

# The Gift of Air Power

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*Graham Chandler*



**Two airmen with Garfield Weston Spitfire SVI.**

One misty morning last year, Belfast amateur aviation historian Jonny McNee was in County Donegal looking for a Second World War Spitfire crash site he had been researching. When he stopped to buy his daughter some candy, a chatty local told him, “It’s in a gully right behind my house.”

When McNee returned with archaeologists and began excavating, he pulled out a section of fuselage. Wiping away the clay, the stenciled name “Garfield Weston No. 1” jumped out. He was over the moon. It was the first of eight Spitfires donated to the Royal Air Force by Canadian businessman Garfield Weston in August 1940, after the news that 16 Spitfires had been lost in a single battle over the English Channel, with 13 pilots killed. “This was the Holy Grail of Spitfires,” recalls McNee.

Holy Grail indeed. Weston’s wartime gesture launched a funding revolution. Spurred on by his generosity, in 1940 Canadians—and dozens of Commonwealth and other countries—began pulling together to do the same. Soon local and community organizations from coast to coast were behind drives to buy fighters for the RAF. Money was raised by women’s church groups, First Nations and others organizing school plays, raffles, hockey games, golf tournaments, yards of pennies, fortune-telling and more.

As recorded on an oral history transcript from a Garfield Weston audio tape of his personal reminiscence from around 1973, “it would seem that Garfield Weston actually walked into the Ministry of Aircraft Production and handed Lord Beaverbrook [Canadian newspaper baron Max Aitken, then Britain’s Minister of Aircraft Production] a blank cheque,” says Derrick Clements, archivist of the Weston Corporate Archives. In recalling the moment, the transcript reads,

"Well, I said, 'All I can say is that I've a blank cheque here. You know, Max, only God can replace those boys, I'd like to replace the machines.'"

Clements says Beaverbrook, who was under tremendous pressure trying to keep enough aircraft flying, apparently started crying, which shocked Garfield, then a Member of the British House of Commons. Beaverbrook filled in the amount for £100,000 and told Garfield he would publicize the donation. When Garfield said he would rather keep the matter of the donation "between you and me," Beaverbrook said that wasn't possible, that "there's too [much] power behind this" and that he would raise millions of dollars by taking it public. That was on Aug. 9, 1940, and the following day London's Evening Standard carried a photo of Weston walking with his three-year-old daughter in the gardens of his Buckinghamshire estate. The same day, Weston had told a Daily Express reporter, "Lord Beaverbrook is doing a fine job. He's a big man with a big job."



**A Spitfire's engine is raised from the peat in County Donegal, Ireland.**

Weston's donation quickly prompted a massive gift from another Canadian tycoon. The weekend of Aug. 24 saw J.W. McConnell, publisher of the Montreal Star, ante up \$1 million to provide an entire squadron of aircraft built in Canada.

The Thursday after that, London Calling broadcast a stirring talk by Weston which was aired over both the BBC and the CBC radio networks. "These boys we cannot replace, but we can and we must replace their machines and give their gallant comrades the necessary numbers to carry on the combat on more equal terms," he said. "Canada, we need your Spitfires, your Hurricanes, your bombers not only in twos, and threes—by the squadron, in mass formation, to blacken the skies against [the German bombers]." Of McConnell's offer, he said, "the princely gift of \$1 million from an outstanding Canadian made all England stand and cheer when the news came over the radio last weekend. How wonderfully the trail has been blazed for the rest of us, my fellow countrymen."

The idea of special donations for weapons of war wasn't new, but it was certainly resurrected in the Second World War. According to historian Jonathan F. Vance in his book *Maple Leaf Empire: Canada, Britain, and Two World Wars*, under England's original Wings for Britain Fund, the Air Ministry came up with a price list for basic airframes: £5,000 for a single-engine fighter (usually a Spitfire), £20,000 for a twin-engine aircraft and £40,000 for a four-engine aircraft.

One of the more unique fundraising ventures prompted by Weston's present was the Dorothy Funds. Dorothy Christie of Montreal launched the idea by selling some of her evening wear and using the money to print cards that read, "Is your name Dorothy? If so, rally around and help buy a Spitfire for Britain." Vance writes that Christie and her friends mailed them to every Dorothy they could find, "eventually spawning a fundraising effort that held 20,000 tea parties (each hosted by someone named Dorothy), all-Dorothy musicales, car washes, rummage sales, and an auction of one of actress Dorothy Lamour's sarongs, which netted \$151 (about \$2,000 today) for the Vancouver branch." It wasn't restricted to big cities either: the local Creston, B.C., Dorothys, led by Dorothy Sinclair, contributed \$22.



