Carl Warner, Research and Information Manager, IWM Duxford

This is a press day in May 1939. These aircraft are all lined up outside what we today call Hangar Four. H F King of Flight Magazine, who was here, described the Spitfire as a poem of speed and precision.

To understand the Spitfire, you need to understand what came before the Spitfire. Duxford was home to number 19 Squadron, and this image shows them in classic formation flying their Gloster Gauntlets. A lot of the skills that they learned while flying these beautiful little aeroplanes they had to re-learn quite rapidly.

So what you see here are pilots of number 19 Squadron in front of one of their aircraft. Second from the right you have Flight Lieutenant Banham, who was a Flight Commander with 19 Squadron. One of the first people to fly the Spitfire – he flew them when he went down to Martlesham Heath.

John Banham (IWM SR 6799)

We each of us flew for about half-an-hour in the thing. Oh, it was a tremendous thrill. But of course it was so different from a Gauntlet. It was more restricted forward vision then flying the Gauntlet with the old radial engine.

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It was a monoplane rather than a biplane. It’s got an incredibly powerful engine. Very little visibility on the ground because you’ve got an enormous nose in front of you. It’s got a retractable undercarriage. So all of these differences took a lot to overcome, and Pilot Officer Gordon Sinclair tells a fabulous story about his first flight in a Spitfire, which led to this.

Gordon Sinclair

I must confess I didn’t terribly like the Spitfire to begin with. But then, I had a reason not to because the first flight I ever did in one I turned it upside-down on the aerodrome landing. And it gave me an in-born fear of it. It took me quite a lot of hours to get over that.

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These are the men of number 611 Squadron Auxiliary Air Force. Now, they were actually at Duxford on their summer camp in August 1939. So, as soon as war was declared they were made a full-time unit. In fact, their CO went into Cambridge to buy some car mirrors to fit to his Spitfires because they didn’t have any mirrors for looking behind them, which, as pilots later in the Battle of Britain will tell you, was probably the most important piece of kit on an aircraft.

Before we get to the Battle of Britain, number 19 Squadron were involved in the defence of the evacuation at Dunkirk. Fighter Pilot Gordon Sinclair gave a very vivid account of fighting over Dunkirk.
Gordon Sinclair

It was exhilarating. I've got to say that, it was. I think everybody found that. And flying in and out of the cloud over Dunkirk, you never knew whether you were going to see a Messerschmitt or a Junkers or another Spitfire or a Hurricane or even a Defiant.

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So now we have a very classic shot taken in September 1940. Sitting in the middle of the wing is George ‘Grumpy’ Unwin, widely regarded by Squadron colleagues as one of the best pilots that they'd ever seen. Douglas Bader gave him his nickname ‘Grumpy’.

Douglas Bader

He had two new tin legs, and I'm trying to get some sleep, and these new legs of his were not quite perfect fits. And he was sitting there, taking a leg off, filing it [makes filing noise] and I said, 'For Christ's sake, go outside and do that!' 'Oh,' he said, 'Shut up, Grumpy.' Snow White and the Seven Dwarves were on at the local cinema, and from then on it was 'Grumpy'. [Laughs]

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Duxford worked with another airfield during the Battle of Britain – Fowlmere. It was basically a farm with a couple of Nissen huts, which you can see here. But it was from there that Duxford's Spitfires effectively operated for most of the battle. The 19 Squadron daily diary, the operations record book, recorded for the 24th of July when they're heading to Fowlmere, 'Now with six Nissen huts established, we continue the good work of 264 Squadron and settle down to enjoy the excellent messing facilities. The irrepressible Pilot Officer Howard Williams restarted his excellent bar.'

Duxford became at the centre of a controversy about how best you use fighters. Trafford Leigh-Mallory, who commanded the group within which Duxford sat, wanted to form a large wing of aircraft. Richard Jones gives a very good account of flying in this enormous wing.

Richard Jones (IWM SR 20497)

I personally thought we were wasting too much time getting up. But then, as a mere junior Pilot Officer sitting in his Spitfire, and you were going to meet the enemy, and you looked around you and you saw 65 to 70 Spitfires and Hurricanes – it completely changed your idea and gave you terrific confidence.

Carl Warner, Research and Information Manager, IWM Duxford

We're leaping forwards in time now. The Spitfire that is here at IWM Duxford is the F-24. So, it is the final mark of Spitfire. And when you think of an aircraft having 24 different marks – there were 22,000 built – it's testament to what an extraordinary aeroplane it was.