



A BIKE FIT FOR HEROES

*As the RAF celebrates its centenary, Royal Enfield launches a motorcycle that pays homage to one that revolutionised World War Two parachute landings.
Hugh Francis Anderson takes a history lesson*

I was excited up to a point, the only thing I knew was that I didn't want to get killed, nor did I want to get horribly wounded either,' says Fred Glover, 9th Parachute Battalion. 'I remember looking down at my right leg at the standard-issue fighting knife and thinking, "Is it really going to come to that?"' It was 6 June 1944. D-Day.

And so the scene is set for the inception of one of the most remarkable vehicles used by the Allied forces during the Second World War, the Royal Enfield Flying Flea. Its purpose was simple: to drop with members of the newly formed Parachute Regiment to facilitate rapid and efficient travel across enemy territory. In memory of the Flying Flea and all those who rode them, Royal Enfield, in collaboration with the Ministry of Defence, has released the limited-edition Classic 500 Pegasus. Which is why I'm at the Imperial War Museum, Duxford.

In every iteration, the Flying Flea is a fascinating motorcycle. What impresses most is its simplicity. Featuring a slight 125cc air-cooled two-stroke engine set within the RE/WD 125 frame that was adapted from a civilian bike, the Flea was light enough to be picked up by hand yet could travel at up to 50mph on open ground. It therefore made

the perfect tool for the burgeoning Parachute Regiment when deployed in enemy territory.

'The formation of the Parachute Regiment and airborne forces has many parallels with the Flying Flea,' says Jon Baker, curator of the Airborne Assault Museum, Duxford. 'The key part of being an airborne soldier was that you went in with the bare amount of equipment. The other factor was mobility. As they were only jumping in with what they had, their only way of travelling was on foot.'

Bicycles were originally employed, but were quickly found to be impractical. If they were strapped to the paratroopers themselves, bicycles could cause injury on landing, and they were ineffective over battle-torn terrain. It was quickly decided that a motorcycle should be conscripted.

'The lightweight Flea gave them the mobility they needed,' says Baker. 'It sped up communications between posts, and soldiers could reach targets much more quickly.'

The Flea had been conceived some years earlier. Arthur Bourne, then editor of *The Motor Cycle* magazine, was a vital element in the early days. His son, Richard, shed some light on how it came to be. 'The War Department was slow to be persuaded – my father tried to convince the director of mechanisation in 1935 and, after a road-test

of a lightweight German motorcycle, he said they should adopt something similar.'

Indeed, the German DKW RT100 of 1934 weighed just 45kg and could travel at 40mph, powered by its air-cooled two-stroke single-cylinder 98cc engine. Arthur, who was close friends with Major Frank Smith, managing director of Royal Enfield, remembered this, and Royal Enfield created the RE/WD 125.

'The bike had originally been designed in 1939 for the Dutch and British civilian markets,' says Richard. 'In 1942, when Churchill said there should be an airborne force and parachute regiment, there was a need for a lightweight military machine. At a demonstration where other machines were on display, the Royal Enfield won out and it was adopted.'

Yet this was not the first time Royal Enfield had partnered with the military. Indeed, its longstanding association with the armed forces goes back to the birth of the brand. In 1892, the company received an order for precision components for the Royal Small Arms factory in Enfield, Middlesex. To mark this significant order, they took the 'Royal' from the Small Arms factory, and 'Enfield' from its location, and so named their new range of bicycles. Motorcycle production followed in 1901.



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STEPHANE O'CALLAGHAN



Clockwise from above
Royal Enfield's Flying Flea was designed to be dropped from aircraft; D-Day veteran Fred Glover shares his memories; Royal Enfield's tribute to the Flea, the Classic 500 Pegasus, joins the Parachute Regiment's display team aboard a Douglas Dakota.



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'In the First World War, Royal Enfield manufactured robust motorcycles used by French, Belgian, Imperial Russian, US and British armies,' says Royal Enfield historian Gordon May. 'The machines were extremely tough. Royal Enfield has always shown adaptability, endurance and resourcefulness, and that has never been more evident than during the Second World War.'

Including the 8000 Flying Fleas that were ordered, Royal Enfield produced some 45,000 motorcycles for the war effort, alongside components for anti-aircraft weapons. 'The company produced 250cc and 350cc sidevalve machines, and then a 350cc overhead-valve bike,' says May, 'The 250s were used mainly as training bikes, and the 350s served as dispatch bikes for sending messages between posts. They were great machines – but they weren't thrown out of aircraft.' Unlike the Flying Flea.

The Flea made its debut on D-Day and was most notably used later that year in the Battle of Arnhem during Operation Market Garden. 'Though many saw it as a defeat, Arnhem represented a gallant last stand,' says Baker. 'Ten thousand men were dropped

eight-to-ten miles from the bridge itself, and that motorcycle gave some of them the mobility to get there quickly.'