**Workers at Canadian Vickers Ltd. in Montreal contribute to a fund.**

It spread south across the border. "Dorothy's Plan Galloping Teas," headlined the *Victoria Daily Colonist*. "Vancouver chapter of the Canadian Dorothy Spitfire Fund is seeking noted Dorothy's of the United States," went the subhead. According to the article, 25 Vancouver women named Dorothy initiated the galloping teas, a version of the chain letter concept. Each Dorothy invited several friends to tea, charging 25 cents. These in turn held other teas, inviting other friends. Plans included inviting Dorothy Thompson, a noted newspaper columnist

and broadcaster, to donate an autographed copy of a recent radio talk, and Dorothy Parker to write a poem.

According to the online Spitfire Site, Britain's Air Ministry at first laid down strict rules regarding the representation of the name, most of which were ignored; markings often tended not to follow the rule. At first, the name or motto was supposed to be contained in a nine-inch by six-inch rectangle, which proved much too small for some donors. The early names were in dull yellow script, but this soon gave way to light grey, white and, in some cases, black. Even some large coats of arms began to appear on some Spitfires, but by 1942 the light grey two-inch lettering had become pretty well standard. Some aircraft had other presentation details added which obliterated the original names, but in actuality few of the names survived the war intact.

With this sort of loose licence, donors had some pet names. Vance reports a man named Herbert Morris of Vancouver naming his donated Spitfire "Dirty Gerty Vancouver." One can only imagine a story behind that one.

In mid-1941, a group of women in Banff, Alta., raised \$75 to assist in the forging of one to be named the "Spitfire of the National Parks." Their idea for the fund was knitting tiny red, white and blue unfinished woollen socks topped by three needles and a ball of wool—to be worn on a lapel. That may have prompted a popular ditty making the rounds at the time: "Twinkle, twinkle, little star, I was out last week in my boyfriend's car. What I did I ain't admittin', but what I'm knittin' ain't for Britain."

Today's Ontario Hockey League team, the Windsor Spitfires, must be proud: in 1941 the City of Windsor raised enough money to buy a Spitfire. The same year saw Ontario's Chinese community donate \$100,000 to a Spitfire Fund.



## **A cooking contest raises funds for a Spitfire.**

Fairs and carnivals got into the act, too. Quebec's Lachute Fair turned over its excess funds towards a Spitfire. And the Banff Winter Carnival's financial statement as at Oct. 31, 1941, is annotated "50 per cent of proceeds to Spitfire Fund." Net proceeds from the event's Karnival Kapers of \$425.80 were signed off by treasurer S.T. Harrison.

Schools weren't to be left out of the patriotic fervour. In Osoyoos, B.C., the local Inkameep Day School held a series of plays specifically for funding the B.C. Indian Spitfire Fund. Another First Nations school put on a show: Banff's newspaper Crag and Canyon of May 30, 1941, reported that the Morley, Alta., Indian girls put on an Empire pageant for the Spitfire Fund. The idea was started by Anna Beaver, one of the senior girls who danced with the group of 6-17-year-olds, led by the older girls who also presented arms drills.

Pearl Moore, an American who married into the famed Brewster family of Banff, was a force behind the Banff-Jasper Spitfire Fund. A notebook now held in the archives of the town's Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies served as her ledger for keeping track of funds raised. It reveals not only the spirit of community, but also the wide diversity of 1941 events. Some examples: Jan. 7, "\$3.36 from hockey game"; Feb. 16, "\$170.50 from bobsled tickets"; March 29, "\$95.41 from Dramatic Club play"; same date, "\$2.90 from six yards of pennies"; and Sept. 7, "\$35.00 from Mrs. Chambers, Fortune Telling." To help promote the fund, \$42.60 of the proceeds were spent on 5,000 triangular stickers featuring a Spitfire against a Canadian Rockies backdrop.

The play had been put on by the Literary-Dramatic Club and was called "The Late Christopher Bean." The Albertan of March 26, 1941, reported receipts were \$145, and expenses, \$50.

The "yards of pennies" idea was a creation of the fund, too. Wooden barometers 36 inches long were placed in and outside of Banff stores with a slot where patrons could donate their spare pennies. Each full one represented a yard of pennies. The eventual aim was to raise "A Mile of Pennies." No record was found as to whether or not they reached the magic mile, but judging from the ledger entry, at 48 pennies to the yard (they were stacked edge to edge) they would have needed to collect 84,480 pennies; or a tidy contribution totalling \$844.80.



