

The Corsair pilots

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On the Wednesday before Flying Legends there was the opportunity to meet three former corsair pilots who had flown the type with the Fleet Air Arm during World War 2.

At Duxford **Christopher Cartledge, Keith Quilter and Peter George** (in the pictures from left to right) were reunited with the plane they had flown during the war. In fact, the Fighter Collections Corsair is painted up to represent the machine that was flown by Peter George from HMS Vengeance in the Pacific Fleet. It was unique in that after an engine change the cowling was painted up in the yellowish primer color then in use.

According to Peter George it was the only plane so painted.

One of the first things commented by the veterans was the fact that the Corsair didn't have the clipped wing tips of the type as flown by the FAA. Those were necessary for the Corsair to fit into the lower hangar decks of the British fleet carriers.

Both Keith Quilter and Christopher Cartledge were flying from HMS Formidable. I had the chance to talk with Christopher Cartledge who told me of his experiences.



During his training he had his first accident when flying a Hurricane on deck landing practice. As he misjudged, a radio mast of the carrier cut off part of his wing off and he crashed into the sea. He was fortunate in only having received a few bruises and cuts.

In March 1944 he was posted to 1842 Squadron that formed in the US on Corsairs. The Corsair was much faster than the Hurricane on which he had trained and it was also very maneuverable. Another thing he remembers is the living conditions during those weeks in the US. There was no rationing and no blackouts as in Britain, so this was a welcome change.

After having completed the conversion to the Corsair and qualified for deck landing, he returned to Britain and joined HMS Formidable. Soon they were on their way to attack the German Battleship Tirpitz that was lying in a Norwegian Fjord. During the journey they practiced flying and dive bombing whenever the weather permitted.

They flew 4 strikes against the Tirpitz that damaged her and kept her in the fjord until she was sunk by RAF Lancasters. Even though there were smoke screens, the big ship's outline was still visible, so they could bomb it. For that mission the Corsairs were carrying a 1000 lb bomb under the left wing and a fuel tank on the centre line rack.



Vought Corsair (Picture courtesy Urs Schnyder)



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After a short leave Formidable sailed for the Pacific, with a 3 month stop in Gibraltar to wait for spares for the ship. They continued on to Australia where they enjoyed a short leave before joining the British Pacific Fleet. On the way there several Japanese held islands were attacked resulting in some casualties. When they neared Japan, Formidable suffered a direct hit from a Kamikaze which took her out of service for 3 days. In the meantime her pilots had to land and fly from HMS Indefatigable.

On the 17th of July 1842 Squadron was to fly the first British air attack against the Japanese mainland. The targets were airfields on the east coast north of Tokyo. Apparently the Japanese were expecting the attack and put up a good defense. Christopher Cartledge's Corsair was hit and he had to put on full right rudder and pull the stick back to fly straight. As he couldn't carry on the attack in this situation he returned to the fleet with the intention of bailing out, as a deck landing would be too dangerous. However, he couldn't jettison the hood and so decided to risk a deck landing. As the fleet wanted to change direction before taking him on board, he had to circle overhead. All the time he tried to open the hood. As he had to let go of the stick every time, this brought him lower and lower until he flew into the water. The next thing he remembered was floating in the sea supported by his life vest and his Corsair disappearing into the waves. Luckily he only suffered some bruises and cuts. Onlookers from Formidable told him later that his aircraft seemed to blow up on impact with the water. To recover from the experience, he was sent to Australia for a short rest, where the news of the Japanese surrender caught up with him.

I'd like to thank **Christopher Cartledge** for an interesting conversation and sharing his memories with me and **Esther Blaine** from IWM Duxford for making this event possible.

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