

The bizarre case of Burma's buried Spitfires



The hidden Spitfires are the rare Mark XIV model - Popperfoto/Getty Images

Analysis: Giles Whittel

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Early this morning, a Qatar Airways jet will leave Heathrow carrying 15 men in search of 36 aircraft buried 68 years ago under 40 feet of mud. The numbers hint at something unusual, but they barely scratch the surface of one of the longest and strangest treasure hunts of modern times.

These planes are reputed to be rare Mark XIV Spitfires, packed into crates in Birmingham in 1945, shipped to Rangoon in Burma and hidden in haste by American soldiers when the Nagasaki atom bomb ended the war.

For decades they have been the holy grail of conflict archaeology. For collectors they would be worth at least £1.5 million apiece. For David Cundall, a farmer and aviation buff, they are the end point of a 17-year journey into history, Burmese politics and secrets that he says he still cannot disclose.

Mr Cundall will reach Rangoon tomorrow to start digging for the Burmese Spitfires inside the perimeter of what is now Yangon International Airport. He will be joined on Monday by Private Stanley Coombe, a retired British soldier in his eighties who helped to identify the dig

site and says that he remembers “clearer than yesterday” the extraordinary spectacle of the planes being buried in giant pine boxes in the spring of 1946.

“They looked as big as double-decker buses,” Mr Coombe said. “It’s one of those funny things: it just stuck in my mind because I asked what was inside them and a person told me they were Spitfires. We gathered it was because they were surplus to requirements. They were just ditching everything.”

Why the Griffon-engined Spitfires were buried — if indeed they were — is a mystery. But Mr Cundall said yesterday that he had unearthed documentary evidence to support the theory that fighters were buried not just outside Rangoon’s airport but at two other former RAF bases in the country.

He said that a researcher at the National Archives in Kew had found official listings for 124 Mark XIV Spitfires marked “SOC” (for Struck Off Charge, meaning no longer on the RAF’s inventory) and “delivered Burma”.

The claim would strengthen an otherwise flimsy documentary paper trail for the planes — there is no other known record of them leaving Britain or arriving in Burma — and it tallies chronologically with eight witness accounts of the burial that he has obtained during his long quest.

The search for the Burmese Spitfires began in 1996 with a chance remark by a friend of Mr Cundall’s who also digs up warplanes as a hobby. Jim Pearce, now in his eighties, claimed to have heard two veterans of a US Navy Seabees construction battalion describe in detail burying the Spitfires on British orders after the end of the war.

Unlike many who had heard similar stories linked to former airbases, Mr Cundall took this one seriously and appealed for information through aviation magazines. Mr Coombe was one of those who responded. Another, Ken Rooth, was a member of the RAF’s 221 Communications Squadron at the time. Before his death he described being stationed at what was then the Mingaladon RAF base during the burial process. “He saw it every day,” Mr Cundall said yesterday.

No wonder. According to the expedition’s working hypothesis, the aircraft had been packed into crates 30ft (9m) long and 11ft (3.4m) wide at the giant Castle Bromwich plant in Birmingham, then transported by ship and rail to Rangoon in anticipation of an open-ended conflict with Japan. A Burmese witness who was 15 at the time claims to have helped his father to bring heavy teak beams to be placed under the crates to improve drainage because they were lowered into a river bed that could flood with each monsoon.

In 2004 a local company drilled a borehole to the planes’ suspected depth. A camera lowered down the hole showed what appeared to be aircraft parts encased in Canadian pine boards, Mr Cundall said. His version of history and what lies beneath is open to question. Given the lack of paperwork, or a compelling reason to bury rather than destroy or give away the planes, experts at the RAF’s Air Historical Branch have said they would be amazed if the Spitfires were found. Nor has Mr Cundall actually seen the evidence from the borehole. Yet electrical conductivity tests from the same year produced blurry images that could be the Spitfires’ alloy fuselages. His witnesses’ accounts all tally with each other, Mr Cundall insists. Asked if he had any doubts, he said: “None at all. I’m 100 per cent convinced.”

