

WARBIRDS Hurricane school

# HURRICA



# SCH





# PLANE

How to sustain a private warbird operation long into the future, and provide a flow of new pilots to fly it safely? The operators of Battle of Britain veteran Hawker Hurricane I V7497 believe they have the answer

**WORDS:** BEN DUNNELL

**PHOTOGRAPHY:** DARREN HARBAR

Sitting at IWM Duxford on a summer's day, talking to Dr Peter Kirkpatrick and Neil Oakman about the operation of Hurricane I V7497, the sound of a departing two-seat Spitfire briefly overshadows the conversation. It's another passenger experience flight conducted under the Safety Standards Acknowledgement and Consent rules, which have provided such a revenue boost to sections of the warbird industry, and drawn in new piloting blood to fulfil the demand. But the initial route into these aircraft is a different matter entirely. Yes, various companies offer Spitfire training courses, but once you've gone solo, what then? The likelihood is that an owner isn't about to let you loose on their aeroplane.

Bringing on a new generation of warbird pilots is part of the reason why Hurricane 501 Operations, 501 being a reference to the squadron with which V7497 served during the Battle of Britain, is launching its own pilot training programme. Another aspect is the need to sustain the aircraft's future. The difference here is that having soloed on the Hurricane, these newly trained pilots can carry on flying it themselves. It's the same with the operator of the Harvard, T-6 Harvard Ltd, which provides the other key training element. As things stand, T-6 Harvard Ltd is the only UK-based organisation offering solo flying after passing the conversion course onto type.

"It is much more straightforward to do with the Harvard", says Neil Oakman, whose day job is a senior training captain with a major European airline, "because it is operated on a certificate ➤

**MAIN PICTURE:** Hurricane 501's training duo: the Hurricane I itself and Harvard IV *Wacky Wabbit*, being flown by Neil Oakman and Andy Goodall respectively.





**ABOVE:** V7497 has been a fixture on the airshow circuit since its return to the air in August 2018. Both of the individuals who form part of its ownership group have now soloed the fighter.

of airworthiness and therefore available for hire. It is the perfect training aircraft to move on the Hurricane". Neil is chief pilot of Hurricane 501 LLP, and head of training for T-6 Harvard Aviation Ltd, the organisation employing the Harvard for teaching pilots to fly the Hurricane. "You could do a PPL on the Harvard if you so wished. Admittedly, we've also got a Piper Cub on which we normally start people off. They progress to the Harvard once they've done their initial tailwheel training.

"Now, with V7497, there's the opportunity to go further still because we have the CAA's

permission to provide fully remunerated flight training on the Hurricane. As a result, the Hurricane is unique in that it will be the only one worldwide available for training and maintaining currency."

Peter Kirkpatrick has gone down exactly this route. An eminent neurosurgeon, he retired from the NHS this summer to focus on the Hurricane, "to make the business side work, and obviously to fly her myself". 'Kirk's' first aviation activities were when he learned to hang-glide as a medical student, subsequently moving on to flex-wing microlights and regular light

aeroplanes. A big step up came in 2009, when he acquired his own Pitts S-2A Special, G-ITII. The Hurricane, via Harvard time, followed a few years later.

"I made contact with Tony Ditheridge at Hawker Restorations, which was about to be taken over by new owners", Peter recalls. "I couldn't afford to get into the project alone, so we ended up doing a shared deal. The aeroplane is currently owned three ways; by John Thorogood, Hawker Restorations, who continue to own a share which they would like to sell, and me. We would welcome any approaches from individuals

## HURRICANE V7497 HISTORY

It was at the Hawker factory in Langley, Berkshire, that Hurricane V7497 was built. Delivered in September 1940 to No 501 Squadron at Kenley, it helped make good the attrition already experienced during the Battle of Britain. Unfortunately, V7497 was soon to add to that list. During only its seventh operational sortie, on 28 September, it was shot down over Kent by a Luftwaffe Messerschmitt Bf 109. The Hurricane's pilot, Plt Off E. B. Rogers, bailed out successfully. At the controls of the Bf 109 was Oberlt Gustav Sprick, Staffelfkapitän of 8./JG 26, who notched up 11 victories in the Battle of Britain; the shoot-down of V7497 was his 20th overall, and saw him being awarded the Knight's Cross personally by Hitler. A few years ago, V7497's majority owner Peter Kirkpatrick

met Sprick's niece through the efforts of a German neurosurgeon friend.

Aviation archaeologists located the Hurricane's remains at the crash site near East Sutton in the 1990s. Following recovery, they were acquired by Hawker Restorations as the basis of a restoration effort. The aircraft was registered G-HRLI during 2002. Numerous original items have been used in the rebuild, alongside new steel tubing and as many period-accurate items as possible. Eye Tech Engineering overhauled the Merlin III engine for the project. It culminated with a maiden post-restoration flight from Hawker Restorations' new base at Elmsett, Suffolk, on 30 August 2018, in the hands of type expert Stu Goldspink.



who might be interested either from an active piloting point of view or as an investor.”

