



D-Day warrior

Squadron Leader Clive Rowley MBE RAF Rtd, was privileged to be one of Spitfire MK356's pilots for 11 years between 1996 and 2006. Here he continues his series on the BBMF aircraft with MK356's story.

Words: Clive Rowley

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At 1025 on 14th June, 1944, Spitfire MK356 skidded to a halt on its belly in a cloud of dust at Ford airfield in West Sussex. Its pilot, Flying Officer 'Gud' Munro, was not to know that this would be the end of MK356's short but intense wartime 'career'. As he climbed out uninjured, his only thoughts were that this was the best possible outcome for him after one of the Spitfire's main wheels had fallen off on take-off, just over two hours earlier, probably as a result of intensive operations on rough landing strips with the Spitfire often heavily loaded. He had continued with the planned mission, a low level fighter sweep in support of the Allied D-Day invasion of France, in the knowledge that he would have to land 'wheels up' when he returned to base, if indeed he got back, as his first priority was to avoid becoming a victim of air combat with the dangerous roving German Focke-Wulf FW-190 fighters or the heavy 'flak' often

experienced when the Spitfires strafed ground targets.

Spitfire Mk LFIXe MK356 was built at the Castle Bromwich aircraft factory in early 1944. Delivered to the RAF in March 1944, she joined the newly formed 443 Squadron Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) at RAF Digby in Lincolnshire. Shortly afterwards, 443 Squadron moved to Holmsley, near Bournemouth and, with 2 other RCAF Spitfire squadrons, became part of 144 Wing, led by Wing Commander (later Air Vice Marshal) 'Johnny' Johnson who, at the War's end, was the RAF's highest scoring fighter ace. Operating from various south coast bases, such as the Sussex airfields of Westhampnett (now Goodwood), and Ford, MK356 flew sixty operational sorties in the lead-up to the D-Day invasion and in support of the landings and fierce fighting in Normandy afterwards. The aircraft was used on fighter sweep, air superiority missions and for attacking ground targets by strafing and sometimes dive-bombing. In

Below: Spitfire MK 356 showing her D-Day stripes



The MK 356 is still in her original flying colours



the course of these duties and in two short months of fighting, MK356 was damaged by enemy fire on three occasions, being forced to 'belly land' three times in all.

One of MK356's regular pilots was Flying Officer (later General) Gordon Ockenden, a twenty-year-old from Alberta. He flew nineteen sorties in MK356 during its short operational life, including the aircraft's first operational mission on 14th April, 1944. On 7th June (D-Day+1) 'Gord' Ockenden flew two patrols, in the Bayeux to Caen area. On the second patrol, flying MK356, he was involved in an attack on four Messerschmitt Bf109Gs 'on the deck'. He chased one of the '109s', opened fire and obtained strikes. His wingman, Flight Lieutenant Hugh Russell finished it off, the enemy aircraft exploding in mid-air. Each pilot was credited with a half share of the kill. Sadly, Hugh Russell was killed in action nine days later. Of the twenty-four Canadian pilots on 443 Squadron on D-Day, several were boyhood friends of 'Gord' Ockenden and all except one were less than twenty-one years old. By the end of the War, just over one year later, twelve of them were dead. Ockenden flew 139 operations in total and in the citation for his DFC there is an insight not only into the man but also into the intense operations in which Spitfire MK356 was involved: "This officer has completed numerous missions including escort and patrol sorties and bombing and low level attacks. He has destroyed or damaged at least thirty-five enemy vehicles and in addition he has destroyed four enemy aircraft and damaged one."

The day after MK356's third and final wheels-up landing, 443 Squadron moved to airfield 'B-3' at St Croix-sur-Mer in France, sufficient territory having been captured to permit squadrons to be based in what, two weeks before, had been enemy territory. MK356 was left behind to be collected by a maintenance unit but she was not repaired to flying condition, instead being used as an instructional airframe at RAF Halton until 1951. For the next seventeen years the aircraft was displayed in the open air as a 'gate guardian' at Hawkinge, Bicester, Locking and Henlow before being used in static scenes in the film 'The Battle of Britain' during which her wing main spars were damaged by some overzealous picketing. In the late 1980s, whilst on display in the museum at RAF St Athan, MK356 was identified as being potentially suitable for return to the air. Restoration began in 1992, with a team from St Athan utilizing the clipped wings from Spitfire Mk XVI SL674 to replace her damaged wings. The lengthy refurbishment was completed by November 1997 when the aircraft flew again for the first time in fifty-three years, subsequently joining the BBMF at RAF Coningsby. MK356 can still be seen in the skies over Lincolnshire, presented as a 'clipped wing' Spitfire in the only colour scheme she ever wore operationally, that of 443 Squadron's '21-V' complete with D-Day stripes under the wings and fuselage - a tribute to the Canadian Spitfire pilots who bravely played their part in the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe in 1944.



Spitfire MK 356 viewed from stern