His chief sponsor, a Belarussian online gaming billionaire, is sufficiently persuaded to be backing the hunt by at least \$1 million. JCB, the digger manufacturer, has made a machine available in Rangoon and a Burmese partner has been lined up to furnish manpower and logistical support. Perhaps more significantly, Burma's newly reformist President Thein Sein cleared the way for Mr Cundall to negotiate with ministries and local businesses in a meeting last April with David Cameron.

Asked whether there was some reason for his supreme confidence that he had not yet revealed, Mr Cundall would say only "we may surprise you".

One mighty 2,000 horsepower Mark XIV disinterred in serviceable condition would be surprise enough. Only five exist in the world today.

Experts believe that Mr Cundall's estimate of £1.5 million per plane could prove conservative, and his contract with Burma entitles him to 30 per cent of whatever is recovered. He insists that his aircraft, if he finds any, will all return to Britain to be restored and put into the air. In principle, each consignment comes with its own toolkit and could be made airworthy by RAF mechanics in two days, according to one of Mr Cundall's fellow diggers. How easy? "Like Airfix," he said.

Hope reigns in search for the Burmese Spitfires

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David Cundall believes passionately that the Burmese Spitfires are where his witnesses have placed them. Private Stanley Coombe can still see them "clearer than yesterday". Everyone from David Cameron to the Belarussian online-gaming tycoon backing the dig hopes it strikes gold. The surveys suggest it could.

A flexible reading of history even provides answers to the problematic question of why on earth these planes might have been buried in the first place.

But the paper trail is thin. Memories are fallible, especially of traumatic times. There remains a possibility that there is nothing at all buried next to the runway at Yangon (Rangoon) International Airport — nothing, as one of the expedition's own surveyors puts it, other than "metallic anomalies" overlaid by rubble.

It would not be the first time that hope eclipsed reality in the pursuit of buried wonders.

A little over 12 years ago, as winter closed in on Siberia, Bernard Buigues, a French explorer, invited reporters to an unprecedented photo opportunity in the Arctic. He had found an immaculately preserved baby mammoth, he said, frozen in mud hundreds of miles north of the old Soviet Union's northernmost military airbase on the Taymyr Peninsula.

So intense was the cold that the creature could not safely be exhumed immediately. But ground penetrating radar had provided compelling evidence and the following spring he would defrost the specimen with hairdryers in a specially adapted underground cavern. And

yes, there was even talk of extracting DNA and cloning the woolly pachyderm that once roamed the taiga terrorising Stone Age families, when not providing them with meat. The world's press headed north. Mr Buigues arranged for a Russian helicopter to fly his precious block of permafrost to meet them, and, sure enough, it sported two magnificent — and genuine — mammoth tusks.

That winter, *The Times* paid a discreet visit to the site where the supposed mammoth was being stored. Like the Burmese Spitfires, it was next to a runway. Unlike the Spitfires, it was on the surface. It was still impossible to tell what the block of mud contained. The tusks were gone. Next spring Mr Buigues and his team switched on their hairdryers and gradually teased away whatever did not melt into a puddle. They were left with inconclusive scraps of ancient mammal tissue, but no mammoth.

Mr Cundall might reasonably scoff at parallels drawn between this story and his own. He has done 17 years' due diligence, after all. He has amassed what data he can, constructed a plausible scenario, enlisted the Prime Minister and the reformist Burmese President to his cause and has beaten seven other serious bidders to an exclusive contract that allows him to start work in Yangon on Monday.

He is also the leader of a complex project with many moving parts, and knows that one part that must not move is the goal. His vision is clear, detailed and described with utmost confidence. For a leader, it cannot be otherwise. For those of us peering over his shoulder, it is too soon to suspend all scepticism