The pilot training idea occurred to Peter almost immediately on starting his involvement with V7497, which first flew in late August 2018, and subsequently gained 15 hours of flight time. “Most warbirds are owned by high net-worth individuals. In our case, we had to develop a viable business model. In addition, I am not one for seeing things stagnate. Having gone to the effort of building a flyable Hurricane, it needs to be flown. Nothing would give me more pleasure than to see her flown for 100 hours a year. The problem we face is that most able pilots can’t afford more than a few hours.”



His own experience showed Peter the need for a more practical, affordable way in. When he was first informed what the necessary Harvard time would cost him, he remembers, “my heart sank. I happened to be at Hawker Restorations when I was told this, and there was a visiting American neurosurgeon there, who was a contemporary of my boss at the time. He’d retired in his 50s, and he said, ‘Don’t worry about that, ‘Kirk’. I’ve got a Harvard in North Carolina. Please come over, all you need to do is put petrol in it’.

“So, I did. I spent two separate weeks out there and gathered about 25 hours, which taught me the mechanics of the aeroplane. But, of course, in the States you’ve have runways on which you could land a Shuttle, so you have all the time in the world to sort yourself out. There’s no doubt that the facility to fly there is enormous compared to here. The cost is about half and the weather was favourable. I thought it was very straightforward. Come to a busy place like Duxford, with a short downwind leg, three aircraft in the circuit, and it all becomes very different.”

Indeed, when he was introduced to the Aircraft Restoration Company, it became apparent that a different approach was required. “They immediately threw that experience into the bin and said I’d have to start again, and they were absolutely right. I did an additional 15 hours of Harvard flying here before I went solo in the Hurricane, so it took me about 40 hours altogether, but over



quite a long period of time due to the time taken to complete the Hurricane restoration. I was in no rush as the Hurricane hadn’t been finished, but in retrospect, if you can compress the training into two or three months rather than two or three years, it makes a considerable difference.”

In establishing Hurricane 501’s dedicated set-up, the all-important

**“The Hurricane will be the only one available for training and maintaining currency”**

training link was forged with T-6 Harvard Aviation Ltd. It was already well-established at Duxford, operating Canadian Car and Foundry-built Harvard IV G-BJST in wartime RAF desert camouflage with the name *Wacky Wabbit*. Says Peter, “We knew the consortium of owners of the Harvard, and had been talking to them. The guys who operate the aircraft are extremely

experienced Harvard pilots. This makes for a relatively safe transition to the Hurricane. Very few people have that luxury. A number of people expressed an interest in progressing to fly the Hurricane, hence we started to put the pieces together. We had to get our own operational control manual, which involved a fair amount of work but the process was immensely valuable. The CAA has been very helpful in that respect, and we’re grateful to them for their support.”

“We now have a recognised training syllabus for the Harvard”, continues Neil, the head of training. He is one of a small group of instructors who are approved to fly the Harvard from the rear seat. “Once students complete their training, they are able to commence ground school for the Hurricane.”

V7497’s third co-owner, John Thorogood, knows this process all too well. He became the latest pilot to solo the Hurricane, on 13 August, following in his father’s footsteps. Sgt Pilot, later Sqn Ldr Laurence Thorogood had flown Hurricane Is and IIs with No 87 Squadron in the Battle of Britain, claiming a Junkers Ju 88 destroyed and a Ju 87 Stuka damaged. In total, he accumulated 550 hours on Hurricanes in four years of flying in England, India and the Arakan campaign in Burma, ➤

**ABOVE:** T-6 Harvard Aviation’s Harvard IV, G-BJST, is an ex-Italian Air Force example. Its markings are those of a Harvard, AJ841, which served with the RAF’s wartime Desert Air Force as a ‘hack’ aeroplane, specifically with No 154 Squadron — this unit was once based at Fowlmere, near the aircraft’s current base at Duxford.



## WARBIRDS Hurricane school

The amount of Harvard time necessary prior to going solo on the Hurricane varies from person to person.





with a further 140 hours on Spitfire VIIIs in Burma and Sumatra.

Having accumulated more than 2,500 hours on Austers and various other tailwheel types and around 1,400 in his Piper Apache, including trips as far afield as Greenland and Cape Town, John is an experienced private pilot, who spent his career in the oil industry. “My father died in 2006”, he says, “but he was often heard to mutter, ‘Don’t worry, John. You’ll fly a Hurricane one day’. The problem with parents wishing these things on you is that they stick. I was very fortunate to be able to participate with ‘Kirk’ in the Hurricane rebuild.

“I started my training in the Harvard at the same time as I became involved with V7497. It’s been somewhat protracted because of the year’s down-time. I should have flown her to ex-RAF Church Fenton on 19 June last year to mark the 80th anniversary of my father’s first flight. I’ve logged 38-and-a-half hours on the Harvard, and being a bit of a geek, counted the landings: 119. A couple of weeks ago Neil and I went through my training records and did a couple of currency flights in the Harvard. He then said, ‘Right, we need to get you together with Stu Goldspink’.. On Friday the 13th, I met up with Stu, who gave me the necessary first solo briefing, and off I went.

