

RICHARD GRACE: A TRIBUTE

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By [Ben Dunnell](#) | 22nd November 2024

FEATURE



It was with immense sorrow that, in mid-October, we learned of the death of Richard Grace — outstanding warbird pilot, engineer and so much more. As a tribute, we look back to our 2020 interview with this great figure in aviation heritage



DARREN HARBAR

Every so often, someone comes along who truly lights up the historic aircraft scene. So it was with Richard Grace. His personality, naturally open and outgoing, imbued with an all-pervading lifelong love of old aeroplanes, was reflected in the joyous exuberance of his flying. The same was true of an innate sympathy towards these machines, born not just of that love for them, but also his ability as an engineer.

Richard's passing from illness on 15 October, aged just 40, has extinguished an exceptional talent; one of the leading lights of the new generation he did so much to spearhead. As the son of the late Nick and Carolyn Grace, he grew up around the family's Stampe and two-seat Spitfire IXT ML407 — not just around them, but in them, too. Yet the opportunity to fly them was not handed over on a plate. He had to show he was good enough, and that he certainly was.

Flying, restoring, maintaining, Richard was in his element. And in heading up Air Leasing, founded by his parents, all of those strands were drawn together. It grew under his leadership into a dedicated operation of worldwide renown, its services much sought-after, and a continual array of challenging projects presided over with good humour. The results, some still to bear their full fruit, and the very successful Ultimate Warbird Flights operation will stand as their own salute.

But there can be no better way, surely, of paying tribute to Richard — of understanding what made him such a special figure in our world — than through his own words. It was towards the end of 2019 that I went to Sywell to interview him for our 'Aeroplane meets...' series, the resulting piece appearing in the February 2020 issue. First, we rewound to his formative days, a good many of which involved the Stampe.

"I grew up going flying in that with my mother. Whenever she went flying, I would usually go with her, often well before I could see out of it. It was all part of the fun. I can remember going in the Spitfire with my sister, both of us sat on the back seat with my father taxiing across Goodwood. That was probably my first time experiencing a big V12, of course with no ear defenders or earplugs, just soaking up the noise.

"I wouldn't say I took it for granted. My mother was very careful to make sure I didn't. But I didn't realise how abnormal it was to have access to an aeroplane until I started to process what everyone else was doing while they were at school: 'What did you do this weekend?' 'Oh, I went to the fish and chip shop with my dad. What about you?' 'I went and did 10 minutes of aerobatics in a Stampe'."Although I went to the air displays where the Spitfire was, my mother made sure I didn't go flying in it until I was 16. The first time I did I'll never forget, because it was a bloody brilliant flight. It was from Duxford to Rochester for a BAe open day. We landed on the downhill runway at Rochester, over some relatively tall trees, and mum was sitting in the front saying some relatively choice words, in the way that only she can. It was just at the right time. To dangle that carrot really did compel me to move along as swiftly as I possibly could.



Mother and son, Carolyn and Richard Grace, with Spitfire IXT ML407 at Biggin Hill back in 2004.

AVPICS/ALAMY

“The engineering is something I’ve always been interested in. Although my father was killed when I was only four, I think there’s something ingrained in me. Maybe it’s just because I knew he was an engineer and therefore I wanted to be one, but it didn’t seem to take any effort to understand it. I spent a lot of time in my youth reading maintenance manuals and stuff like that when I probably should have been reading textbooks for school, but that’s life. Then my mother was able to sort out me doing work experience at The Fighter Collection. Everyone, throughout, has been so good to me as far as patience and showing me how to do things are concerned. They really didn’t need to do it, but I think they were keen to pass on a bit of knowledge. Fortunately for me I seem to have been able to remember a lot of it.



In suitable attire for the 2015 Goodwood Revival.

AVPICS/ALAMY



The Dukes of Cassutt on display, Richard joined by Dave Puleston and Aidan Brown.

BEN DUNNELL



Immaculate close-formation work from the Trig Team.

BEN DUNNELL

“With both the engineering and the flying, I’ve been surrounded by the right people. I’m sure it’s something my mother rather cunningly did. To be shown how to do anything by Pete Kynsey — well, there aren’t many people who can say that. He taught me how to do aerobatics in a Spitfire! The first loop I ever flew myself was in a Spitfire, when I was 16.”

For as long as he could remember, Richard knew he wanted his career to involve historic aircraft.

