



PRESS RELEASE: Royal Observer Corps

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Aviation Group Spit-fired Up Over New Arrival

It's been many years since an air defence post could contact headquarters with a report of a Spitfire in Northern Ireland.

But in a limited fashion, that's no longer impossible. That's because this icon of aviation history has arrived at a new home on the edge of Lisburn, County Antrim. It's the new pride and joy of the Ulster Aviation Society. Actually, it's a full-sized, very accurate replica of a Spitfire, built from fibreglass by a specialised English firm.

The aircraft, a Spitfire II, is an exact (but non-flying) copy of the type of aircraft purchased through the famous *Belfast Telegraph* Spitfire Fund of 1940 at the height of the Battle of Britain. The newspaper's aim was to raise £5,000 through public donations—the price of a Spitfire at the time.

"The *Telegraph* in fact raised £85,000 and the fund was able to buy 17 Spitfires," said Ray Burrows, chairman of the Ulster Aviation Society. "Not only was that excellent; it was the best newspaper fund-raiser throughout World War Two."

Each of the 17 Spitfires was named after a community, county or region of Northern Ireland, and the Society hopes to name its replica Spitfire after one of those actual "presentation" machines.

The big surprise to the 370 members of the U.A.S. was the speed with which the aircraft became available. Mr. Burrows explained that the Society's original plan was to mount an 18-month public campaign early this year to raise £85,000—the price of a single replica Spitfire. Original flying Spitfires these days can cost upwards of £1.7 million each, far beyond the Society's resources.

"But this aircraft came on the market in December at a fraction of that £85,000 price," said Mr. Burrows. "It was just too good an opportunity to miss, and the guy who was selling it wanted it to come here. This aircraft was basically looked at, purchased, delivered and assembled here in three days—which is a record, even for the Society."

The organisation is planning an official public rollout for the Spitfire but a date has not yet been set, he added. Meanwhile, a fund-raising campaign has been launched to pay for the aircraft, as the Society has had to seriously deplete its existing finances.

"But while we're scrambling for funds, we're also aiming to have our Spitfire play a role in a limited number of public events and for education purposes throughout Northern Ireland

during the months and years ahead,” said Mr. Burrows. “The indications are that it will be a very popular attraction.”

Each feature of the replica Spitfire’s airframe has been duplicated with the closest attention, even down to the exact size and types of the thousands of rivets used on the original aircraft. The structure is mainly fibreglass, carefully moulded from an original Spitfire. As well, the paint scheme and markings show exacting attention to authenticity, said Society chairman Ray Burrows.

“It’s important to us that we portray this replica as accurately as possible,” he said. “It’s a powerful symbol and its distinctive appearance still evokes strong, positive feelings from people.” As such, the aviation society’s Spitfire is a unique and lasting tribute to the people from many lands who produced, maintained and flew the aircraft that helped to ensure our freedom.

Spitfires flew and fought from Northern Ireland during the war, notably from RAF bases at Aldergrove, Eglinton, Ballyhalbert and Long Kesh—the last location being the home of the Ulster Aviation Society. The organisation, founded in 1968, boasts a collection of 20 machines, the largest assemblage of historic aircraft in all of Ireland.

Also in the collection—and just around a corner from the Spitfire—are rooms dedicated to the Royal Observer Corps and the Cold War. Original equipment has been sourced and many of the displays, including a mock underground post, have been constructed to better explain the role of the ROC.

Former ROC members are on hand to tell of their experiences, demonstrate each piece of equipment and explain procedures of the Corps when it was active.

Further information on the Society and its collection can be found on its website, www.ulsteraviationsociety.org. We’re also on Facebook.

Donations to our Spitfire Fund from businesses, organisations and individuals would be greatly appreciated. Cheques should be made payable by post to the Ulster Aviation Society and sent to: Garry Macdonald, U.A.S., 18 Riverview, Portadown, Co Armagh BT63 5WP. Alternatively, online users can contribute by logging in to: bit.ly/uasSpitfireFund.

The Spitfire II (P7895) of the Ulster Aviation Society is seen here in the markings of 32 Squadron, RAF, though the Observer Corps name is spurious for this particular aircraft.

**Media Contact: Stephen Riley, press officer,
Ulster Aviation Society
Phone: (0)28 94 432392
Mobile: 07919 122899
e-mail: sriley@freezezone.co.uk**



013 Volunteers from the Ulster Aviation Society scramble to unload their new Spitfire II replica at the end of its trip from Linton-on-Ouse in Yorkshire. The wind that night was so strong, the wing might have taken flight after all!



018 The fuselage of the Spitfire, ready to be unloaded at the hangar of the U.A.S. near Lisburn, the morning after its arrival.



Spit – port view The replica Spitfire assembled, in all its markings finery. It's expected the aircraft will eventually be finished in markings which have a direct relevance to Northern Ireland. Meanwhile, though they're not really accurate, who would complain about them the way they're seen here?



FOOTNOTE from the ROC Association. We are very grateful to Stephen and the Ulster Aviation Society for allowing us to publish their Spitfire story. Full marks too, to 31Group Heritage Team Member, **Alistair McCann** who obtained authority from the UAS Chairman **Ray Burrows** to proudly display the "Observer Corps" name on the Spitfire for a short time. Hopefully, this might be repeated again soon when we dedicate our New 31Group Standard.

The history of aircraft reporting in The Province during WW2 was unique. The men and women involved, back then, served on the Air Defence Posts and Operations Centres that operated in a similar way to the ROC on the mainland. They became part of the ROC in 1954 as No 31 Group Belfast, with 58 Observer Posts being established by the end of that year. However, ROC uniforms *were* worn in Northern Ireland during WW2 by members of a secret organisation known as the RSS or Radio Security Service, listening to German radio broadcasts, and reporting to their Headquarters in Bletchley Park. These people were issued with ROC uniforms as a disguise, to prevent people asking questions about what they were really doing. It was a bit of a gaffe because the ROC didn't exist over there at the time!

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