



A MISSED

OPPORTUNITY?

The tantalising possibility of a truly long-range PR Spitfire

Hindsight is a wonderful thing — even for legendary test pilot Jeffrey Quill, who more than 20 years after the end of the Second World War pondered a potential missed opportunity to create a truly long-range photo-reconnaissance Spitfire. In his final article, the late **MELVYN HISCOCK** recalls a chain of conversations regarding an intriguing “what if . . . ?”

THIS ARTICLE WAS prompted by a conversation many years ago in the office of renowned Hampshire-based aircraft restorer Vivian Bellamy (1919–98); it came back to mind following a recent online discussion on the excellent Britmodeller forum. The story begins with Supermarine Spitfire two-seat trainers.

A Spitfire for two

As is well known, the Spitfire Trainer was prototyped on MT818, a standard Mark VIII converted in 1946. No orders for the Tr.8 trainer were forthcoming but Vickers-Armstrongs did convert a total of 20 Tr.9s for the Netherlands, India, Egypt and Eire. The company also did

some preliminary design work on a trainer version of the Mark XVIII.

Flown as a demonstrator, Tr.8 MT818 was by 1952 in storage at Chilbolton. It remained there until it was acquired by Viv Bellamy for the Hampshire Aeroplane Club at Eastleigh, with which it flew as G-AIDN. There it was flown by club members until bought by Viv’s brother-in-law, John Fairey, the second son of pioneering British aircraft manufacturer Sir Richard Fairey.

Late in life, Viv had an office at Longparish, near Andover, and I used to pop in from time to time to see him. One afternoon we got on to the topic of Spitfires, and the subject of Supermarine test pilot Jeffrey Quill came up. Needless to say, Viv had known him; and he told me about a

ABOVE What might have been? This artist’s impression by MARK HARRIS shows what a Griffon-powered “Spitfire PR.XVIII” — adapted for extended range with the cockpit relocated rearwards to accommodate more fuel and cameras — may have looked like. Artwork © 2021. For more info on the artist’s work visit www.markharris.ca.



ABOVE The prototype Tr.8 two-seat trainer, MT818, seen here wearing its B-Conditions marking N32. It was later put on the British civil register as G-AIDN and survives today with the Biggin Hill Heritage Hangar. **LEFT** The irrepressible Vivian Bellamy (left) and actor James Fox during the making of the uncompleted film *Biggles Sweeps the Skies* in 1969.

wartime incident that had happened at High Post. Some Americans had come in to collect Spitfires and, when they took off, they kept the Spitfires on the ground a while longer than normal and then retracted the mainwheels while the Spits were still very close to the deck, so that they appeared to pop up only just as they took off. Several spectators had been impressed, and Quill noticed this.

He was due to fly a Spitfire soon afterwards, and he climbed in and started up in the usual way. He then began his take-off roll and, the moment the tail came up, one wheel popped up into the wheel-well. As he lifted off, the other did the same. In order to do this he must have selected wheels-up as soon as the tail was up, and kept just enough side load on the remaining wheel to prevent it retracting until flying speed was reached. It could have all ended with a Spitfire on its belly shedding prop blades, but