“I was in a careers meeting at school, and I said I wanted to be a pilot and an engineer. They told me, ‘No, no, you can only be a pilot or an engineer’. For me it had to be both. I never aspired to be in the military, or fly an airliner, or anything like that. All I wanted to do was fly Second World War aeroplanes. That has been my life’s ambition, and I’m very lucky to have achieved it.

“The main reason for that was growing up around Duxford. After my father was killed, within a couple of years the aeroplane was at Duxford, and my mother was flying a lot. She was checked out on the Spitfire in 1990. We were living in north Essex, and with the aeroplane there I used to go with her and kind of kick around. I grew up watching the greats of aviation wring out Spitfires at Duxford —seeing Ray and Mark Hanna, Stephen Grey, ‘Hoof’ Proudfoot and others doing the kind of flying those people were capable of doing will have an effect on you. They were brilliant times, they really were.

“I did some flying at the Cambridge Flying Group when I was doing my GCSEs. The first flights in my logbook are at Cambridge in a Tiger Moth. On Wednesday afternoons at school we either did CCF [Combined Cadet Force] or the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, and I said, ‘Can’t I go and do flying lessons at Cambridge?’ Initially they were all keen, but when I actually went and did it they said no, it wasn’t fine. Otherwise I could have had my licence a lot sooner, but it was good flying. Then Pete and I did a bit in the Stampe, just some circuits for about an hour. I think my mother was concerned about getting tailwheel ingrained in my mind before I went to the inevitable Cessna 150 to do my licence. She wanted me to have that, albeit very basic, grounding in flying tailwheel aeroplanes so I understood what life was about.

“Although he’d been flying a Harvard, Pete’s first proper warbird was ’407. He became chief pilot, and then he did mum’s conversion to it. Pete’s just been around for ever, and in my youth I didn’t realise how significant he would be. He’s a great instructor, because he’s totally hands-off, and lets you go just far enough where you actually get to learn. I’ve done a bit of training with people, checking them out in aeroplanes, and I’ve learned a lot from his training methods: basically, to let them get on with it, intervene only when required and offer subtle, polite advice. That’s what Pete did all along. It’s hard to explain why he’s so good at teaching people how to do things, but I think the fundamental point is you don’t realise you’re being taught. You get to think you’ve done it all yourself.”

Once he’d obtained his private pilot’s licence, Richard got straight back into taildraggers — and, knowing more experience on higher-performance aircraft would be necessary, bought a Cassutt 111M.

“I saw it come up for sale, and I spent every penny I had to purchase it. It was definitely the best thing I ever did, because it was a great little aeroplane, despite a couple of people telling me not to buy it. There was good reason for that, because Cassutts do have a bit of a reputation. I’d like to point out that this was a Cassutt Sport, which is a lot friendlier than a Cassutt Racer in that it’s got a bigger wing and tail.



you can simply only learn by doing it, and the more you do of it the easier it will become. That’s not to say you will become better at it, but it will become easier. I started flying the Cassutt when I had 80 hours’ total time, and I was in formation with Dave before I had 100 hours’ total time. Those were really important days in that aeroplane.”

They were indeed, for it made possible his entry into display flying — beginning with 2005’s Red Bull Air Race at Longleat — and then the cockpit of the Spitfire.

“It’s the age-old thing of ‘it’s not what you know, it’s who you know’. I was up at Leicester and Paul Bonhomme was there. I’d known Paul a long time, because he used to fly the Spitfire. He saw me in this little aeroplane and asked if I had a display authorisation. I told him I hadn’t. ‘Well, you should get one’, he said, ‘because at the air race at Longleat they want some other racing aeroplanes’. I spoke to Pete Kynsey, he guided me through the process, and I got my DA. I flew there in formation with Anna Walker, who was in Pete’s Cosmic Wind. We both did a whiz-around and landed at Kemble. I had a great time, it was all really safe and sensible. It was brilliant to be out in the world. All of a sudden you feel like you’re part of the thing you’ve been watching go on for all those years.

“I bought another Cassutt, which needed a bit of work. The second I had G-RUNT, Dave and I were flying together in a pair of Cassutts whenever we could, just because it was a laugh. We even got a display or two like that, if people were looking for something different that would fill a hole. I finished rebuilding G-BOMB the next year, and we rebuilt G-RUNT as well. We painted them all the same, we had three of them, and we started flying as the hilariously named — and I’d like to say this was Dave’s idea, not mine — Dukes of Cassutt. It was me, Dave and Aidan Brown, and occasionally Nick Smith.