“You don’t just jump into a Hurricane and fly her. It is wise to spend a good hour-and-a-bit taxiing her around the airfield. It feels a bit fraught at first because you’re continually under pressure of time to avoid the coolant overheating. But the exercise is essential to become familiar with the engine starting, how the brakes work, and beginning to feel at home in the aeroplane. I vividly remember the first take-off, notable for the noise and heat from the radiator beneath my seat. A bit of a faff when operating the gear retraction for the first time and being surprised by the force required to move the lever through the gate. Changing to the main tanks, reducing to climb power and departing the circuit I had a minor panic about how on earth I was going to get her down in one piece. But the training asserted itself, time spent over Newmarket exploring her stalling behaviour both clean and in the approach configuration with their associated



wing drops, just like the pilot’s notes. Practising extension of the flaps and the gear before returning to Duxford for a run-in and break into a right-hand circuit. Gear and flaps down at 120mph, harness locked and canopy locked open. Lined up on finals, good visibility over the nose, 85mph over the M11, 15kt wind straight down the runway, I rounded out and settled gently on three points. What was all the fuss about, I asked myself.”

The training programme targets qualified pilots who have already gained substantial flying experience. For those who require further tailwheel training, aerobatic and spin training, this will be provided by means of a Pitts S-2A. Thereafter the number of Harvard hours required before reaching sufficient competency to solo the Hurricane varies from person to person, often depending on their individual circumstances. As Neil says, “I’ve had several experienced pilots who think they’ll just need a quick whiz-round in the Harvard. Seventeen or so hours later, they are ready to go solo!”

Peter Kirkpatrick concurs. In June 2020, he had a mishap while landing V7497 in a crosswind at Duxford,

which caused the undercarriage to collapse. He talks very honestly about the human factors involved: “Going from a high-stress job and hopping over here for a quick hour in a Harvard or a Hurricane when your mind is still elsewhere is not the way to do it. I think the accident I had last year was a combination of factors — bad weather conditions, very hard ground, a gusty wind coming from the right, and myself having just come off working in a

COVID ward and having done very little air time during the pandemic.”

There’s a potential lesson in that for would-be co-owners of V7497 and trainees, who might also be in high-pressure jobs. “One of the things we insist on”, says Peter, “is that on the day you fly, you do nothing else. You devote that day to that one sortie. You’re not going to be coming from your job to here to squeeze it in. You need to factor that out so there’s a proper build-up. All the boxes have got to be ticked. Very importantly, for the first few flights you’ve got to have a decent headwind. The Hurricane lands beautifully in the right conditions. Of course, in the war they had big, grass fields, so they always

**“I vividly remember the first take-off for the noise and heat”**

**ABOVE:** The Hurricane and Harvard over their IWM Duxford base. Human factors are an important element of Hurricane 501’s training programme, and operating from Duxford brings some of these aspects to the fore.





**ABOVE:** Aside from training pilots to fly the Hurricane, there is also a need to find a new, third, co-owner — and, ideally, sponsorship to help defray V7497's operating expenses.

landed into wind. Here you don't have that luxury.

"Being a pilot who came to fixed-wing very late compared with the vast majority of people, I was lean on hours. Although there is an idea that if you can fly a Pitts you can fly anything, I don't think that's true. A Pitts, once you've got to grips with it, is a highly sympathetic aeroplane. It does everything you tell it to do, and it's got virtually no vices, as far as I can see. That's very different to warbirds, which don't do what you tell them to do, particularly at low speed. They lose rudder authority, and on the ground it's like trying to steer a heavy tanker with brakes that would barely stop a mountain bike. It's a completely different discipline."

Even so, having the Pitts available adds a further facet to the training syllabus if students so desire. Neil reports, "We've got somebody coming through the system at the moment who would like to fly the

Pitts as well. He would like to do his aerobatic rating, before he moves on to the next stage and flies the Harvard. One day he may look at progressing on to the Hurricane, so he's someone we could take

**“At some stage, we've got to get the new generation of young pilots flying these aeroplanes**

**”**

all the way from his initial PPL to the Hurricane. He's 30 years old and very keen on World War Two aircraft, and it would be ideal to bring him through all the stages of the programme."

But there are broader goals in sight here. With costs rising, and revenue from airshows diminishing, there is a need to find new ways of keeping historic aircraft operations viable, which brings with it the need for new pilots to fly them. Opinions differ as to the best route to achieving that, but, as John Thorogood says, "The unanswered question is, 'When the present cadre of ageing warbird pilots has hung up their helmets, who is going to fly these aircraft?' At some stage, we've got to get the new generation of young pilots flying them. How do we do that safely? Hopefully, operations like ours will open the way."

**A**

If you have an interest in flying, or sponsoring Hurricane V7497, or even taking a share in the aircraft, e-mail Peter Kirkpatrick at [kirk@hurricane501.co.uk](mailto:kirk@hurricane501.co.uk). For more information, visit [www.hurricane501.co.uk](http://www.hurricane501.co.uk)