DESERT HAWK DRAMA

Discovery, Recovery, Display and Disappointment

The convoluted story regarding one of the most remarkable aircraft wreck discoveries in modern times has come to a conclusion, and sadly that story has not seen a fairy tale ending. With appropriate urgency and no effort spared, the Royal Air Force Museum dispatched a recovery team to save a P-40 Kittyhawk which was, ironically, 'frozen' in time upon the Sahara's scorching sands. The wreck was under direct threat from vandalism, damage already inflicted within weeks of the discovery. Secured, the aircraft became the focus of complicated negotiations, the goal to return the fighter to the UK and display it as found in an appropriate diorama. This was to pay silent tribute to its lost pilot and a poignant reminder of the thousands of servicemen who have been swallowed up by the shifting sands. It was not to be....

HISTORICAL RECAP

Curtiss Kittyhawk (RAF serial number ET574) was one of a total of 227 Kittyhawk IAs (equivalent to the Curtiss P40E) which were delivered to the Royal Air Force under the American Lend-Lease programme. This particular fighter is a P-40E-1CU, construction number 19761 and USAAF serial number 41-35928. The aircraft was built in March 1942 at Buffalo, New York, and thereafter was shipped via the Cape of South Africa to Suez on the SS Mormac Swan. Upon arrival in Egypt it was likely prepared by No 107 Maintenance Unit, who painted over the dark green areas of factory paint with Middle Stone desert camouflage prior to its allocation to a Squadron.

By the beginning of June 1942 ET574 had been issued to 260 Squadron at Bir el Baheira Landing Ground (LG.140), Libya. Here it joined 'A' Flight and was assigned the code 'HS-B'. Throughout June 1942 ET574 was flying operations during this chaotic period of the North African campaign when Allied Forces were in constant retreat. As of the 15th June the Squadron's Kittyhawks began to carry a single general purpose 500lb (227 kg) bomb below the fuselage, doing whatever they

via Mark Sheppard

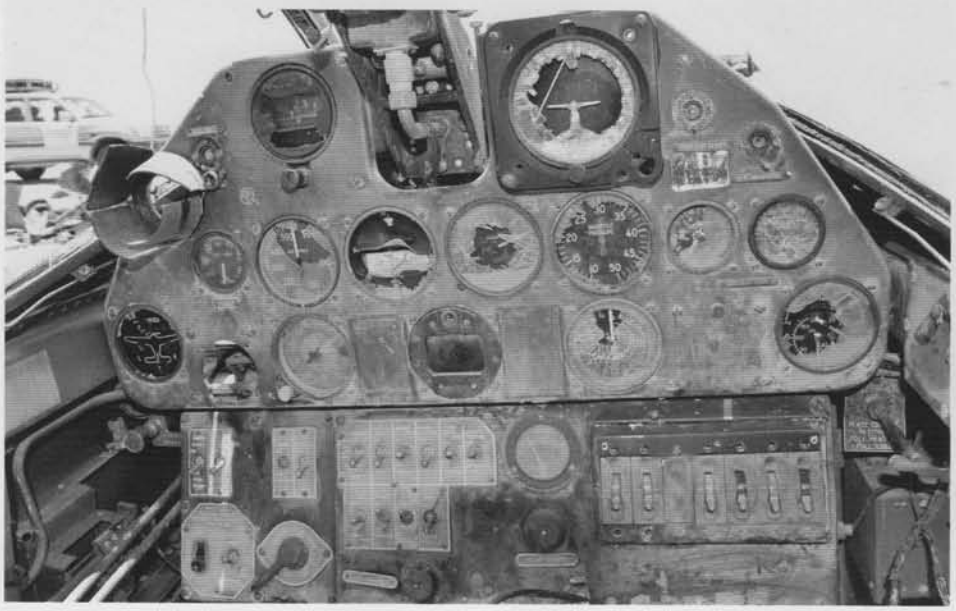
Flight Sergeant Copping in full flight kit poses with a Kittyhawk.

Kittyhawk at rest, its slumber of 70 years just hours away from an awakening. Egyptian Army personnel tried to destroy the imagery taken by the recovery team during the rescue operation by wiping as many of the digital camera cards on site as they could. Fortunately they were not totally successful.

