

Star of Stone

The matter of starting a fund to buy a Spitfire was first mooted at a meeting of the Rotary Club held on the evening of 21st August 1940, when members adopted a resolution to inaugurate a fund for the purchase of a Spitfire by the town and its surrounding district.

Within ten days, a preliminary meeting had been convened by the Club with representatives of the Stone Urban and Stone Rural District Councils in attendance. The Chairmen of both councils were asked to put the matter before their members, which they appear to have done without delay, obtaining their utmost support. At the Urban District Council Meeting Councillor R. F. Goodill remarked that Stone had never lagged in its spirit of patriotism and thought that the council should make the greatest possible effort in support of the Rotary Club's welcome proposal.

On 20th September 1940 a public meeting was held to set up an organisation to raise the necessary £5,000 which was the cost of production of a Spitfire fighter aircraft. It is reported that there was a large attendance, which included members of many organisations and industrial concerns. The Member of Parliament for Stone, Sir Joseph Lamb, took the chair. It was moved and agreed that "the suggestion of Stone Rotary Club should be adopted and a fund started". The Directors of John Joule and Sons had met that day and had decided to start the fund with 100 guineas. A Spitfire Fund Management Committee was then elected with the following as officers: President: Sir Joseph Lamb, M.P. Chairman: T. A. Beardsmore, OBE. Secretary: S. C. Blood. Treasurer: Capt. P. Pollard, MBE. The two district council chairmen were to be joint vice chairmen of the committee. It will be noted that the chairman, secretary and treasurer all held equivalent offices in the Rotary Club of Stone.

It should be remembered that the sum of £5,000 was a very considerable one to raise in those days. It represented ten times the annual salary of many professional people and would have purchased a whole row of semi-detached houses! The appeal got off the ground quickly. The Rotary Club, small though it was, gave an initial donation itself of £100. The Rural District Council Chairman donated a set of silver maundy money to be sold in aid of the fund. Lotus Ltd gave £100, plus a promise to back every £1 raised by its employees with a further £1.

Within a month the fund had passed the £1,000 mark. Area sub-committees were set to work to raise money in the rural parishes, including the four ward committees that were formed in Eccleshall. Sports clubs too arranged events to raise money. There was even a "sherry dansant" in aid of the fund at the Crown Hotel. Schools joined in. Musical and dramatic performances were organised. An auction alone raised £250 and, in due course by the end of the summer of 1941, the target of £5,000 was achieved with a final donation from a generous anonymous donor.

At the final meeting of the Spitfire Management Committee, it was decided that the aircraft should be named "Star of Stone". Local legend proffers that the Spitfire was so-named because fundraising discussions were held in The Star Inn.

The cheque for £5,000 was handed over the following week to Sir Joseph Lamb M.P., representing the Minister for Air, by the chairman of the Spitfire committee and President of Stone Rotary Club, Mr T. A. Beardsmore. An R.A.F trumpet fanfare was played to mark the opening of the presentation ceremony at which Sir Joseph Lamb uttered a warning against wishful thinking in regard to the war and eulogised the Russian army and people for the magnificent stand they were making. Two months later an Anglo-Soviet Friendship Committee was formed in Stone



A painting of the Star of Stone Spitfire by Charles O'Neill has been presented to the family of Fl Lt Karl Jacobsen and to the mayor of his home town near Oslo, to the Norwegian Ambassador in the UK, and to many other organisations

The end of the story of Stone's Spitfire was however to be a sad one. In September 1942 a plaque was presented for display in the Stone R.D.C. offices, on behalf of the Minister for Aircraft Production, to commemorate the raising of the money, but the occasion was tinged with sadness, for news had been received only on the previous morning that the Star of Stone had failed to return from a sweep over occupied France and that the pilot, a Norwegian, had been killed.

Sadly, it was shot down on 19th June 1942 and the young Norwegian pilot Karl Jacobsen was killed.

Norwegian Flight Lieutenant Karl 'Kai' Theodore Jacobsen had escaped his country alongside his monarch, King Haakon and Norway's Crown Prince Olav. Escape for the 461 exiles fleeing Norway on HMS Devonshire, also among them Prime Minister Johan Nygaardsvold, from Tromsø, had already proven a close call. The heavy cruiser sailed within a few dozen miles of the battle between the battlecruisers Scharnhorst and Gneisenau and the ill-fated aircraft carrier HMS Glorious and her two escorts.



After training, Jacobsen flew operations protecting merchant navy shipping and, as his reputation and that of his fellow Norwegians for aggressive patrolling grew, 'Kai' Jacobsen and his fellow 'Norge' pilots were transferred to RAF North Weald in Essex in May 1942. Aircraft from the squadron took off on a 'Roadstead' sweep – low-level or divebombing attacks on shipping at sea or in port – in the Ostende area of Belgium and the Walcheren area of the Netherlands on June 19, at about 10.15am.

The squadron was joined by aircraft from the second Norwegian squadron to be raised, No.332. As they attacked German armed trawlers, the Spitfires became embroiled in a protracted dogfight with the Luftwaffe. Low on fuel and ammunition, and during an attempt to assist fellow Norwegian and 331 Squadron comrade, Jens Einar Müller, Jacobsen in Star of Stone was jumped.

The Operations Log succinctly recorded: "Missing, down in flames." Müller's aircraft, AR298, was claimed by Oberfeldwebel Hans Ehlers of 6./JG 1, flying a Focke-Wulf Fw190A. Jacobsen's Star of Stone was brought down near Vlissingen by another 6./JG 1 aircraft, but exactly by whom is disputed. Four pilots, Unteroffizier Flecks and Brakebusch, Oberfeldwebel Ehlers, and Lieutenant Leonhardt each claimed the victory. Two Norwegian planes were lost during these operations."

The squadron's combat report was initially unsure as to which of the two pilots had crashed into the sea, although a request from Müller for clothing to be sent to his POW camp confirmed it was 'Kai' Jacobsen who had not survived. He left a widow – Sonja Irgens – whom he had married in June 1941.



His wing man Jens Müller, an Anglo-Norwegian born in China, on November 30, 1917, managed to parachute out, spent 66 hours at sea in a dinghy and was then captured by the Germans and sent Stalag Luft III.

Incarcerated in Stalag Luft III, Müller contributed to the legendary Great Escape, constructing an air pump for ventilation of the tunnel.

On the night of the mass breakout, he was the 43rd of the 76 who managed to escape, accompanied by fellow Norwegian Per Bergsland. He wore a suit made by his own hand from a Royal Marine uniform and an RAF overcoat and black tie. For the journey from Frankfurt to Stettin we had other papers ordering us to change our place of work."

From Stettin (now Szczecin), they were supposed to meet a contact of Roger Bushell's.

Instead, they were smuggled into the harbour and made it to Gothenburg, Sweden. Both were repatriated and resumed their RAF careers as instructors; they were two of just three of the escapees to score a 'home run'. Fifty escapees, including two Norwegians, were murdered after their recapture.

Set up in 2018, the Stone Spitfire Group aims to keep the story of the Star of Stone alive. The spitfire group wanted to commemorate the plane, the 331 squadron it was part of, as well as Karl and Jens in some way in Stone. So, they have purchased and had seats dedicated to them in the new Crown Wharf theatre being developed in the town.

Local artist Emma Joustra has commemorated the project in a drawing featuring the history of the plane and those involved (including Philip & Edith Leason).



Philip Leason with Peter Gardner, Chairman of the North Weald Airfield Museum

