

SIGH FOR A MERLIN

Alex Henshaw

Sigh for a Merlin is the enthralling account of Alex Henshaw's life with the Spitfire.

Alex Henshaw grew up in the '20s and '30s and his first aircraft was a Gypsy I Moth. He set his heart on winning the coveted King's Cup Air Race which he fulfilled in 1938, after years of dedicated practice and scientific experimentation. Then, in February 1939, he made his now legendary record breaking solo flight from England to South Africa and back in his beloved Percival Mew Gull. It was this peacetime experience which prompted Vickers-Armstrong to offer him a post as test pilot when war broke out shortly after.



After a short stint testing Wellington bombers, Henshaw was reassigned to work with Jeffrey Quill testing Spitfires at Eastleigh on England's south coast. The Spitfire was more like his much-loved Mew Gull and he instantly fell in love with the immortal fighter.

In 1940 he was appointed Chief Test Pilot at Supermarine's new factory at Castle Bromwich. Powered by the mighty Merlin engine, Spitfires were tested and manufactured at this site throughout the war by the end of which 37,000 test flights had been made. Alex Henshaw flew an estimated 10% of all Spitfires ever built, often without instrument landing aids of any kind. He developed his own breathtaking acrobatic style in the aircraft and often called upon these same handling skills to escape from seemingly hopeless situations. He also flew another Merlin-engined classic – the Lancaster.

Alex Henshaw's amazing flight to Cape Town and back established several solo records that still stand today, over 60 years later. The flight is recounted in his book *Flight of the Mew Gull*, 1980.

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