

Picture: NEIL NEWITT



Wing Commander Jim De Bomford holds the Spitfire's oxygen mask. Behind him are the corroded remains of the engine and the propeller.

## Spitfire is back from the grave

A World War II Spitfire was recovered from the mudflats at St George's Sound near Derby in Western Australia at the weekend. The broken-up plane has since been taken to Laverton and treated before going to its final resting place in the Point Cook RAAF Museum, where it will be restored.

The Spitfire Mark V, piloted by D. E. Gray, ran out of fuel on a flight from Darwin to Drysdale Mission, WA, in 1943 and crashed. The pilot survived. The plane is still armed with four .303 machineguns and two 20 milli-



A Spitfire similar to the one recovered in Western Australia.

metre cannon. The 18-day rescue operation began on 19 November and was led by Wing Commander Jim De Bomford.

Thirteen RAAF and navy mem-

bers used flotation bags and a barge to recover the "Spit", which was built in Britain but assembled at Laverton in 1942 before going into service.

# Spitfire list up by one

AN UNWRITTEN law states that as soon as you have finished something, someone, somewhere will make it out of date. The Australians have just up-dated our World's Spitfires survey from the October issue.

An ex RAF Spitfire has been located in North West Australia. MkVc BR545 was serving with 54 Sqn (RAF) when it force landed due to fuel shortage on December 12, 1943. The pilot survived and was subsequently rescued. The

was too inaccessible.

This July the aircraft was 'rediscovered' by an Aero Commander on a routine coastal patrol, and photographed from the air. At first sight the Spitfire is still intact although it is impossible at this moment to determine its actual state of preservation.

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# Aviation ARCHAEOLOGY

**Mike Searle describes one of the most demanding and dangerous salvages made in recent times. Site of this recovery was a river where not too many months before a crocodile had eaten a swimmer!**

RUBBER TYRES in near perfect condition. An almost usable face mask, shining chrome suspension struts, and hydraulic oil still under pressure. Hard to believe they were part of a Spitfire which had been sitting in the mud for 44 years in the remote north west of Western Australia.

It was the most efficient fighting machine of its time. The bane of the *Luftwaffe*. Flown by the few to whom so many owed so much. Three years after the Battle of Britain, three squadrons were brought to Australia to take on the Japanese *Zeros*.

That was in 1943, and on Christmas Eve of that year a young British Pilot F/O D.W. Grey flying from Darwin was out on patrol. Wishing he could be back home in England for Christmas rather than sitting in the cockpit in near 50° heat, luck wasn't with him on this day. He became hopelessly lost and was fast running out of fuel. He found himself flying over the rugged but beautiful Prince Regent river north of Derby, when his fuel tanks ran dry. He had only one choice, to ditch the spluttering Mk V in the cool clear waters below. Had he seen the huge man eating crocodiles, he may have had second thoughts.

At this point it seems his luck changed, unlike the American tourist Ginger Meadows who was taken by a huge crocodile in mid 1987 the prehistoric killers left him alone. He was picked up by aboriginal pearlers, and was back on his base within seven days.

Battling the same tropical heat, and having to contend with a largely increased crocodile population, thirteen RAAF servicemen, and one Royal Australian Naval officer prepared to dig the ageing wreck from its watery grave. The adventure was fraught with danger and mishap. A death trap for the careless. The crocodiles had already claimed one victim. No one wanted to become their next. It was to be a test of guts, determination, and stamina for the servicemen.

*Day 1 – November 27 – with the hulk lying partially underwater. A small marker buoy will locate the wreck when the waters deepen. (Dick Cluley via Peter R Arnold)*

# The Spitfire from Crocodile Creek!

*Day 2 and the first trial with floatation bags – note the tail section and defence boards in the background. (Dick Cluley via PRA)*



Despite all their hard work preparing the barge prior to leaving Broome, Lady Luck it seems had been left standing on the jetty. During their two and a half day trip to the salvage site the boat's engines broke down twice, the first time they were adrift in the Indian Ocean for more than an hour. The second while negotiating dangerous reefs.

When they arrived, the Spitfire was seven metres beneath them. It was marked with a white polystyrene buoy, embroidered with crocodile teeth marks. Within hours the tide had gone out and left the Spitfire high and dry. It was painfully obvious the men had to get into the thick glutinous mud and dig it out.

Told no creature was to be killed, they were not leaving the safety of the decks of the barge without letting the crocodile population know there would be trouble if they wanted it. Sharp shooters were posted and a volley of gun fire sent birds and crocodiles scurrying for cover.

Day two and for more than five hours the men worked waist deep in the grey sticky mud clearing it away from the old fighter. The sweat from their labours running off their brows into their eyes as the temperature reached the 45° mark.

With about an hour to spare before the tide returned they

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attached special flotation bags to the wreck. The plan was to lift it out of the mud on the next tide. Luck was against them. The bags punctured on the sharp edges of thousands of oysters which had made the 44 year old wreck their home.

Apart from crocodiles, one of the biggest problems the men had was lack of sleep. The sun rose around five. Before eight the temperature was in the thirties, by noon it had topped forty.

After the failure of the flotation bags the previous day it was back in the mud. While some worked on the fuselage, others slithered out to the tail. It was a long hot day. Again temperatures soared to the mid forties, and guards were posted to keep watch for the prehistoric man eaters. While one gunner stood lookout on the bridge, the other crawled out into the mud with his mates.

It was a desperate race against time. It had been decided to cut the huge Merlin engine from the rest of the airframe. There were some surprises for the workers, hydraulic oil still underpressure squirted out from the engine, and the discovery of two almost perfect Dunlop tyres, a face mask, and compass.

