment and when 120 Grumman F8F-1 Bearcats arrived, some of the earlier planes were phased out of service. The Spitfires flew on into the early 1960s.

One of the Spitfires was FR Mk. XIX PS890 (coded U14-26/97 in Thai service). In 1962, the fighter, still in full Thai AF markings, was disassembled and loaded aboard a Lockheed L-1049 Constellation freighter from Flying Tiger Line and flown to Burbank, California, where it was donated by King Bhumiphol to Ed Maloney, founder of The Air Museum, which would become today's Planes of Fame.

This was an incredible gift for the fledgling museum and Ed would comment, "Back then, in my wildest dreams, I did not think we would get a Spitfire. When we heard that Thailand was phasing out the aircraft we started letter writing to the Thai embassy about the possibility of getting one of the aircraft. I basically thought it would be a futile effort but to my great surprise we received a most positive answer. Thai royalty was, and still is, a supporter of vintage aircraft. This was at the point when we were beginning to move to our new location at Ontario Airport so the Spitfire was painted in a generic RAF scheme." As a side note, during 1951 the American government wanted photo information on certain areas of China and a deal was struck to utilize the Royal Air Force's PR Mk. XIXs based at Kai Tak Airport in Hong Kong. These were hazardous missions but the RAF and their Spitfires performed the task admirably and the American government got the required photographs. The last Mk. XIX operational sortie was undertaken in 1963 when one of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight's aircraft was used to engage in combat trials with the RAF's English Electric Lightning twin-jet fighter. At the time, there were extreme tensions in the area and the RAF wanted to see how the front-line Lightning would compare to the P-51D Mustangs being flown by the Indonesians.

**Steve Hinton flying PS890 on its third flight.**

**Beginning in 2008 PS890/F-AZJS was overhauled and fitted with a rebuilt Griffon driving a single five-blade prop. At that time, the aircraft received an RAF Southeast Asia camouflage scheme.**

Spitfire PS890 remained on static display — heading to its new home at Chino Airport and as time went by some thought was given to rebuilding the aircraft to flying condition.

However, the big stumbling block was the Rolls-Royce Griffon 65 of 2050-hp. Yes, there were engines available and, yes, they could be overhauled, but both were extremely expensive and out of the reach of the museum. As the value of Warbirds kept increasing, Steve Hinton and the gang got the idea of getting PS890 back in the air — but in a rather unique manner.

**Almost immediately into the takeoff role, the aircraft's nose drops and the prop digs into the grass.**

**The violence of the incident is portrayed in this view of the aircraft digging in and starting to go over on its back.**

With the RAF phasing out its Avro Shackleton patrol bombers, there was suddenly an availability of Rolls-Royce Griffon 58As and their contra-rotating propellers. And in 1994 a decision was made to acquire one of these engines and then convert the airframe to handle the new powerplant. It was not a particularly easy task and work was done as the museum had time and funding.

By 2002, the entire project had come together and the plane was given a coat of beautiful high-gloss Photo Recon Blue. The plane really looked good with its contra-rotating props and Steve took it aloft on 8 May 2002 for its first post-restoration test flight (registered N219AM).

In February 2005, the Spitfire was sold to French collector Christophe Jacquard who was based at Dijon-Darois. Disassembled, the plane was shipped to England and arrived at Duxford on 31 March 2005 where it was assembled and registered G-CDGK for test work. In April 2005 it was once again disassembled and trucked (via the Chunnel) to France where it was registered F-AZJS on 7 April.

The blue Spitfire was flown at numerous shows but in 2008 a decision was made to ground the aircraft and rebuild the Griffon to handle a single propeller. At the same time, the Spitfire was painted in RAF Southeast Asia camouflage.

Getting back to the accident day, everything looked like it was going well. The pilot strapped in and started the Griffon. After warming up and a brief run-up, the aircraft took the active.

"What one has to remember about the Griffon Spits is that they are nose heavy — very nose heavy," stated an experienced Warbird pilot who viewed the accident video.

The pilot applied power and the fighter rapidly accelerated but, almost at the same time, took a distinct nose-down attitude and the five-blade wooden prop began digging into the grass. The prop literally exploded — sending pieces everywhere and a woman spectator was injured. "As the propeller suddenly began to get shorter, you could hear the Griffon violently overspeed and this was causing internal damage. As the Spitfire gets up on its main gear, the center of gravity shifts a bit forward and combined with large application of power, torque, and very minimal propeller clearance in flight attitude, a pilot can find himself in big trouble. There is a huge amount of stress on engine and airframe — the prop wants to stop but the engine wants to keep running. The supercharger is running at 20,000-rpm and the massive force of the stoppage literally destroys that unit. Also consider the stock Mk. IX Spitfire with the less powerful and lighter Merlin up front has the tail starting to come up as the pilot applies just 30-in of manifold pressure," said our consulting pilot.

The Spitfire slammed onto its nose, seemed to hang there for a moment and then crashed onto its back. "Not a good place to be. You can see glycol, and perhaps fuel leaking leaking from that big tank in front of the pilot. The Spitfire cockpit is snug to begin with so just imagine being wedged into that confine with a hot engine and fuel raining down on you. It also appears that there was zero in the way of safety equipment so, after a moment's hesitation, the crowd surged forward to lift the aircraft. What is funny is that the 'officials' in their bright green vests tried to stop them — yet this was the only way the pilot was going to survive. The spectators managed to lift the plane up and the pilot was unstrapped and pulled rapidly away from the aircraft."

The good thing is that the pilot received only minor injuries and there will be an investigation as to the cause of the accident. It had apparently rained somewhat recently and the soft soil could have been instrumental in causing a tire to dramatically dig in, but it is probably going to be pilot error. The airplane was very heavily damaged and it seems that no particular care was taken when it was lifted and put on a truck for removal. The engine is probably destroyed, prop gone, motor mount broken, fuselage twisted, both wings broken, vertical tail crushed, etc. When we talked to Vintage V-12s and other restoration shops, the price of rebuilding the stricken Spitfire was placed at about $2,000,000. **WI**

**Spectators rush onto the grass to raise the Spitfire so that the injured pilot can be extracted.**

**It seems that little care was exercised in lifting the stricken fighter. Note the broken right wing.**