

A FINE OLD WARHORSE COMES HOME TO DUBLIN



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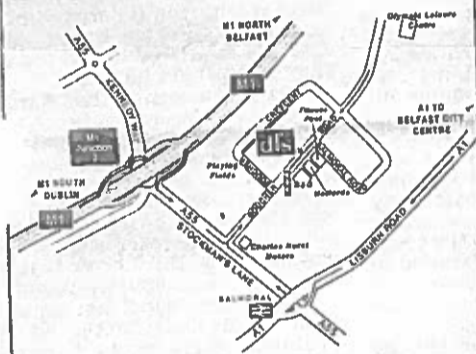
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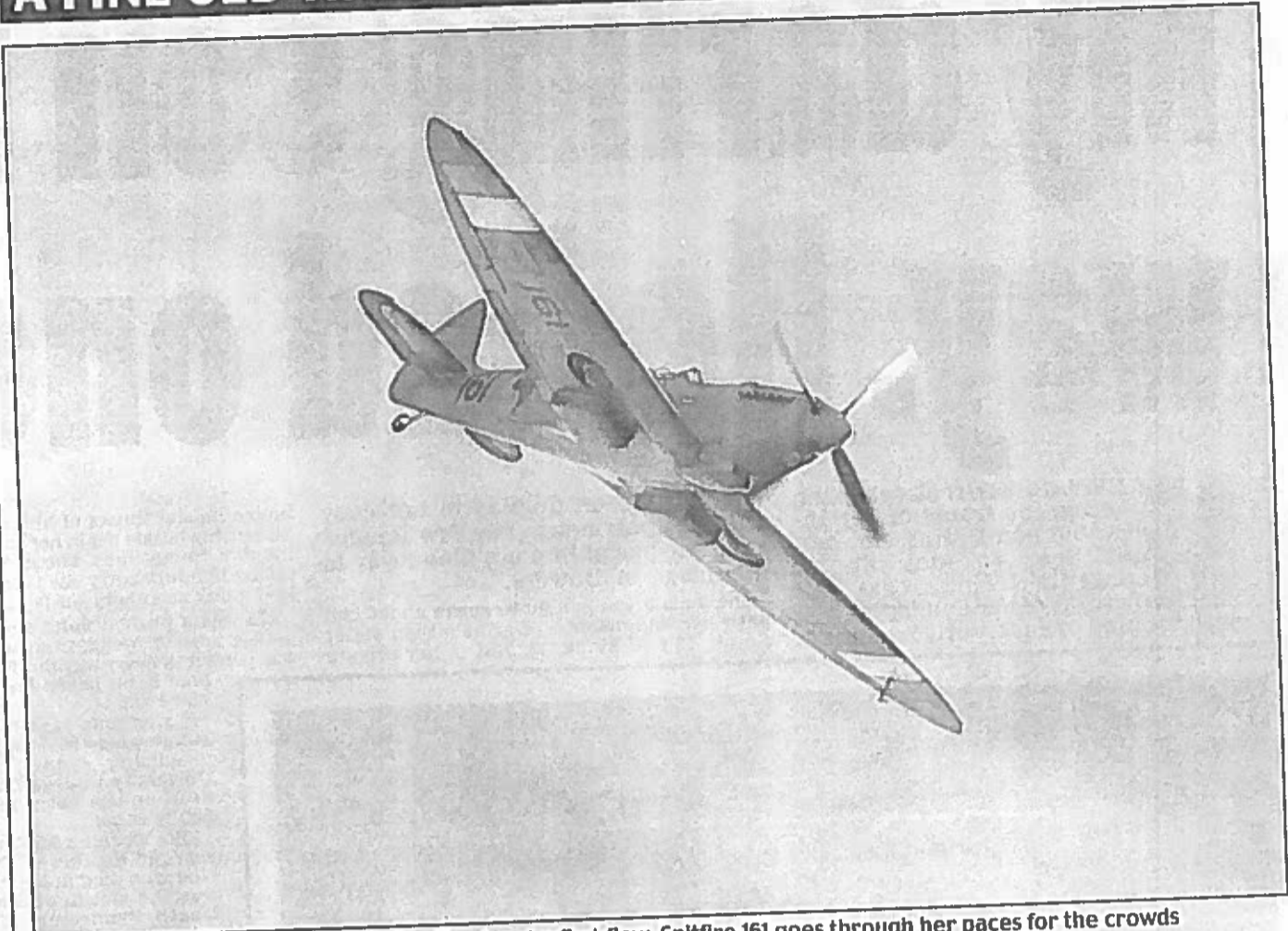
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Remembering The Few: As beautiful as the day she first flew, Spitfire 161 goes through her paces for the crowds

Tally ho! Spitfire No 161 reaches for the sky again

By Geraldine Comiskey

IT'S a name that conjures up magnificent images of Battle of Britain bravery, of young pilots taking on the Luftwaffe from their cockpits with pictures of their sweethearts in their pockets.

Now many people will be pleased to know that the old warhorse is still in fighting form - even if in an unexpected setting.

For an original Spitfire yesterday made a return visit to the Irish Air Corps base at Baldonnel, Dublin, which had been its home for a few years after World War II.

Even without its fearsome guns, Spitfire Number 161 - one of only five left in the world in airworthy condition - looked ready for action.

Performing loops and rolls, its propeller snarling, it thrilled the crowds who were at the Air Corps headquarters to see three cadets receive their wings.

It was as if the grandfather of war-planes wanted to show these rookies how it was done in the tough old days.

'It was great to see it was still in perfect working order after all those years,' said an Air Corps spokesman.

Number 161 was bought by the Air Corps just after the war and incredibly, served until 1980 as a training craft.

Among those who turned up at Baldonnel to welcome the plane back was former Air Corps pilot Pat O'Callaghan, who flew it when it was in active service. But, although the plane



Oh what a beautiful baby: Spitfire 161 comes to a halt beside a passenger jet

may not have seen combat in the war, it has had its share of tragedy. Two pilots died when it crashed in 2000.

However, in homage to its happier days at Baldonnel, British owners, Duxford Historic Flying Limited, had painted it in the Irish Air Corps colours and reinstated its old serial number.

The man who sponsored its return to Irish soil was CityJet chief executive Geoff White.

The six, two-seater Spitfires purchased by the Irish Air Corps, were a rarity even for their time, as most of the planes were single-seaters, designed for pilots who already knew how to fly.

Spitfire No 161 is now taking pride of place in the Baldonnel museum.

The most famous Irish Spitfire pilot was Dublin-born Wing Commander Brendan 'Paddy' Finucane who clocked up 32 kills before dying in anti-aircraft fire.



Ex-Air Corps Spitfire pilot Pat O'Callaghan