

The World's First 1957 Rocket Gold Star

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Yes, you read the date in the title correctly. This article is about a little-known variation of the "Rocket Gold Star" that preceded the well-known A10 model by a full six years. I have mislead you a little, though, since the machine in question was sold under a different name.

Before discussing that earlier machine, it's worth reminding you that in 1963 BSA used the name "Gold Star Spitfire Scrambler" for their A10 off-road racing machine. Quoting from the U.S. sales brochure, "*New for 1963... The famous Spitfire now has the lightweight Gold Star frame, Gold Star Catalina type brakes front and rear...*". From another press release for the Rocket Gold Star and the Gold Star Spitfire Scrambler, the first is described as a "*Super Rocket with, Gold Star racing and custom features...*" and the second as "*Super Rocket with Gold Star Scrambler features...*"

So, having established that there was a scrambler version of the "Rocket Gold Star" in 1963, we are ready to look back a few years to find the origin of this model. The standard British-authored books on the marque are oblivious to the fact that there were Spitfire Scramblers prior to 1959. The reason being, these were export-only at the time so very few people in England even knew of their existence. However, in the U.S., the May 1957 issue of "Cycle" carried a full-page ad for the "*NEW! Spitfire Scrambler,*" as well as a very useful press-release-based article "*BSA Announces New 40" Scrambler Model.*" Why do I say this press release is "useful"? It turns out I was very lucky two years ago, and stumbled across the first of these machines to come off the production line at Small Heath. I'll come back to this aspect a little later, but first some more about the model,

BSA's new A10 Spitfire Scrambler was introduced in the Spring of 1957. Supplied without lights, speedometer, or mufflers, the Spitfire was intended strictly for off-road competition. One source claims only 340 of these machines were made that year and, although I haven't yet tried to confirm this number, there is no doubt very few have survived. The 1957 Spitfire Scrambler combined a modified Super Rocket engine including type 357 "full-race" camshaft and 9:1 pistons) with Gold Star cycle parts, (front and rear mudguards, hubs., and forks) all housed in a Catalina-style scrambler frame without passenger footpeg loops. Similar to what was done with the Catalina, and the later Rocket Gold Star. the frames were given their own numbering sequence (CA7A.xxx). Spitfires quickly began winning races in the U.S., taking three out of the top four positions in the September 1957 Peoria National Championship T.T. The machine was even popular enough for several companies to advertise aftermarket accessories specifically for it. However, after producing only a few hundred of these disguised Gold Star twins in 1957, the next year BSA switched to using standard A10 cycle parts, thus putting the idea on "hold" until its time came again six years later.

As for how the Spitfire was configured, a press release from BSA's West Coast distributor Hap Alzina dated 27 March 1957 says, amongst other things. "*Original projection on the Spitfire Scrambler was that a special scrambles camshaft would be most applicable for the basic purpose of the machine. However, careful dynamometer and road testing disclosed extraordinary satisfactory performance with the full-race camshaft and hence this fitment has been adopted as a standard component, an engineering accomplishment that will be welcome news to 'drag-race' enthusiasts as it confines the necessary alterations from drags to scrambles to the top end of the engine.*" It goes on to say that the owner need fit only a few components, rather than some previously-announced "*Drag-Kit,*" and gives those Components as "*S&W Special High-Rev Valve Springs,*" along with sets of "special" valve collars and keepers. An October 1958 bulletin issued by Alzina itemizes the 31 special parts

for the 1957 Spitfire Scrambler that aren't listed in standard parts catalogs. The principle defining ones are 67-1127 for the head and 67-357 for the camshaft.

Two years ago I was given the opportunity to buy an A10 based on a few photographs. The machine looked to be in wretched and incomplete condition (which later proved to be all too accurate), but the asking price was very low. So, I decided to buy it for the parts. However, as soon as I opened the crate, I saw the engine number ended with a "101," so it obviously was the first in some series. I looked in all the usual books to try to identify the engine and frame, whose full numbers are CA10SR.101 and CA7A.107, respectively, but without success. However, when I checked the records in the Science Museum Library, I was amazed to discover my inexpensive purchase was the very first Spitfire Scrambler 'manufactured red. It was the first of the initial batch dispatched to BSA's West Coast distributor on February 13, 1957, with deliveries to dealers that began March 29. After the first 65 Spitfires had been shipped to Alzina, they were followed by approximately 15 shipped to BSA on the East Coast (these machines are identified in the records by "RS" rather than "SR," but I haven't yet determined if these letters actually were stamped on the cages in reverse order). By the way, frame number 101 (holding engine 169) didn't leave the factory until March 20. That one was in East Coast livery, and headed for BSA's Nutley, New Jersey distributorship.

Although I had stumbled onto a very unusual machine, the bike had led a very hard life indeed. When it arrived it was missing a large number of parts and, more critically, came with the headstock crudely hacksawed from the frame - and even more crudely reattached a very clumsy attempt to make a chopper. The "workmanship" was unbelievable, with short sections of galvanized iron water pipe stuffed in the down tubes to help rake the head, and with the entire assembly held in place with aluminum pop rivets and incredibly poor welding. Evidence of all this was hidden beneath deep layers of epoxy body filler. However, it was obvious the machine had never run in this form, since the first modest jolt would have snapped (the flimsy pop rivets and separated the front end from the rest of the machine - and, likely, the rider from the rest of his life).

Over the last two years I've reconstructed the frame and located many of the missing parts. The bike still isn't quite ready for restoration. What was delivered to me was little more than an engine, hubs and forks, incorrect gearbox and a dangerously butchered frame. Luckily, with the exception of the SCT2 gearbox (used only on 1957 Spitfires) nearly all the other parts that were missing are standard A10 and Gold Star items. Once I track down a few more key components to loosely bolt on, it will be ready to tear apart and restore. It's at this point the magazine ads and press releases will be invaluable. Already though, discrepancies between different pieces of literature I have are apparent. As one example, photos show it with and without a passenger grab rail. Although I will restore it to as original condition as possible, I do intend to make a few concessions to ride-ability. These will include mufflers, and a license plate assembly incorporating a Ni-Cad powered brake light. The more I have worked on my Spitfire Scrambler, the more it has become obvious it is really a "Rocket Gold Star" in disguise. What kept this desirable model in obscurity for forty years was that it was only built in this Gold Star form for a single year, was made in very limited numbers, was a US-only model, and perhaps most important - hid its identity behind an alias. However, the frame (except for the lack of a kink for the oil pump), forks, hubs, and all the cycle parts are straight out of the Gold Star parts book. Throw in an A10 engine that was tuned to Super Rocket specifications and what do you have? Yes, a Rocket Gold Star. Although the 1957 catalog managed to fool us for forty years by naming this new model the "Spitfire Scrambler," a rose by any other name...

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