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Johnnie Spitfire: The Andoverian
A tale of three towns, a war and an airplane

Years before the official start of the Sister Towns movement in 1947 (and decades before the towns were officially “twinned”), Andover and North Andover, Massachusetts, were supporting friends in Andover, England. The three towns – Andover and North Andover, Massachusetts, and Andover, England – became Sister Towns in June 2000.

The story begins to emerge

The December 16, 1954 Andover Townsman ran this article describing the connection:



Pictured above is the Spitfire airplane, “The Andoverian,” towards whose purchase Andover and North Andover residents subscribed generously two years ago. A committee headed by Toy E. Hardy, chairman, and Edward A. Anderson, treasurer, raised \$4214.50 in Andover at that time, and the money was sent to Andover, England, to aid in the purchase of the Spitfire.

The first picture of the airplane arrived recently, being sent to Mr. Anderson by Hon. S. W. Bell, mayor of Andover, England. Mr. Bell sends the pictures as he is retiring from the mayoralty soon.

“I feel that I cannot allow the occasion to pass without conveying through you to the people of Andover, Massachusetts, a message of greeting from the people of Andover, England, and a renewed expression of our thanks for your generous gestures of friendship and sympathy



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at that period in the war, when, although our spirits were undaunted, we were alone in our struggle against Hitler and the Nazis and all the evil things which those words imply.

“Now we stand together – the British Commonwealth of Nations, the United States and the U.S.S.R. with all the other United Nations – in a common cause, looking forward with confidence under the guiding and providential hand of God, to the final triumph of our arms against Germany and Japan.

“I believe that the personal links which have been formed are to be regarded as one of the good things which have come out of this evil war, in that they will make for a closer understanding between the peoples of our two nations, not only now, but in the peace to which we all look forward.”

Many thanks to Andover Sister Towns Association’s Fred Snell for providing this additional information.

- The \$4,214.50 sent by Andover and North Andover residents in 1941 to Andover, Hampshire, England would be worth \$72,502 in 2018 dollars.
- The population of our two Massachusetts towns in 1940 was 18,646 compared to the 2010 population of 61,620.
- A single Spitfire cost £12,604 to produce in 1939, according to:
<https://www.anglotopia.net/british-history/spitfire-14-facts-figures-probably-didnt-know-supermarine-spitfire-iconic-plane-fought-battle-britain/>.

The Spitfire Airplane

The expense of World War I between 1914-1918 and the Depression of the 1920s that followed left Britain vulnerable. Appeasements made to Hitler and the Nazis to avoid war was prompted in part by the lack of funds in the national bank. However, as Nazi Germany advanced, Britain scrambled to rebuild its armed forces.

The Spitfire was one of the most admired of all fighter aircraft. It was designed by Reginald J Mitchell of Supermarine Ltd. Work on the design began in 1934. It was based on a series of air racing seaplanes that competed for the Schneider Trophy in the 1920 through 1931. The Coupe d'Aviation Maritime Jacques Schneider was a trophy awarded annually to the winner of a race for seaplanes.



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Original Spitfire designer Reginald Mitchell died in 1937, so he never knew the role his airplane design would have in World War II. Mitchell was succeeded by Joseph Smith who would complete the design of the “Supermarine Spitfire.”

Royal Air Force use of the Spitfire began August 1938. Spitfires reached a max speed of 346mph. They carried eight Browning

.303 machine guns. Between 1936 and 1948, more than 20,000 spitfires were built. Changes were made over time including more powerful engines, and changes in the fuselage and cockpit canopy.

During the Battle of Britain, between July and October 1940, 370 of the 2,000 aircraft deployed by the Royal Air Force were Spitfires. In all 529 enemy aircraft were shot down during the battle.

The Andoverian was manufactured in the Castle Bromwich factory, September 10, 1941. It was delivered to No. 118 Squadron at Ibsley, Hampshire.

Spitfires were used throughout World War II all over the world – Italy, North Africa, Burma (Myanmar), the Pacific. Spitfire plans provided cover for Allied forces in the liberation of Europe, beaches in Normandy and Sicily.

Spitfire Funds

At the beginning of the war, the British people needed to believe in something and the Spitfire gave them that.

May 1940, before the Battle of Britain began in July, the British government recruited English-Canadian Lord Max Aitken, Baron Beaverbrook, to help increase production of the Spitfire. Lord Beaverbrook was a public and media relations dynamo, running public appeals for raw materials, encouraging conservation and savings, and building the media campaign around the Spitfire. Within weeks, Spitfire councils and funds were set up. The Battle of Britain, with German planes flying overhead, inspired more than 1,400 appeals for support.



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When Spitfire Funds were launched in May 1940, they had a theoretical price tag of £5,000 for each plane. The price tag had little to do with the actual cost, but it was a good round number for building public support.

Spitfire Fund contributors could purchase wings for £2,000, a gun for £200, a spark plug for 8 shillings, and a rivet at a sixpence. Donors could also have a dedication painted onto the nose of the plane they helped fund.

Every town in Britain (and at least two in the US – Andover and North Andover!) wanted to have a plane named for them.



Newspapers coordinated funds, and listed individuals and donations, “My week’s pocket money – Fred Smith aged 7” and “From all at No. 15 Station Lane.” The BBC promoted the Funds and donations grew. Funds were organized by councils, churches, civic groups, schools, and businesses.

People came up with ingenious fundraising methods. One village drew an outline of a Spitfire on a field and challenged the community to fill it with coins, which they did in just a few days. Movie theaters, carnival workers (“Fun at the Fair”), kennel clubs (“The Dog Fighter”), Woolworths, and women named Dorothy (“Dorothy of Great Britain and Empire”). Funds were raised from donated from expats around the world: Uruguay, Trinidad, the Gold Coast, and Hong Kong. Around £13 million (£650 million today) was raised through everything from children’s campaigns to formal fundraising.

Spitfire Funds built around 2,600 planes, but the funds really had more to do with supporting the war effort. Spitfire Funds gave the public something to do, something to believe in and rally around. Spitfire Funds build civic morale in a dark time.



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In October 1942, the British Film Industry arrived at Ibsley, where the Andoverian was made, to film “The First of The Few,” directed by and starring Leslie Howard and David Niven. There’s a possibility that the Andoverian, AD204, is included in some of the movie shots. “The First of The Few” can viewed on YouTube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1vMKe6U_Kk.

In 1980, a booklet telling the history of “Johnnie Spitfire was published. A copy is in the History Center collection.



Sources

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