

Second SAAF Spitfire pilot's reunion honours war heroes

The Friends of the SAAF Museum's (FSAAFM) Spitfire Restoration Project received another boost on Saturday 4th November, when eleven veteran pilots who have flown Spitfires gathered at the SAAF Museum at Air Force Base Swartkop, to share reminiscences about their days flying that iconic aircraft, and to be honoured by a large crowd who had gathered for that purpose. A similar event was held in April 2017 at AFB Swartkop, when ten Spitfire pilots attended.

The Spitfire Restoration Project team were aware that there were other Spitfire pilots in the country, so they went to additional efforts to locate and contact them – this was the result.



*Back row, from left: Col Tony Smit, Scully Levin, Lt Col Dave Knoesen, Cmdt (LtCol) Butch Bester.
Front row, from left: Trevor Wallace, Felix Mendelsohn, General Denis Earp, John Martin, Albie Gotze, Basil Hersov, Alan Bridgens*



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They are all identified in the above photograph. The Spitfire fuselage is just visible in the background. They include a World War Two pilot, Albie Gotze, who had been flown up from Cape Town specifically for the event, escorted and sponsored by the well-known South African aviation historian, Tinus le Roux and his wife, Tersia. Our grateful thanks also to Kulula and Martin Louw, for sponsoring flights. Several others of the pilots had flown Spitfires in combat in World War Two, or operationally after the war, and were delighted to meet up again with one another and reminisce about their experiences.

The event concluded with a fly past by three of the SAAF Museum's North American Harvards – the very aircraft which several of the pilots had trained on, more than seventy years ago.

The event was opened by Lieutenant Colonel Brintjies, the Officer Commanding the SAAF Museum, and Colonel Fryer of the SAAF, who welcomed everyone present, particularly the pilots, one of whom, General Earp, is a retired Chief of the South African Air Force, as well as the Project's Patron. Colonel Smit, the second Officer Commanding of the Museum, who initiated the first restoration of this aircraft some 25 years ago, also gave some background on the project. Ian Grace, the Project Steering Committee Chairman, and main organiser of the event, thanked the SAAF Museum for all their assistance in setting up the event, and in providing the fly past. He also thanked everyone else who had assisted, particularly the sponsors of refreshments, the members of the Friends and the project team who had given up so much of their time and energy in the preceding few days, and the Irene Air Scouts who were helping on the day.

Recent progress on the project includes permission from the SAAF to erect a workshop and hangar at Swartkop for the restoration to take place, with work currently underway to ascertain the detailed structural requirements, as some of the ground at Swartkop is dolomitic. Once this is clarified and the design finalised, the building will be erected and restoration of the aircraft will move forward. Already offers have been received to assist in the structural work from companies in the aeronautical industry in South Africa, and plans are being developed to outsource some of the work to them. The Spitfire fuselage was on display at the event, making it very clear how much work will be required to restore it.

The Spitfire, of course, is one of the most iconic aircraft of all time. This specific one came out from Britain shortly after the Second World War and served with the SAAF for several years until it was retired in 1954 to make way for the new jets then taking over. It was restored to flying condition by the SAAF Museum and the Atlas Aircraft Corporation in the 1990s and flew frequently at air shows until an unfortunate malfunction and forced landing in 2000. Whilst the pilot fortunately walked away with relatively superficial injuries, the plane was seriously damaged and put into storage. The SAAF Museum Council has now approved a project to restore it to at least display condition, to be managed by the FSAAFM. Extensive planning work in many respects has been underway for some time now, to ensure that the project is properly managed and financed.



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A Non Profit Organisation (NPO) has been set up to ensure that the latter aspects are properly addressed, and that donors to the project can make use of the tax provisions afforded with NPOs.

For more information on the Friends of the SAAF Museum's Spitfire Restoration Project and how you can help, go to www.spitfire-restoration.co.za

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