“It was really good fun and a great formative experience for all of us, cruising around at sensible speeds, taking fast aeroplanes into short strips, and flying in tidy, close formation through relatively dynamic manoeuvring in a 10, sometimes 12-minute sequence. We had to do all the things we still do now in the warbirds, but kind of without the pressure and without the fuel burn. The direct outlay was something like 100 quid and we could go and do half an hour of close formation with three aeroplanes. They were bloody good times.



Putting ML407 through its paces in a Duxford practice.

DAVID WHITWORTH

“I flew the Spitfire for the first time in October 2007. I honestly don’t think there was too much emotion in it, and there wasn’t a lot of worry. My life’s ambition was to fly that aeroplane, and I’m not arrogant enough to have assumed it would ever happen. It was definitely something I had to earn, and it wasn’t up to me. I couldn’t stomp my feet and say, ‘I want a go’. If I wasn’t up to it, it wasn’t happening. Sitting in front of the control tower at Duxford with Pete Kynsey telling you how to fly a Spitfire, if you can’t do it then, then you can’t do it.

“It didn’t take very long, simply because I’d done a fair bit of flying in the back with Pete and various others in the front. Evidently I’m a bit of a sponge with things like that. I’d sit and watch what was happening, looking at the relevant things like the air speeds and figuring out what it was actually doing rather than just looking out the window. I got in the front with Pete in the back, did a bit of general flying, and then he just said, ‘Off you go’. I went and, even on my first flight, did what I’d done on every other flight, which was to head north to the Hundred Foot Washes near Ely, do 10 minutes of aerobatics and come back. From there on in, it was really enjoyable.

“I think I had about the luckiest early warbird flying career anybody’s ever had — I only had about 300 hours’ total time, and the insurers said that before I could fly any people or do any air displays I had to have 50 hours’ total time in the aeroplane. My mother was very kind in enabling me to do that, financially if nothing else. I had about 15 hours that I could log when I first flew it, so I had 35 hours to fly off. I think I did it within a year, which was some of the best flying-off I’ve ever done. It was 35 hours of perfecting an aerobatic sequence in a Spitfire. There was a bit of transiting, but basically it was all finessing a display sequence. That time spent in that aeroplane has helped me with all the others, because, fundamentally, they’re all of similar power or weight, or similar power-to-weight ratios at least. The techniques I figured out about where to win energy in an aeroplane, it turns out work in all of them.”



Seafire LIIIc PP972 was something of a landmark project, and Richard loved flying it.

ALAN WILSON



Airborne from Duxford for some solo aeros in Fighter Aviation Engineering's P-47D.

HARRY MEASURES

Richard's debut Spitfire display was in ML407 at the Duxford [Spitfire](#) Day during August 2009. Just over a year later came his first big formation: the Spitfire 16-ship at Duxford's Battle of Britain Air Show in September 2010.

"I'd spent years watching these vast formations and sitting listening to the pilots talking about what's involved... it was all going in, so I was quite well-armed. I was right on the inside right wing, so there was lots of work to do out there, lots of sky to cover in the turns. Those Spitfire formations are always brilliant. If you can't look out the window and enjoy the view of 16 Spitfires, I think you want your head checking.

"Those Duxford displays are something I'd always wanted to do. It's such an honour being allowed to do them, because it is really about being allowed. You can have an aeroplane and you can have the theoretical skills, but actually getting your foot in the door as an acceptable pilot to be involved is a whole different thing.

"The next adventure came along in the form of the Pitts Special. We were up at Perth, looking at a Pitts with the chap who bought it. Dave [Puleston] was going to give it a quick test flight and fly it back, and there was this little Pitts S-1D [G-BLAG] in the hangar. In the flying club at Perth was a thing saying it was for sale. Talk about fate: my great uncle had passed away and left me a small amount of money, so I was able to use some of that money, and that which I had, to purchase that Pitts.

"So, Dave and I were still flying together, but now we had two Pitts Specials, and the options opened up. We worked up a routine, and we flew unsponsored for a while. It was not disastrously expensive to practice, and we were based at Bentwaters so we had a bit of airspace to do it in without anyone yelling at us too much. We learned so much between the two of us. I was primarily leading with Dave following, simply because he's so bloody good at it.



Richard’s favourite display: in the Fury ISS, leading Pete Kynsey at the controls of the Bearcat, at Duxford during September 2016.

