

# The great SPITFIRE HUNT



BY ROY ECCLESTON

They worked by night with pick and shovel for three long weeks, five men with one idea: bury a brand new Spitfire in its crate beneath the dusty soil of Oakey air base on Queensland's Darling Downs, to be preserved for posterity.

IT SOUNDS LIKE AN OLD PUB TALE that's grown taller in the telling. But Gold Coast pharmacist John Marshall doesn't doubt it happened, because he heard it time and again from his father Nev, who worked at the base and claimed for years that he and his mates had buried the fighter plane.

The story never varied, Marshall says. It was mid-February, 1946, after the end of World War II, and the men who serviced and assembled the hundreds of warbirds at Oakey were cleaning up a base which was packed with aircraft no one wanted. So, he says, at least one plane - worth a fortune today - was buried while still packed in its crate. Now, although Nev Marshall is dead, the hunt is gathering pace to try to prove an old man's yarn, or debunk a myth. "I don't doubt the story or the credibility of my dad," Marshall tells *The Bulletin*.

Thousands of kilometres away in Melbourne, James Carter and Karl von Moller are convinced as well. Carter, an advertising copywriter with George Patterson Y&R, and von Moller, a cinematographer, seem an unlikely pair to be hunting buried fighter planes.

But after hearing the story in 2000, the pair decided there could be a documentary in the mystery, whether it turned out to be true or not. They've spent thousands of hours combing through old war records at the National Archives, checking the size of old coal mine shafts that honeycomb the area around Oakey, and knocking on the doors of local farmers in the quest for clues.

It was in August last year that a visit to one local property helped convince Carter and von Moller they weren't on a wild goose chase. Directed by the farmer to a hillock near his dam, "we found heaps of



**PROP STAR**  
The Temora Aviation Museum's Spitfire out for a spin

aircraft parts, heaps and heaps of old stuff from Spitfires". They pulled out a piece that looks a bit like a thigh bone from an extinct carnivore, except it was covered with rusty flakes and dust. It was a landing strut from a Spitfire. They've also collected a piece of engine cowling, an exhaust manifold and engine valves. Until then, von Moller was not particularly hopeful they would prove there was anything to the tale. Is he now convinced? "I'm convinced there's a great story," he says, and then goes further. "I'm convinced there's at least one."

Finding a Supermarine Spitfire, especially one in its greased wrappings unassembled inside a crate - the story even has 21 drums of fuel buried alongside - would be a worldwide coup. This is the glamour plane of World War II, the Battle of Britain icon whose distinct appearance and elliptical wings helped make it a legend of aviation.

According to Carter's research, of the 20,340 built, only a couple are believed to be flying in Australia - at Temora in NSW, home of the Aviation Museum and Historic Flight Club - and about 50 in the world. A plane still in a crate would be worth perhaps \$5m, but would

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**WARBIRD GRAVEYARD**  
Discarded fighters at the Oakey base in Queensland at war's end

be donated to a museum if found, he says. So why would anyone bury one in a paddock in Queensland? Because the planes were all considered to be junk when the war ended, and Oakey was jam-packed with them, says Carter. Australia reputedly had the fourth-largest air force in the world at the end of the conflict, with more than 5000 planes. In late 1945, there were 553 planes at Oakey, including 50 Mustangs, 225 Spitfires, 240 Kittyhawks and 38 Boomerangs.

The Americans insisted the planes they had provided to the RAAF be scrapped. And while there was no requirement to junk the Spitfires and the carrier-based Seafires, which had been arriving for assembly right to the war's end, they were seen as useless reminders.

"They tried to sell them, but no one wanted them," Carter says. "I think there was the odd farmer who took one to turn into a chook shed." Eventually a Sydney scrap metal company bought the lot, built a smelter on site, and started turning the planes into ingots, he says.

"So these guys, these five men, are watching the planes being chopped up," Carter surmises. "And they decide themselves that this was almost

criminal, that these wonderful aircraft that served Australia so well during the war should be treated in such a way. So they decided purely for posterity they should get one of them, a brand new one in a crate, dig a hole in the ground, cover it up and leave it for future generations; for someone to find."

The problem is, no one has. Even Nev Marshall, when he returned to the base as an old man before his death about 10 years ago, couldn't locate the spot where he insisted the plane was buried.

These days, the base is home to the army's aviation training centre, with a focus on helicopter training, and many of the old landmarks from World War II are gone. Brian Reardon, curator of the Museum of Australian Army Flying at the base, says Marshall had become distressed by the changes. Now, Reardon thinks, they misunderstood his directions which centred on a water tower.

"There was another water tower of sorts, on the other side of the base," he says. "We haven't investigated that area at all." Like Carter and von Moller, with whom he shares information, Reardon thinks there's something to the claim. "I think it's a distinct possibility," he says. "Germany had capitulated. The US dropped the Bomb, and the war stopped. So they started disposing of stuff ... we know the old coalmines under Oakey, a lot of stuff was dumped in it, but they collapsed the entry to it."

So the digging goes on. Just a few weeks ago, with the consent of the army, Reardon used a bobcat to excavate an area alongside an old hanger where - in a different case to Nev Marshall's - some workers had commandeered a bulldozer and supposedly buried a plane. That search found nothing.



#### FLYBOYS

Post-war action at Oakey, above, and, left, von Moller and Carter with a Spitfire manifold found in the area

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#### JAMES CARTER ADMAN TURNED SPITFIRE HUNTER

Carter thinks there are at least one or two planes, and that others have been thrown down mine shafts. There could be a dozen, he thinks. His research has shown some discrepancies between the number of planes disposed of and those that were on the base at the end of the war.

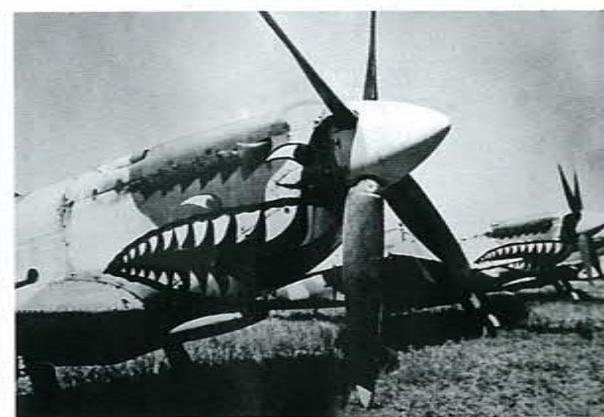
Reardon, Carter and von Moller now think they have narrowed the area down, and are hoping to persuade a mining company with ground-penetrating airborne radar to help put the matter to bed. The radar works best in dry soils and can be tuned to pick up the frequency of different metals at a depth of several metres.

Many others have looked for the planes over the years. In January, the local Jondaryan Shire Council approved a request from a couple of locals to drill holes on council property in their hunt for six Spitfires, although it noted a previous excavation had turned up nothing.

It's a hard story to kill off. John Marshall says he's about sick of it, and has consigned his papers on the subject to the shed. He thinks there's a chance one of his dad's partners secretly returned and dug up the box.

Reardon wants to settle the question and hopes to secure a radar survey by the end of the year. "It's credible, but there's nothing there until we dig it up," he says. "We'd at least like to go to the areas where we believe they are, and even if we prove they're not there, then we'll all sleep at night." ●

Anyone with information can email Carter and von Moller at [info@brokenwings.com.au](mailto:info@brokenwings.com.au)



**BURIED TREASURE**  
Rusting Spitfires at the Oakey base and sections of Spitfires the hunters have turned up

**Bulletin** [www.thebulletin.com.au](http://www.thebulletin.com.au)

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