Despite these thrills luck was still against them. It took more than 24 hours of hard slog to get the engine on board. Using two six tonne winches it was slow going. Centimetre by agonising centimetre the men pulled on the dead weight. Stopping only for a drink of cordial, the men managed to get the engine on the edge of the ramp just as the tide began to wash over it again. It was dawn the following morning before it was secure, and all were exhausted. Some had given up around 2am others had worked through the night under spotlights. All were suffering from dozens of sandfly bites, attracted by the light.

This was the beginning of their third full day in the St George Basin, and the heat was beginning to get to them. When they worked they had to dress in army greens or be cut to ribbons by the shell fragments in the mud. By the time they finished their day they were caked in the thick grey mixture. There were no showers here, and no fresh water to spare. The only way to get the mud off was to wash in sea water. For this they had to wait for the tide to come in. A petrol driven pump was used to draw sea water and by the time they were hosed down, the mud had dried rock hard on them.

They wore *Rambo*-style webbing around their foreheads to stop the sweat running in their eyes. They hadn't shaved for days, and were beginning to look like a mob of pirates. It went well with the skull and cross bones the barge was flying.

Time was running out. So the man in charge of the operation, Wing Commander Jim de Bomford, decided to try the flotation bags a second time. Another six hours in the unyielding mud. Dusk came, and again the

tide was rushing in. But for once luck smiled on them and they managed to get the flotation bags attached.

With the combined buoyancy of the barge, and the bags the Spitfire lifted. The men were positively jubilant. They could push it with sticks, and watch it move in the water. There was some frantic winching as they tried to manoeuvre it onto the lowered ramp of the barge. Then disaster, one of the bags punctured, and half the Spitfire disappeared. The tide was about to turn, dejected they sat and waited.

As the Spitfire settled back on the mud, it was time to get radical.

They were running out of time. They still had enough drinking water, but they had run out of fresh food.

The decision to cut the starboard wing from the body was made. It was while they were removing the wing the crocodiles attacked. It wasn't a full out assault, rather, as you'd expect from such creatures, an attempted kidnapping.

Wayne Dicks the cook, and F/O Mike *Beeker* Roberts were in a dinghy trying to retrieve a rope, when two crocodiles snook up on them. *Beeker* spotted them first. They came within metres of the boat. *Beeker* yelled to the gunner, and as he stood up to point the

reptiles out, the small boat lurched violently. Whether it was an attack from an unseen man eater or the erratic movements of the worried couple in the dinghy no one was sure, but it appeared that *Beeker* had gone over board.

As the men on the barge heaved on the rope which held the dinghy they made as much noise as they could to scare the man eaters away. The gunners let off a volley of tracers, still not sure whether *Beeker* had gone over and become their first victim or whether he'd just fallen over in the boat. But he need not have worried, *Beeker* was lying in the bottom of the dinghy.

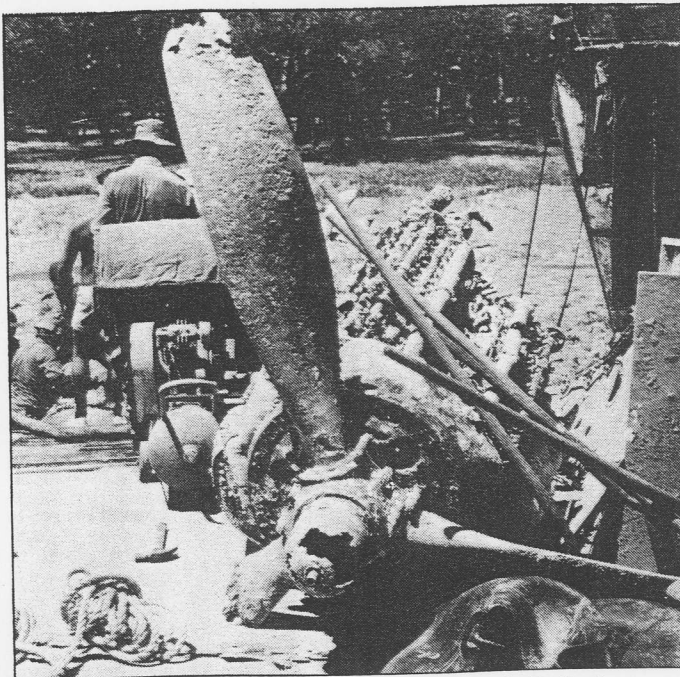
Extra lookouts were posted and as the men went back in the mud, the reptiles could be seen among the mangroves, their small bright eyes shining, or perhaps twinkling in the torch light. Despite the obvious dangers, the men were now desperate to get the job finished. Again they laboured through the night, winching the wing slowly on board. By the time dawn broke all that was left in the mud was the port wing, and cockpit.

They worked throughout the day, now on the verge of complete exhaustion. Time had almost run out, if they didn't get the remainder of the aircraft up within the next 24 hours it would stay in its watery grave.

By the end of the day their hard work had paid off. To every ones' joy the fuselage and port wing were on board. All they had to do now was wait for high tide, and see if the barge had enough hydraulic power to lift the remainder of the wreckage.

If there had been champagne on board *Wandi Two*, there would have been quite a celebration that night. As it was, warm cordial was more than enough to toast the success of the expedition.

Although the Spitfire adventure had come to an end, the story hasn't. The wreckage was taken back to Broome, and from there by Hercules to Laverton in Victoria, where it will be preserved. Meantime the search is on for the pilot F/O D W Grey service number 123590 of 54 Squadron, last heard of at Scunthorpe, Lincs.



Above: The engine is successfully brought on deck. (Author)

Below: Three of the team at work on the severed cockpit of the Spitfire. (Author)