JOHN DUNNELL

“I was trying to fly it if not daily, then certainly weekly. It was in the hangar where I was working, so rather than eating my sandwich and sitting around drinking tea for 20 minutes, I’d eat my sandwich and go and fly the Pitts for 20 minutes, trying to figure out how to do a vertical roll — which, I can assure you, takes longer than 20 minutes. I’ve always been able to go and push out an aeroplane whenever I fancy, which is quite rare. If you’re working in an office in the centre of London, I don’t think you can squeeze in 20 minutes of flying at lunchtime. “Air displays are the classic way of trying to push the comfort boundaries. Once someone’s paying you to go somewhere, you do look at the day and think, ‘1,000ft cloudbase, sensible visibility — we can get there’. You end up getting there at 1,000ft, whereas normally, if you’re flying on a jolly, you’d go, ‘1,000ft cloudbase — nah, I’ll do something else today’. Instead, you get there, you do the airshow and you figure out you can cope with these things. I’m always very cautious of normalisation of marginal stuff, but if you get caught out in a 1,000ft cloudbase if you’ve never flown in one you end up clutching at straws, so it’s far better to have done it in something you’re exceptionally comfortable in, like a Pitts.”



Four Buchóns emerged from Air Leasing’s workshop to fly again under Richard’s leadership, among them the unique HA-1112-M4L two-seater.

DARREN HARBAR

Having started in 2010-11 as the Pitts Pair, Richard and Dave then enjoyed sponsorship from Trig Avionics. The Trig Team continued until 2018, by which time Air Leasing’s warbird activities had expanded very considerably. After passing through five other restoration facilities, Seafire LIIIc PP972 was returned to flight for its owner in June 2015, with Richard at the controls. Soon the sale by ‘Connie’ Edwards of his cache of Hispano HA-1112 Buchóns stored on his ranch in Big Spring, Texas, brought about another notably fascinating project. Was it all a conscious decision to develop the business?

“Nope. Complete accident. The ‘phone rang and I stopped saying no. It’s all been a matter of chance — of knowing people, right place, right time. I’m not scared to give someone an estimate of how much something’s going to cost them in both time and money, and when I’ve done it I try to stick at it. I guess that’s why people keep turning up. Long may it continue.



Back in totally ‘stock’ wartime configuration, Spitfire IX MH415 proved a delight all round.

CLAIRE HARTLEY

“I had a call suggesting I might like to go to west Texas and have a look at a Buchón for a group of Australian investors that wanted to purchase two and have them rebuilt. I went out there and spent a couple of days looking at the aeroplanes, put some numbers down on a piece of paper and presented them to the chap who was dealing with the numbers side of things. Right there and then, we had the job. I was still in west Texas, and spent the next three days pulling the engines out of them. “There was a bit of a delay in exporting them, so we put them in boxes. We’d just got the hangar here at Sywell, and the first thing that happened before we got it was that a container was parked outside with the world’s only two-seat Buchón in it. We did those two, the two-seater and ‘Yellow 7’, on price and on time, both for the same group of owners. In the interim, Anglia Aircraft Restorations purchased ‘White 9’, and we did that pretty much alongside ‘Yellow 7’, though ‘Yellow 7’ was finished first by about a month.

“Boschung Global had bought all those aeroplanes from ‘Connie’. They then sold those two off to the Australian investors, ‘White 9’ to Anglia Aircraft Restorations and had [c/n] 220, or G-AWHR, rebuilt for themselves, which we again did here. They were, basically, very simple jobs. We had everything in them that we needed to make them work. It’s great to still maintain them now, because we know them inside-out... I think they’re really good aeroplanes, personally.”

Operating, managing and maintaining the fleet of aircraft owned by Anglia Aircraft Restorations and now Fighter Aviation Engineering was a source of great pride for Richard. They began with the ex-Iraqi Fury, followed by the Spitfire FRXIVe, TF-51D Mustang, Hurricane I, Spitfire LFVc, Buchón and P-47D Thunderbolt. The ex-Sidney Cotton Lockheed 12A and the Tempest II are the latest restoration projects to have emerged from this productive collaboration and friendship.

“In 2016 we brought the Fury back from Australia for Anglia Aircraft Restorations; I went and put it back in the box after I’d seen it fly with its new engine. I think I said it was going to take eight weeks from when it arrived, and we managed to do it in three weeks and get it to Flying Legends. That was only because it was realistic to do so, because the aeroplane was very good, but it was bloody hard work. There were some long days went into it.

