



SALUTE THE BRAVE

BRITAIN'S ACES HIGH AVIATION GALLERY COMMEMORATES
THE 80th ANNIVERSARY OF D-DAY WITH AN INCREDIBLE NEW VENUE
BY KEN ELLIS

Plans are being finalised for veterans, their families, friends, and history enthusiasts to make a pilgrimage to Europe to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the D-Day landings. I'm here to highlight a venue that almost certainly will not have made any target list. About 60 miles northwest of London is a quintessentially English village, not far from the famous dreamy academic spires of historic Oxford: it should be on any "must do" list.

Steventon is mentioned in the *Domesday Book*, the inventory made for King William I in 1086 of the towns and villages he had conquered 20 years previously. From the point of view of *Air Classics*, it is Steventon's most recent history that is important. Here is the new and exciting home of Aces High — an

international company specializing in the highly collectable field of autographed aviation and military fine art.

I have followed the progress of Aces High since it was established in 1996, watching it mature and raise an enviable global reputation. An invitation to come and see the new premises brought me to an impressive building on the edge of Steventon. The website had not done justice to what was behind the door. Whatever you might have in your mind about how an aviation gallery should look, it won't prepare for the new Aces High venue. It's vast, it's festooned in items of art, from greetings cards and calendars to framed originals and everything in between — you could come away having spent \$15 or \$150,000.

This is only part of the experience,

here is a visitor center, some might call it a nascent museum. Center stage is a full-size static replica of a Spitfire Mk. IX and there are wartime vehicles and many other fascinating artefacts. Should the weather dictate, there's a roaring log fire. All year round there are sumptuous sofas to sink into and a bar to sample — hints of a gentlemen's club. During the period of the D-Day anniversary, appearances and signing sessions by veterans, movie screenings, Jeep rides and entertainment for all ages will be staged.

FAMILY OF FAMILIES

Managing Director Colin Hudson has spent a lifetime steeped in aviation art. Long since fascinated by the subject, he began as a collector in the days when it was very much a niche pursuit.



Aces High managing director Colin Hudson with P-51D *Miss Helen*.

As his knowledge grew, he gained the confidence to begin trading in 1990, going on to establish Aces High six years later. His enthusiasm for the subject is evident: "I started seeking out signed prints, to have graduated to commissioning fine art from the world's leading artists is the stuff of dreams."

The first gallery was in the delightful Buckinghamshire town of Wendover, but in recent years it was clear that bigger premises were needed. The hunt was on for somewhere, as Colin put it: "to properly immerse visitors in 250,000 items of military artwork." Space was needed to enhance the artwork displays, but it also had to serve as a versatile arena for special events.

Colin sees Aces High as "a family of families," centered around its impressive group of artists. Along with well-known names, Colin has nurtured and introduced up-and-coming artists into the mix: "It's vital to find and encourage new blood, like any other aspect of art, it evolves and moves on."

"Our greatest responsibility lies with the veterans," explained Colin, introducing another of the "families." Regular signings are staged where artists and collectors alike can meet the personnel who were involved in the episodes depicted in the paintings.



Lancaster veteran Russell "Rusty" Waughman visited the Aces High gallery during the summer of 2023. Pilot Officer Waughman FDC AFC Ld'H died, aged 100, in December 2023.

Colin: "World War Two personnel are increasingly frail, and we are careful not to overstretch them and to meet their needs. Although they are of a great age, it is heart-warming to see that their enthusiasm to turn up is undiminished — they remain young at heart."

Veterans are not restricted to World War Two, collectors are just as fascinated by Korea, Vietnam, the Falklands, and the more recent conflicts in Iraq and

Afghanistan. Occasionally, "multi-era" gatherings of former combatants are held which have produced some fascinating conversations between the generations.

Largest family element is Aces High's loyal band of enthusiasts who travel great distances to meet their favorite artist and pay their respects to those with first-hand experience of military aviation. The "families" are completed by the staff, Colin praises their abilities: "They take



A recent multi-era gathering at Steventon, featuring veterans from World War Two through to Iraq and Afghanistan.