

# Spitfire

## 10th November 2016 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

There was a full house at the Roy Underdown Pavilion to hear Colin van Geffen talk about the world's best known Second World War fighter aircraft, the Spitfire. What an appropriate location to hold this meeting, on the former Hamble airfield which was the largest Spitfire repair base during the last World War. Colin illustrated in his talk the important aspects of Hamble's contribution to the history of the Spitfire's life.

He started by giving the origins of Supermarine, the company that built the Spitfire. It was a prominent seaplane and flying boat manufacturer and the Spitfire was developed from its Schneider Trophy racing seaplanes. R J Mitchell is known as the designer of the Spitfire, but after his death in 1937 Joe Smith and others made a huge contribution to its design.

The first Spitfire, which cost £16,000 to develop, made its maiden test flight from Eastleigh aerodrome in March 1936. The Air Ministry placed a large first order of 310 Spitfires and the first production Spitfire rolled off the Supermarine Woolston factory assembly line in mid 1938. At this time the factory was working at full capacity, so another factory at Castle Bromwich in Birmingham was set up to help produce Spitfires.

It was during the Battle of Britain that the Spitfire first gained its reputation as a superb fighter aircraft. In October 1939 Air Service Training (AST), which owned and operated the airfield, was appointed to undertake the repair of damaged or crashed Spitfires. During the Battle of Britain damaged Spitfires used to land for a quick repair and refuel with an average of 15 per a week 'fly-in' repairs returned to the Royal Air Force.

Next Colin spoke about the Blitz and showed German aerial photographs of Southampton and Hamble, identifying the important bombing targets. This, of course, included Supermarine's factories alongside the River Itchen which were badly damaged, so Spitfire production had to be dispersed. Production of Spitfire parts were dispersed to 28 different sites in Southampton and other locations in the local area. These were brought together to be assembled at places such as Eastleigh and Salisbury. Southampton was the eleventh worst hit location in the country during the Blitz and Colin's pictures of the devastation gave a remarkable insight into what it was like at that time.

Colin next explained how the Spitfire was developed and improved, including variants such as the Seafire. He said there were 22 different Marks produced, although confusingly the last Mark number was 24. The major change in the Spitfire's shape came when the bigger and more powerful Griffon engine replaced the original Merlin engine. When showing the variants, Colin included the Floatplane Spitfire which Folland of Hamble undertook the conversion work.

A mention was made and a picture shown of Hamble's Air Transport Auxiliary women, who delivered the Spitfires to and from the airfield.

By the end of the war AST at Hamble had repaired 2575 Spitfires and with its Exeter dispersal unit the total was 3507. 46 different countries used Spitfires during its service life. Memories were shared about the scrapping of many Spitfires at the end of the war and at Hamble some AST employees made good use of the parts, using Spitfire canopies as garden cloches and wheels for their wheelbarrows or boat trailers!

Colin's presentation was excellent with the use of sound effects and superb pictures, as well as interacting with the audience, particularly using questions and answers. Using this method he dispelled many myths and legends about the Spitfire. A very professional talk.

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An Echo article in April 1946 announced "*The recommencement of Courses in Civilian Flying*" at AST, which ceased at the beginning of the Second World War. It said AST was widely known as "Britain's Air University" and trained large numbers of civilian airmen in a full range of aeronautical subjects.

The article states that "*During the war AST's establishment at Hamble became the biggest fighter aircraft repair depot in Britain, and turned out more than 3,000 repaired aircraft - a notable achievement, and one unequalled by any other firm in the country.*"