“Flying the Thunderbolt is something else for me. Its appearance and everything about it I loved, but I never dreamt, ever, that I’d get to work on it. And to fly it is unbelievable. It’s so stable, it always does the same thing. There are very few systems in it; it’s got oil doors and cowl gills, and if you forget them it’s not the end of the world. It’s got one fuel tank that you just turn on, and you can do that the day before if you want. As far as workload goes, short of remembering to put the wheels up and down and knowing how a constant-speed prop works, you can fly it, and it is easy to fly. It’s like a warbird in slow motion. The funny thing about it is it isn’t going slowly at all. It’s going really quickly. You try and sit in formation with it on take-off in a Mustang, and it’ll embarrass you. When you’re in it, it feels like this lumbering, friendly thing. And you can see so much out of it, it barely feels like you’re in it.

“If I couldn’t fly I’d still be an engineer on these aeroplanes, definitely. Don’t get me wrong, the flying is very important and it’s very enjoyable, but it’s not the be-all and end-all for me. The satisfaction of seeing an aeroplane go flying that you’ve worked on and rebuilt with your company, and with your mates — there’s nothing quite like it. With the Seafire III, which was the first aeroplane I did the initial flights on, I didn’t really believe it was airworthy until I stood on the ground and watched someone else fly it. ‘Actually, it does work!’ Then you realise that, really, you need to stand back and watch these things go flying as an engineer, rather than trying to do it all yourself. It’s the same with all the Buchóns. Although I’ve done the initial shakedown flying on them, it’s not really true until Pete Kynsey comes back and tells me it is...

“I’m only where I am because of the people around me. For the aircraft owners who spend a lot of money on these machines to let me fly their pride and joy is a privilege I don’t take lightly. We’ve only been able to achieve the aeroplanes we have in this hangar because of the team of engineers we’ve got, and I’ve got to where I am because of the people who have mentored me throughout the process. I am eternally grateful to those people for giving me the opportunities.”

Many would say exactly the same of Richard. Through his generosity, a whole raft of pilots have been able to move into warbirds for the first time. New blood on the engineering side, too, has been encouraged and nurtured — and that has filtered through to the cockpit. During 2024 we saw two of the Air Leasing/ Ultimate Warbird Flights team, Lee Kingman and Danny Williams, gave their inaugural public displays. Lee did so in Cassutt G-RUNT, while Danny progressed from a Tiger Moth to his ex-Trig Team Pitts. The future remains in good hands, just as Richard often said it would.

He’d certainly have been delighted to see them, and others, taking their initial steps in the way he did. Back then, it was a pleasure to witness the flourishing of this newcomer, one who’d watched Duxford’s great names fly, soaking it in just like the rest of us, but was now putting his own stamp on things. My thoughts turn to the day before Duxford’s 2013 Autumn Air Show, and a practice display in ML407. There is, as an onlooker, a ‘sweet spot’ for a Spitfire solo, a hard-to-define confection of attributes that best portrays the fighter’s own qualities of power and elegance, while being visually pleasing and remaining within all the key parameters. That occasion, to me, exemplified how Richard belonged to the ranks of those who naturally knew how to do it.



The pure joy historic aviation can bring was always apparent in Richard.

HARRY MEASURES

And not just in warbirds, either. I will never forget him expressing his absolute thrill at getting airborne in Pete Kynsey's Cosmic Wind Ballerina for the first time — more exciting, he said, than his maiden Spitfire trip. Of course, he piloted the diminutive air racer with tremendous verve. He even went on to acquire one of its old sister-ships, Little Toni; what a shame we'll never get to see him fly it.

At least we got to witness the fulfilment of another ambition. At Duxford's September show in 2016, Richard led Pete Kynsey in The Fighter Collection's Bearcat, the pair reprising the 'Ultimate Pistons' duo staged during the 1990s by Ray Hanna and Stephen Grey. He'd watched and appreciated them as a youngster. Now here he was staging his own version. "For me", said Richard, "there's very little in life that gets better than that display, getting to lead Pete around. Of course he was always going to hang on in there. Among the things I will always remember, that's the one."

