



Flying in the Wooden Wonder

WHEN I was a young lad back in the early '80s I remember my father telling me stories about an aircraft called a de Havilland Mosquito. He used to work at RNZAF Base Woodbourne near Blenheim and recalled the type operating from there. He told of seeing four of them flying at low level down one of Blenheim's main roads and his stories saw me head to the local library to learn more. I found a large book on the Mosquito and read it from cover to cover many times. In fact that book was probably issued to me more times than anyone else. When the book was due back I would return it after school, wait for the librarian to put it back on the shelf, and then it could be mine again. Eventually I got told off for doing this!



On any fine day. Front to back: Mosquito, Spitfire, Mustang, Kittyhawk. How lucky we are at Ardmore.

What struck me the most was how beautiful the aeroplane is. It had nice clean lines, two big Merlin's, several big guns - and it stopped me in my tracks when I learnt it was made of wood!

The MOTAT museum in Auckland has a former RNZAF Mosquito there and I remember seeing it in the 1990s whilst on a course with Air Cadets. I thought the chances of me seeing one Mosquito fly were pretty much nil and that was reinforced following the tragic crash of RR299 in 1996. I didn't give much thought to the aircraft over the next ten years until 2006 when I flew to Auckland to photograph the Mk V Spitfire air to air, that had been restored by Avspecs. The Spitfire was a beautiful restoration but I could not help but be drawn to the back corner of the hangar where a Mosquito, affectionately known as the Wooden Wonder, was being worked on. Like a lot of other people, I thought could this really be possible? It was pretty much just the wooden structure with a little of the interior equipment installed but was of great interest.

Over the next few years I returned to Ardmore several times to photograph the WWII fighters that were being restored there and midway through 2009 I remember thinking to myself 'This is really going to happen. That Mossie is going to fly.' It wasn't like I had thought it never would, but the team was doing something

considered to be impossible by many people due to the technical design of the aeroplane. Yet here were these guys carrying on like their work was just business as usual - even though they were rebuilding a legend, an over-used term but one that does indeed apply to this aeroplane.

I spoke to Managing Director of Avspecs, Warren Denholm at the end of 2011 and learnt it was going to fly during 2012.

As I live in the South Island it is a couple of airliner flights each time to get to Ardmore however during 2012 I flew to Auckland 14 times to check on progress and to attend the airshow where the Mosquito was the star. Even though I've seen the Mosquito fly at other events since then, nothing has been as good as that

first display at Ardmore on September 29. It was such a special time especially with owner Jerry Yagen there to see it too.

A couple of weeks after the show I flew alongside the Mosquito to take some air to air photos thanks to Warren and Jerry Yagen. Flying with the Mosquito was like a dream. I was now seeing exactly what I had seen in that book all those years ago, a pure thoroughbred fighter bomber that was loved and admired by all who flew it. It was also a stark reminder that it was a weapon of war and a lot of crews never returned from some of the

dangerous missions they were often sent on.

The Mosquito appeared a few months later at an open day at Ardmore airfield where again it was the star but for me this day would be one I won't ever forget. I would be flying in the Mosquito alongside Keith Skilling as pilot.

A dream comes true

Keith taxied in following a display and I climbed the crew ladder and got in. It is a bit awkward, as your head ends up in the pilots lap before you get a chance to swivel around and sit down. The seat is very comfortable and the staggered sitting arrangement works well, allowing the observer to enjoy their ride without fear of bumping the pilot with an elbow whilst he does important things!

This layout also allows the second person to operate some systems if necessary.

I had sat in this cockpit dozens of times over the years as the restoration progressed and following a safety brief Keith started the engines. My excitement level jumped up a peg or two as we taxied out to the runway.

After running up both of the Merlin 25s rated at 1625hp it was time to fly. Keith lined the aeroplane up on the runway and slowly



The Hauraki Gulf from inside the Mosquito cockpit. Keith Skilling is at the controls.

started to push the throttles forward in stages just like in most of the other powerful WWII fighters. The Mosquito is known for swinging on take-off, and sometimes violently as both props turn in the same direction. That combined with such a lot of torque from the big V12s means that advancing the throttles slowly is a must.

Having flown in fighters like the Spitfire, Yak 3, P-40, and Mustang this felt very different for some obvious reasons. Firstly you expect to see a Merlin on the front of a WW2 fighter and along with that comes poor vision over the nose but sitting between two of these power plants is very exciting and the view is amazing.

Those big engines thunder away right there next to you and you also get a better idea as to how big the props really are and how close the tips are to the fuselage.

Having no visual cues out the front is different to say the least. Keith said afterwards that the lack of visual cues over the nose in the take-off and landing phase were no problem, and "in a lot of ways the view over the nose is similar to the 777 I fly."

The tail comes up at around 70 mph and soon after we are airborne at 125 mph. The gear is on its way up as we accelerate to 190 mph which ensures the aeroplane will be able to be controlled in straight and level flight on one engine should we lose the other.

The sound is out of this world, even after Keith has just 2400 rpm set on the engines in cruise power. We head out to the Hauraki Gulf area and looking down on the wing gives a reminder as to how big the aeroplane really is. It is a bit of a bumpy day but the aircraft makes light work of that.

We complete some S turns where above 220 mph the ailerons start to get a bit heavy so it's easier with two hands on the stick as we weave around the country side. I can see why the aircraft excelled as a low level attack aircraft.

Keith explained a few things as we flew around and although we had headsets on and big engines close by we could still easily speak together with only slightly raised voices. We headed back to

Ardmore and things started to get busy for Keith. The gear came down, flaps down, prop pitch adjusted, aircraft trimmed etc. and lining up on finals with power on sounded great. At the time there was no other traffic so that was one less thing to worry about.

In the landing configuration at slow speed the aircraft still flies very smoothly. With those big flaps down speed over the fence was 125 mph. The undercarriage and big tyres absorb the couple of light bumps as we land - no fancy three pointers here, mains on first and then the tail settles down.

The brakes are good and needed several applications rather than just 'standing' on them, something you don't do in a tail dragger.

The throttles are pulled right back and the engines crackle. The backfires sound great.

As we shut down and everything goes quiet, I held my hand out and said to Keith "look at that, shaking like a leaf". Keith said, "look at mine" and his was rock steady, cool as a cucumber is Keith. Thanks to Warren Denholm and Keith, and thanks Jerry. What an experience.

Mosquito KA114 was the star attraction at the recent Wings Over Wairarapa airshow in Masterton. Upon arriving back at Ardmore there was one final and memorable 'test' flight before disassembly of the aircraft began ready for sea freighting to the United States for owner Jerry Yagen. KA114 will no doubt be the star of his airshow held in Virginia in May.



Keith Skilling, Mosquito Pilot.