**Alberta Cubs donate to the Spitfire Fund.**

But by Feb. 19 the following year, 1942, according to the last entry in the ledger, they had their down payment on a Spit: "Sent to Wings for Britain, \$6,944.40." A receipt for \$7,000 read "received from Miss Agnes Hammond, Banff-Jasper Spitfire Fund" issued by A.H. Russell, treasurer of Wings for Britain, Winnipeg Manitoba Branch. The Montreal Star proudly reported on the contribution. Fund headquarters at 215 St. James St. W. in Montreal reported it as the first installment on a Spitfire "raised in Banff, not including the painting raffle."

The painting raffle was also the brainchild of the Banff-Jasper Spitfire Fund; and the patriotic generosity of some now-famous Canadian artists. Sometime early in 1941, six Canadian painters got together and each offered one of their best works: Nicholas de Grandmaison, Belmore Browne, Ronald Jackson, Peter Whyte, Roland Gissing and Carl Rungius. Images were of various western Canadian subjects. The paintings were exhibited across Canada and tickets sold for well over a year, culminating in a gala draw in Banff on Saturday, June 5, 1942. It was a big social event where the draw was made by Suzanne Holman, eight-year-old daughter of British actress Vivian Leigh, and six airmen, representing Canada, Poland, Australia, New Zealand, England and the United States.

Revealing the extent of U.S. interest and involvement in the Spitfire Fund effort, Mrs. F.W. Nicolls of Mineral Springs Rd. in Reading, Pa., won de Grandmaison's Stoney Indian. Helen Harbison of Philadelphia was thrilled to draw two of the prizes: Gissing's Ghost River Valley and Jackson's American Wigeon. According to the Calgary Herald of June 8, 1942, Harbison was a well known figure in Banff, where she often holidayed with her family and was a regular member of the Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies.

The Banff-Jasper Spitfire Fund was an active one. On July 31, 1941, a song recital by Soprano Audrey Mildmay was presented in the ballroom of the Banff Springs Hotel, "In aid of the Banff-Jasper Spitfire Fund," read the program. It featured Mozart's Alleluia and Edward

Elgar's *The Shepherd's Song*. Mildmay was a top performer with the famous Glyndebourne Opera and went on to sing with the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy.

In September 1941, the Banff-Jasper Spitfire Fund purchased a 1941 Ford Deluxe Fordor Sedan for \$1,147.00 from Brewster's Garage in Banff to raffle off. It appears to have been sold at near cost; the retail selling price of the car was marked as \$1,401.00 on the receipt. Tickets went for 50 cents, but no record was found of how many were eventually sold. The sales pitch: "You need a car. The Fund needs the money. Canada needs the Spitfire."

Other Canadians stepped up to the Spitfire Fund plate for different reasons. Mount Zion Lutheran church in New Westminster, B.C., had a record of supporting the fund after Germany invaded Norway on April 9, 1940. "One of the first reactions among Nidaros/Mount Zion Norwegians was a numbness caused by the loss of things in the homeland of their birth," states Byron Welters, Mount Zion's archivist, in an e-mail. "The purpose of the Norwegian Spitfire Fund, started under the auspices of the Norwegian government in London, England, was to collect funds for the acquisition of aircraft to help liberate Norway." Dinners and raffles were held; and often contributors remained anonymous for fear of retribution against family members still in Norway.

Spitfire Funds' activities appeared to have been peaking just before the U.S., with its massive funding and materiel capacity, entered the war. Three days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Dec. 10, 1941, Drummondville Spokesman newspaper reported the Canadian Ladies' Golf Union Spitfire Fund, launched on April 9 of the same year, had reached \$37,000, just over \$9,000 of that from Quebec clubs. "Golf tournaments, sweepstakes, bridges, teas, raffles, supper parties and dances were a few of the ways and means by which they reached their objectives," it was reported. Appeals were being sent to every golf club throughout Canada, Newfoundland (then a British Crown Colony) and Bermuda.

Of all the presentation Spitfires of the Second World War, just one remains: Mk.IIb P8332, named Soebang, at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. It was presented by Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, and named after the Netherlands East Indies town that raised the purchase funds. It was restored at No. 6 Repair Depot in Trenton, Ont., in 1966.

By the end of the war, almost 1,600 Spitfires carried presentation names with donations reportedly totalling around £8,000,000 worldwide. Apart from Spitfires, hundreds of other presentation aircraft were donated from around the globe, largely Hurricanes but also substantial numbers of Beaufighters, Blenheims, Defiants, Hudsons, Lancasters, Mosquitos, Stirlings, Tiger Moths, Wellingtons, Whirlwinds and other types. But none quite matched the impact of Garfield Weston No. 1.