Though field notes from the battle indicate that some Fleas were destroyed by anti-aircraft weapons, and others were damaged on landing, the majority made it and became a vital tool for the troops. Many were even recovered back to Britain from Normandy, but in Arnhem, as the troops were cut off, they fell into German hands and were either destroyed or re-used. 'In fact, many of the parachute cradles were collected by the Germans, loaded onto trains and sent back to Germany to be melted down,' says May. 'The Flying Flea really was designed as a piece of disposable battlefield equipment.'

However, once the war ended, the Fleas that made it home were repurposed for civilian use. In post-war Britain, the need for a cheap, reliable form of transport was paramount, and Royal Enfield brought many of them back, rebuilt the engines, painted them black and sold them to the general public. The Flea and its derivatives continued in production until the early 1960s, when the operation was moved to India.

So it seems fitting that Royal Enfield should launch the Classic 500 Pegasus now. With 2018 marking the centenary of the RAF, the limited run of 1000 comes at a particularly poignant time – and 190 of them be available to buy in the UK, with an on-the-road price of £4999.

Mark Wells is the company's head of global product strategy. 'The Pegasus is the catalyst to tell the story of the Flea,' he says. 'It's given us the opportunity to learn more about our past and to speak to the last surviving veterans, which has been humbling. The collaboration between the Ministry of Defence and Royal Enfield has made our understanding of this story much richer.'

When Royal Enfield first approached the Parachute Regiment to discuss the project, the MoD opened its archives to enable the team to match the Pegasus as closely as possible to the original Flea. The emblem and name come from the Parachute Regiment insignia, alongside the markings of the Fleas used by the 250th Airborne Light Company.

'There was a yellow stripe on the crankcase to denote the centre of gravity for loading the

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motorcycles onto the aircraft and gliders, which we've included on the crankcases of the new models,' says Wells. 'We've also precisely matched the colours, which are either Service Brown or Olive Drab Green, and we've tried hard to make sure that these new models are accurately and sensibly done, right down to their canvas pannier bags.'

Throughout the process, the MoD has checked and validated the motorcycles to ensure accuracy, and even allowed the use of one of the original planes used to deploy the Flea, the Dakota.

I take the opportunity to ask Jon Baker about the aircraft used by the RAF during the Flea's tenure. 'It was cleared for use on a variety of different aircraft, from the Albemarle to the Dakota, through to

converted bombers such as the Halifax, but the Dakota was the aircraft of choice.'

The cradle itself was manufactured with two mounting points, enabling the Flea to be loaded into any of the cleared aircraft, and in some instances loaded onto gliders too, such as its versatility and light weight. With this in mind, I delve into de-classified Ministry of Aircraft Production drop-tests dated March-May 1944, where it is written that: 'It was required to drop a 125cc Royal Enfield motor cycle from the Halifax, Albemarle, Dakota, Stirling IV and Lancaster, and to evolve a technique for dropping it together with a stick of men and container load.'

While simple in principle, the final tests, just one month before the bike's first use in Normandy, outline the strict conditions →

Clockwise from facing page Cradles await a quartet of original Flying Fleas outside a Douglas Dakota; genuine WW2 bike shows the patina of age; soldiers from the Parachute Regiment check their cargo; Royal Enfield traded on its military associations for its bikes.

upon which it should be deployed. Most notably: '...the motor cycle must on no account be dropped simultaneously with a man, since the path of the cycle then crosses the path of the man.' For those chosen to ride these motorcycles, even the departure sequence had its hazards.

The official Parachute Regiment display team take to the sky aboard the Dakota, which is now loaded with the Classic 500 Pegasus, and I take the opportunity to ask Siddhartha Lal, CEO of Royal Enfield, about the Flea and the brand. 'The story of the Flying Flea is both remarkable and inspiring, and it has a history like no other. Our machines have played an important role in both World Wars, earning a reputation for endurance in the toughest conditions, so it's certainly an association we want to keep. With events and motorcycles like this, it will only get stronger. And I think it's a positive association to have. The military possesses qualities that Royal Enfield has always stood for, in being rugged and timeless.'

Shedding light on the history and significance of the Flying Flea to the Airborne Divisions during the Second World War is important, but not as important as remembering those who rode the Fleas themselves, of which there are, unfortunately,

no survivors left. Indeed, the very sacrifice that those millions of men and women made during the war eclipses all else, and I'm left in awe by the stories I've heard.

Fred Glover, now 92 years old, is one of the last surviving veterans of D-Day. He regales me with some of his tales from the war. Shot in both legs when the glider in which he was travelling flew over enemy battalions, Glover was left alone with two injured German soldiers while his regiment continued on to complete their operation. In a moment of humanity and grace, Glover shared his rations with these soldiers, even giving his morphine to one whom he deemed more severely injured than himself.

Though Glover became a prisoner of war and eventually escaped the hospital camp in which he was held, one comment struck me in particular. 'When the action is over, and the battle has died down, sanity returns. I remember being asked when I got home, "Why did you give that German soldier your morphine?" And my answer was simple: 'I'm a soldier, not a murderer.'"

If the launch of Royal Enfield's Classic 500 Pegasus has one overriding impetus, it is the opportunity to retell the story of our veterans and, by doing so, keep their memory alive. 

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