

Hi John

I finally found the time to write an approx two page (A4 size in Times New Roman 12 Font) account of my memories of Keith MacDonald.

I hope I haven't missed any spelling errors and that my punctuation is correct!

I've written everything in a style as best reflects my impressions of Keith and to the very best as my memory serves (aided by some notes I took back then).

If you think this may be suitable for publication, please feel free to send this account back to me with any suggestions as to how it might be improved in any way - I'm very happy to co-operate.

Very Best Regards

Mark

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This is a brief account of my memories of Squadron Leader Keith J. MacDonald late of 485 squadron, a man who like many others in World War II, risked his life on many occasions to help ensure that freedom prevailed against the threat of despotism.

Early one fine evening in the early spring of 1989, I received a phone call from Keith asking me to come and mow his lawn at his Red Beach residence in Whangaparaoa. At the time I was a lawn mowing contractor.

The following afternoon I met Keith and was told, "Mow according to the way you choose and then afterwards I will decide whether or not to retain your services."

Keith was a short, stocky man with his hair parted in the middle and a face set like granite. "This man's ex-military" I thought. So I made sure I did my very best.

Towards the end of the job, I was mowing close to his Skyline garage and caught a glimpse of something very large sitting on a cradle inside. I was able to identify it as a Rolls Royce Merlin engine, as I had been a buff of WWII aircraft and aviation in general since the age of 10.

After completing my work, Keith appeared satisfied and directed me to mow his lawn every two weeks. "Come rain,

hail or sunshine.”

After agreeing to a set price I asked Keith, “Is that a Rolls Royce Merlin engine you’ve got in your garage?”

Immediately, Keith fixed me with a stare of an intensity that could have made a cobra run for cover. “What would a young whipper-snapper like you know about such things?” With knees beginning to knock a little I replied that I was an aviation enthusiast.

“Ok then.” said Keith still glaring at me in the eye, “Tell me, what are the main external differences between a Messerschmitt 109E and a Messerschmitt 109F?”

“The 109E had square tipped wings, tailplane struts and a relatively small propeller spinner. The 109F had rounded wingtips, no tailplane struts and a large propeller spinner that merged cleanly with the fuselage”.

“O.K., but what about the supercharger inlet?” replied Keith. ‘Oh that’s right, the 109F had a much larger and more pronounced inlet on the port side close behind the spinner” I said.

At that Keith suddenly relaxed and his eyes softened. “Top marks. Yes that’s a Merlin engine in my garage, which I’m reconditioning at the moment. Come inside and I’ll show you what I’m doing, but don’t tell anyone about it because I don’t want any unnecessary attention”.

That meeting began an 18 month period of a rare and fascinating experience.

Every two weeks after I finished mowing his lawn, Keith spent the time to share a great deal about himself, his experiences with 485 squadron and just about everything a young fellow could possibly absorb about the technical details and intricacies of the Supermarine Spitfire and the Rolls Royce Merlin engine he was rebuilding, right down to showing me an ‘as new’ Rolls Royce service manual that used to come with every new Merlin engine shipped to the aircraft assembly factory, which even described how to unpack the engine from its wooden shipping crate.

Here are Keith’s most memorable quotes as I best remember them:

“The Spitfire was an exquisite aircraft in every respect. From its external appearance to the way it in which it was designed through to its superb overall performance and the ease with which it could be flown”.

“The Spitfire MkIX was a big step forward from the MkV. With the advent of the 60 series Merlin with its two stage, two speed supercharger, I suppose you could say that the Spitfire came of age. It was certainly everything that Mitchell would have hoped for.”

“The Merlin 66 was my favourite. With its supercharger set up for optimum performance from low altitude up to about 23,000 feet or thereabouts and with its injection carburettors it gave the Spitfire LF IX a powerful edge that made you feel confident and safe”.

“When you were in the nine, the airborne Hun were much less of a problem.”

“Having said that, whenever you were being shot at, you became acutely aware that you were surrounded by high octane fuel especially in the big tank just forward of you. Incendiary rounds and high octane fuel made for a nasty mix”.

“Often when we were on the way to various destinations on ground attack missions we flew at zero feet, and I mean ZERO feet.”

“Two Hispano cannon were quite effective when used against anything that moved.”

“The Spitfire could be tricky on takeoff especially fully loaded with ordinance and when the wind was up.”

“On the afternoon of D-Day I was piloting a ‘borrowed’ Spitfire and secured a quarter share of a JU88 over the Omaha beachhead. One of our chaps had already managed to set one of its engines on fire, but three more of us including me zeroed in and let fly with everything we had until we saw him crash. Almost right up until he went in there were still bits flying off him.”

“Those Hawker aircraft equipped with the Napier Sabre engine exhibited the gliding angle of a brick.”

“I don’t really like to compare the Spitfire with the Mustang. Each aircraft had its relative strengths. For example, where the Spitfire had the edge on climbing ability, the Mustang had the range. It’s like trying to compare apples with oranges. They were both fine aircraft, but saying that if I’d been in a position to make a choice, which is academic of course because I wasn’t in that position and we never used Mustangs in any case, I would have always gone for the Spitfire.”

“After the war I never piloted another aircraft again. I’d already used up my nine lives.”

“These modern day Cessnas and such like are toys for boys, nothing more than powered gliders.”

“An aircraft should always be termed as such. An aircraft. It should never be referred to as a ‘plane’.”

My time with Keith made a great impression on me. Though he may have appeared to have been a bit gruff for some, he nevertheless opened up and let go of a lot of tension once he had found ears to listen. He showed me all his 485 photos and pointed out and named his fellow pilots with what I could only describe as great affection.

He also shared many personal and trying memories inherited from his war years which I promised to keep confidential.

I'll let Keith have the final word.

“Don't ever tamper with manufacturers' specifications because they have specified them for good reasons.”

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