



Under the cover of darkness five determined men spent three weeks digging a hole big enough to bury a remarkable piece of history. Its exact location in Australia has remained a mystery for more than 65 years, but now some equally determined treasure seekers are convinced they will find it soon

# The hunt for the lost Spitfire

Words **David Allsop** Photograph **Philip Makanna**

**S**OMEWHERE BENEATH THE DUSTY SOIL of the former Oakey wartime airbase in Southern Queensland's Darling Downs is a wooden crate. It was carefully buried more than 65 years ago and inside it is a unique treasure with an estimated value of around £6 million.

This treasure trove is not so much pieces of eight as thousands of pieces. For according to local legend the crate contains the component parts of a sleek and unused Spitfire fighter plane, greased and carefully wrapped, right down to the last nut and bolt.

It's unlikely to come with an instruction manual and a tube of glue, because this isn't a model or even a half-scale replica. It's a full-size state-of-the-art gleaming Supermarine Spitfire delivered to the airbase before the end of the Pacific War in the summer of 1945.

By the following February more than 550 Allied aircraft had been mothballed to await their fate at Oakey. ▶

## Fighting spirit

The Supermarine Spitfire Mk VIII was used extensively by the Royal Australian Air Force during the Pacific War



'We're certain that it's there in the ground. **It's now up to us to prove it'**



#### Crate expectations

Clockwise from top: Spitfires lined up for scrappage at Oakey airbase in 1946; engine crates in the Oakey paddock – one containing all the component parts of a Supermarine Spitfire is believed to be buried nearby; documentary-maker James Carter, who is convinced he is getting closer to his quarry; the 'wrecking crew' at Oakey

Marshall's recollections for clues as to the plane's whereabouts.

One of the teams involved, a film production company from Melbourne, isn't deterred by the lack of progress. 'We're certain it's there in the ground. It's now up to us to prove it,' says James Carter, who is making a TV documentary about the hunt.

'It's the ultimate boyhood adventure... the wading through thousands of wartime documents and photos, the searching, and of course the dig. We haven't got an "end" to our story yet, but TV executives are keen on our project.'

Intriguingly, Carter's research has revealed discrepancies between the number of 'warbirds' scrapped and those that were listed as present on the base at the end of the war. And the regular unearthing of bits of old Spitfire fuselage and engine parts convinces him that his goal is getting tantalisingly closer.

The next stage is to rely more on harnessing modern technology. The film-makers have been in talks with a mining company about using ground-penetrating airborne radar to resolve the issue once and for all.

And so the chances of seeing the famous elliptical wing swooping over Queensland's Darling Downs again – and hearing the distinctive growl of that Rolls-Royce Merlin engine – are, it seems, getting stronger by the day. ♦

#### Supermarine Spitfire

Role Fighter/Photo-reconnaissance  
 First flight March 5, 1936 (type 300)  
 Introduction August 4, 1938  
 Retired 1961, Irish Air Corps  
 Produced 1938-1948  
 Number built 20,351  
 Unit cost, 1938 £16,436

including 50 Mustangs, 240 Kittyhawks and 225 Spitfires. With the fighting over, there was no immediate demand for them (other than as unlikely crop sprayers) and the Australian government took the decision to scrap the lot, so a smelter was built on site and the wrecking began.

But five local men, who looked on in consternation as the planes were torn apart, decided to save one for posterity. And the one they chose was a brand-new Spitfire, very probably a Supermarine Mk VIII, still packed in its crate.

The problem is that no one knows exactly where they buried it. Some even doubt that a Spitfire was buried at all, and dismiss the whole story as a hoax. But John Marshall, a Brisbane chemist, doesn't have any

doubts – because he heard the story repeatedly from his father Nev, who had worked at Oakey and claimed to be one of the five men involved.

'I don't doubt the story or my dad's credibility,' John says, adding that he suspects one of Nev's partners returned and disinterred the crate. Before his death in the late Nineties, Nev returned to the former airbase with local museum officials to try to pinpoint the burial place, but many of the old landmarks from the war had long since gone and the attempt ended in failure.

Nonetheless, interest in the search has continued to gather pace, and three separate teams are said to be scouring the airfield's 934 acres, relying on a combination of local gossip, old records and Nev