

**THE  TIMES**

## Dozens of hidden British Spitfires to be excavated in Burma



One of the Mk14 Spitfires being crated up in Burma ready to be buried Sean Spencer/Hull News&Pictures

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**Richard Lloyd Parry**

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Dozens of Spitfires that have lain buried for almost 70 years in Burma could be heading back to Britain soon after a deal to recover them from where they were abandoned by victorious allied forces.

David Cundall, a Lincolnshire farmer and businessman who has spent 16 years tracking the lost aircraft, has signed an agreement with the Burmese Government to dig up 20 or more, each worth as much as £1.5 million. If the excavation, due to begin this month, succeeds, it will be the end of a saga that has drawn in the President of Burma, the Prime Minister of Britain and competing bands of treasure hunters.

The Mark XIV Spitfires were manufactured at Castle Bromwich in the West Midlands and transported to Burma, where they remained unused by the time of the Japanese surrender in August 1945. They were deemed too expensive to bring home, but rather than leave them intact in an unstable country, the decision was

made to bury them in their transportation crates — carefully greased and tarred and wrapped in greaseproof paper to preserve them. Of the 50 or so Spitfires still flying, only six are Mark XIVs.

According to Mr Cundall's research, 124 Spitfires were buried in this way at five sites. Their existence has been known of for years, but it was only in February that Mr Cundall's team confirmed two burial places with the use of ground radar and remote-controlled cameras inserted into the crates through boreholes.

In April, David Cameron discussed the Spitfires with President Thein Sein and reached an informal agreement, under which some of the aircraft would return to Britain and some remain in Burma. But the plans were delayed when Mr Cundall rejected the terms of a deal offered by Steve Boulton Brooks, a property developer and Spitfire enthusiast who had offered to fund the recovery effort.

Mr Cameron's meeting with President Thein Sein led to an important condition of the Spitfire recovery: the removal of EU sanctions that had made it difficult to do business there. The Burmese Government signed a contract this week with Mr Cundall and his Burmese partner, a company called Shwe Taung Paw.

Mr Cundall found another, unidentified backer who, he says, has promised to buy all the Spitfires. "He's putting half a million pounds into the project for me to go over, dig them up, and I will then sell them to him," he said in April. "The Burmese have agreed to sell their share to him."

A spokesman for Mr Brooks said yesterday: "We are concerned that any Spitfires discovered under the current agreement could be dispersed with no long-term value to Myanmar or the UK. We hope that Mr Cundall will confirm that at least some of any Spitfires excavated are put to use in building new cultural and educational ties between Myanmar and the United Kingdom."

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