It was with an infectious, natural enthusiasm that Richard couldn't help but describe everything he'd done. He was one of my favourite people to talk to about old aeroplanes, and without fail he had something insightful and memorable to say. A restoration he really enjoyed was that of Spitfire IX MH415, another ex-'Connie' Edwards aeroplane and a highly original combat veteran. Of the result, he told me in 2021, "There is always going to be a difference between — and there's no nice way to put it — a Spitfire and aluminium in the shape of a Spitfire. It is what it is. I'm not trying to take anything away from it. We'd happily do it in here — we'd make a Spitfire from nothing. But you can tell. You simply can tell. It's like having gluten-free bread. It's sort of nearly there, but it's not bread."

It comes as a great sadness that there will no longer be the chance to have those conversations. The loss of such an inspirational character is, and will continue to be, very deeply felt. But, in an all-too-short life, Richard Grace achieved so much — and went about it in such a way — that he will forever be recalled with immense affection, and his legacy writ large across the skies. To his wife Daisy, their children Allegra and Stirling, his sisters Olivia and Nicola, and his friends and colleagues, our deepest sympathies.

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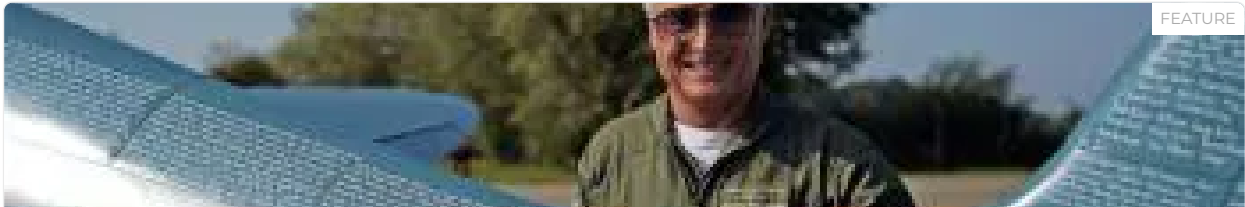
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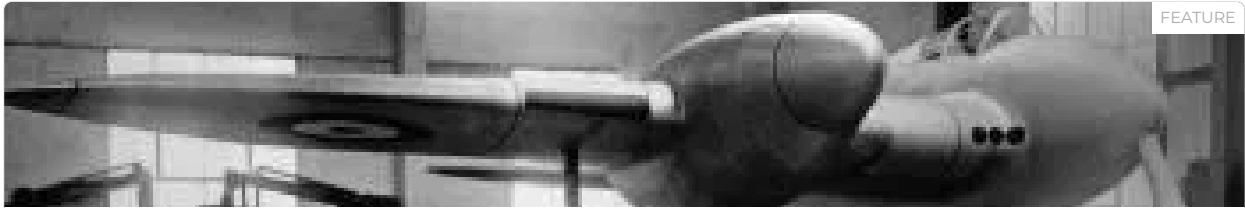
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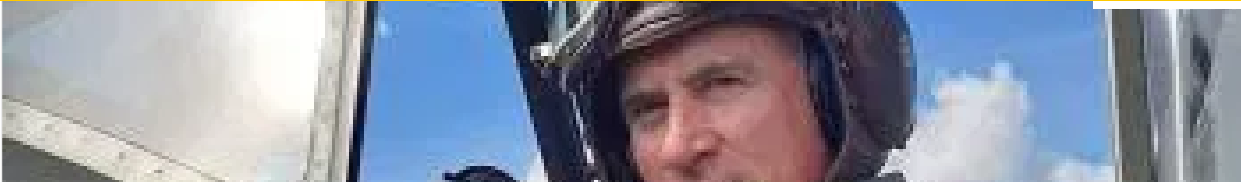


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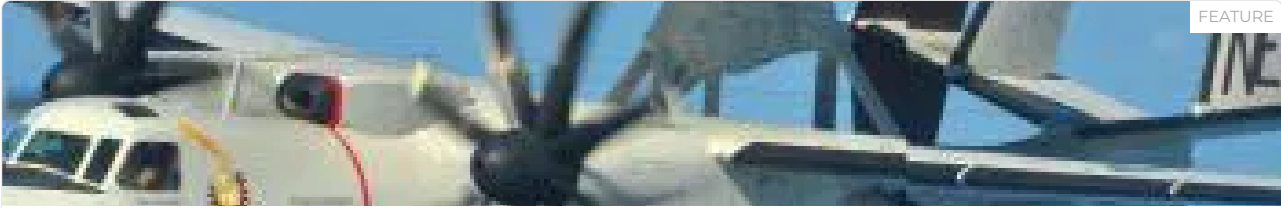
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