

Warbird Watch

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Welcome to Warbird Watch! This will be a new monthly newsletter centered around vintage aviation, keeping memories alive by sharing stories of the past and the present. Every single airframe tells a story, and we have made it our mission to continue to tell those stories to future generations. This month we will be profiling a long forgotten airframe that is in need of some TLC, Spitfire Mk. 21 LA226.



The Supermarine Spitfire is one of the most legendary aircraft ever produced. It is an engineering masterpiece. From its looks, to its effectiveness in combat, the Spitfire was a pilot's dream. Even today, if you talk to any warbird pilot who has flown a Spitfire, they will say they become one with the aircraft and is truly remarkable to fly.

Like most things in life, one star takes away all the attention. For the Spitfire, that one star is the Mk. IX. Being the most produced variant, it also has the greatest number of surviving airframes today. If you are at an airshow or a museum, you will likely see a Mk. IX. The Spitfire continued to be modified and produced even after WWII, but the final development to see action was the long forgotten Mk. 21. With a redesigned wing, strengthened fuselage, and powered by the mighty Griffon 61-Series engine, it entered service in April 1945 and saw some action. Armed with four 20mm Hispano cannons, a three second burst would shoot an astonishing 40lbs of ammunition. An incredible design, fast, well armoured, with a ton of firepower, it was quite the fighter. It suffered stability issues early on, and by the time modifications were completed to fix the issues, the war was almost over and only 120 aircraft were delivered before the order was



cancelled. After the war many of the Mk. 21s were destroyed, leaving only three left today. Two on display and one in storage.

The one forgotten aircraft in storage: LA226. Built at South Marston (also known as Phillips and Powis Factory), she took her first flight on January

9th, 1945 with Flight Lieutenant Johnson at the controls. That flight lasted approximately five minutes before she was taken on charge by the R.A.F. on the 21st, and was flown over to No. 33 Maintenance Unit by Flight Lieutenant Fellows of the Air Transport Auxiliary on the 22nd of January. On March 7th 1945, LA226 was delivered to No. 91 (Nigerian) Squadron, given the code DL E. On April 13th 1945, LA226 flew her first operational sortie. During the month of April, 91 Squadron moved to East Anglia to carry out reconnaissance missions. Although the Mk. 21 saw limited action in the war, it was two of these Spitfires from 91 Squadron on April 26th that claimed to have sunk a German midget submarine. After some maintenance and modifications in June, she was returned to 91 Squadron on Canada Day (July 1st). Just one month later, LA226 suffered an emergency landing at RAF Fairwood Common.



With the war over, we would not hear from this Spitfire again until January 1946 where she was transferred to No. 122 (Bombay) Squadron at R.A.F. Dalcross with the code EB F. That would be LA226's final posting as a fighter. In December 1947 LA226 would be transferred to 43 Group, then No. 9 Maintenance Unit at Cosford to be declared non-effective stock. After her military fighter career was over, she would still prove useful. Used by the CAACU (Civilian Anti-Aircraft Co-Operation Unit) as a target tug in

Exeter in 1951, followed by becoming a Maintenance Command aircraft in 1954 before being returned to No. 9 Maintenance Unit. A few years later in 1958, LA226 would become a display aircraft. Starting at Little Rissington, R.A.F. Henlow to take part in the famous Battle of Britain film (although was not selected to be filmed), gate guardian at South Marston Works from 1968-1984, and finally Biggin Hill Chapel from 1984-1987. After decades of WWII aircraft being on display out in the elements, a massive initiative was carried out to replace these aircraft with fiberglass replicas. LA226 was one of those aircraft to be taken out of the weather to be preserved for future generations.



Unfortunately, this iconic aircraft has been in storage since 1989 out of view of the public eye. 36 years locked away behind closed doors. The good news: the R.A.F. is taking good care of LA226, ensuring that this airplane and many others are preserved and could potentially be put on display in the future to inspire future generations again. The forgotten Spitfire Mk. 21 may not be as legendary as the Mk. I, V, or IX, but it still did its part at the closing stages of WWII to cement its place in history.

Performance:
 Maximum speed: 350 mph (563 km/h, 343 mi/h) at 40,000 ft (12,192 m) and 31,000 ft (9,449 m)
 Cruise speed: 280 mph (450 km/h, 279 mi/h)
 Service ceiling: 34,000 ft (10,363 m)
 Service ceiling: 34,000 ft (10,363 m) at 40,000 ft (12,192 m)
 Rate of climb: 700 ft/min (3.3 m/s) at 40,000 ft (12,192 m) and 3,000 ft (914 m) at 10,000 ft (3,048 m)

Armament: (Data)
 1- Two 2,000-lb (907 kg) bombs (one in the nose and one in the tail)
 2- Two 500-lb (227 kg) bombs (one in the nose and one in the tail)
 3- Four 250-lb (113 kg) bombs (one in the nose and three in the tail)