



Famous Names

Aviation

THE BROTHER WHO DESIGNED THE SPITFIRE

One of the most important contributions to the success in World War Two was the Spitfire, designed by Freemason R J Mitchell.



RJ Mitchell in 1931

Below
A 1940 water colour by Raymond McGrath of fitters working on a Spitfire



During his last years, Mitchell was involved in the design of the Supermarine b12/36 bomber, the r1/36 fast flying boat and the .37/35 four-cannon fighter.

In 1942 a film was made of Mitchell's life called The First of the Few, starring Leslie Howard as the designer.

Mitchell had one son, Dr Gordon Mitchell, now in his eighties, who has written two books about his father: RJ Mitchell – 'World-famous Aircraft Designer and RJ Mitchell – Schooldays to Spitfire.

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The word 'genius', like many in the English language, has become much over used in recent years and in consequence greatly devalued. There are, however, few men who more richly deserve this description than the 'Forgotten Hero' Reginald Joseph Mitchell. In so far as the general public recognises his name, Reginald (RJ) Mitchell is forever linked as the designer of the iconic Spitfire fighter plane. His achievements, however, were so much more. Within Freemasonry, even fewer will know of his membership of the Craft from aged 26 until his tragically early death aged 42.

Mitchell was born in 1895 at Longton, Stoke-on-Trent, one of five children. His father was a Yorkshire teacher who later owned a significant printing company in the area. Mitchell senior was himself a Freemason and the founding organist and later Master in 1923 of **Jasper Lodge No. 3934** meeting (as it still does) at Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent. **It was into this Lodge, on Friday, 13th May 1921, that R J Mitchell was initiated as a Lewis.**

It should be remembered that it was only in 1903 that the Wright Brothers achieved powered flight and several more years before any working airplane flew over Britain. He secured a job with the small Supermarine company that was a modest part of the newly-created British aviation industry, and at the time Supermarine specialised in building seaplanes. It was at Supermarine that R J Mitchell did all his work as an aircraft designer. When the company was absorbed into the Vickers industrial empire in 1928, Mitchell was made a director.

By 1920, Mitchell had become chief designer and chief engineer of Supermarine, and he was still only 25 years old. He set about creating his close-knit design team of whom he was fiercely proud and protective. He could be direct, short-tempered, even brutal, and he was without doubt single-minded.

Brother Mitchell was proposed into Jasper Lodge 3934 in 1921 not by his father, but by Bro. Good, the Senior Warden and W Bro. Story, the Immediate Past Master.

He was described as 'chief aviation engineer of Avenue Road, Itchin, Southampton.' **His father, as Junior Warden, delivered the Charge on the night** and there were a large number of visitors present, including seven from Bro Mitchell's old school Lodge, Hanliensian No. 3935, which meets at Shelton, Stoke-on-Trent. Bro Mitchell attended on a regular basis to begin with, but those attendances fell away in direct proportion to his commitments with Supermarine many miles away at Southampton.

Between 1920 and 1936 he designed 24 different aircraft ranging from light aircraft and fighters to huge flying boats and bombers – a remarkable output during a 16-year period. When Vickers took over Supermarine in 1928 they let the Supermarine design team carry on as before. Their own designer stayed at Vickers proper. His name? Barnes Wallis – inventor of the famous Dam Busters bouncing bomb and the Wellington bomber. Through the 1920s and 1930s he led his design team in creating a succession of ground-breaking aircraft. He also took numerous airspeed records during this period. During these few short years the aircraft had moved from a bi-plane contrivance made of wood canvas and wire into the sleek mono-hulled, steel-bodied machine we now recognise, and which evolved ultimately into the Spitfire design.

In 1932 Mitchell was awarded the CBE for his outstanding work.
In 1933 he was diagnosed with cancer and died on 11 June 1937 aged 42.

Brother Mitchell resigned from Jasper Lodge in February 1934, citing his inability to attend regularly. He did, however, join Lodge of Concord No. 4910 in Southampton in September 1931. His last attendance there is recorded as being in January 1936. That Lodge clearly kept in contact thereafter with Bro Mitchell.