Sister ship. A 260 Squadron Kittyhawk 'HS-V' at rest in typical featureless desert surroundings.

could to stem the tide of Rommel's advancing Afrika Corps but with little success. During this period 260 Squadron had to retreat to four different Landing Grounds, moving from Libya into Egypt and by the 27th June they were based 30 miles (48 kms) east of El Daba (LG.106). On 28th June the fighter was one of several Kittyhawks participating on an early morning reconnaissance mission when they encountered light but accurate flak which resulted in three aircraft sustaining hits, the damaged machines putting down at Bir Koraiyim (LG.09). ET574 had suffered a large calibre round through the rear fuselage plus other damage which made normal undercarriage operation difficult. It was soon decided to fly the two most damaged fighters to LG. 100, the location of No 53 Repair and Salvage Unit (RSU) at Wadi Natrun. The intention was to leave the damaged Kittyhawks for repair and return to the Squadron with two replacement aircraft.

Around mid afternoon, ET574 with its undercarriage in the locked down position, took off on a ferry flight accompanied by ET245 flown by Flight Sergeant Lionel 'Shep' Sheppard. Being the more experienced, Flight Sergeant Dennis C. H. Copping took the lead, however he elected to fly an incorrect compass heading. His correct route would have required him to fly on a heading of roughly 110 degrees for 30-40 minutes only, but he instead flew on a heading of 210 degrees, which took both P-40s south-west instead of south-east. Sheppard followed assuming they would eventually turn south east and onto the correct heading, however after some 35 minutes Sheppard realized this was not going to happen and he repeatedly tried to persuade Copping to alter course, both via radio and also using visual means. Receiving no response and concerned about fuel, Sheppard decided to break away, arriving at Wadi Natrun following 1 hour 50 minutes flight time. Meanwhile Copping flew on and was never seen again.



Views of the cockpit separated by just a few weeks show the damage inflicted prior to the RAF Museum's expedition to recover the aircraft to El Alamein.

Cockpit view of the reflector gun sight and armoured windscreen. Note cracks in the latter, the result of Egyptian Army soldiers firing rounds into it.

Like the rest of the personnel of the Desert Air Force (DAF), Copping had been under considerable stress. They had covered the 8th Army's full retreat, and as a consequence the DAF was in action continually and had suffered heavy losses. From the end of May to the end of June these losses consisted of nine pilots killed, missing or wounded and over twice as many Kittyhawks lost or damaged. As to whether these factors contributed to Copping's strange action, we will never know for sure, but whatever the circumstances surrounding this incident, he became a casualty of war. Squadron records show that ET574 was recorded as Cat. E (total write-off) from Battle Damage, being formally Struck off Charge on 3rd July. Given the Allies plight the loss was largely forgotten and Copping became just one of the many thousands of combatants from all nations who remain unaccounted for to this day and are consigned to history.

This would all change when in February 2012 the largely intact wreck of Copping's Kittyhawk was discovered. There remains some dispute as to who first found the wreck, with both the crew of a Polish / Egyptian oil and gas prospecting group and members of the Association of Independent Researchers Western Desert (ARIDO) claiming to be the first to visit the site. ARIDO reported the find to the Police and Army, the latter apparently removing most of the ammunition in April, causing damage in the process. They broke the canopy Perspex and some of the instrument glass, shot at the armoured windscreen and punched holes in the wings. It seems they also removed some objects, including the parachute remnants. Photos first appeared in public on a Polish model forum in April, sparking a storm of speculation. Members of ARIDO returned to the site again in May and provided the first film evidence.

The P-40 had come to rest on a rocky escarpment in a particularly remote and desolate region of the Al Wadi Al Jadid desert, approximately 230 miles (370 kms) south west of Cairo. Initial inspection found no trace of Copping, although it seemed he had survived the crash landing. The canopy was closed and there was evidence that he may have used his parachute as a temporary shelter before deciding to leave the aircraft and head off into the desert. He is remembered on the Alamein Memorial which commemorates those with no known grave.

RESCUE MISSION

It soon became clear that this unique survivor of the RAF's Desert Air Force was in great peril, with tour companies offering visits to the wreck site and inviting further vandalism and pilfering of the wreck. Something needed to be done, and quickly. The management at the RAF Museum seized the initiative and spoke to several organisations which had previously rebuilt Kittyhawks. They also reviewed the relevant section of the RAF Air Publication that detailed assembly/disassembly of the type, museum technicians consulting this to implement a 'dry-run' on the museum's existing P-40 before agreeing the detailed methodology to be employed in any recovery attempt. The management decided to secure the services of Kennet Aviation to organise and cover the cost of the recovery expedition and in return one of the museum's surplus Spitfires was offered in trade, the stripped shell of a post-war Spitfire Mk.22, PK664. With permission to recover gained (the Kittyhawk sat in Egyptian military territory, and several military checkpoints had to be passed) and equipment sourced, the group led by a small but experienced team arrived at the wreck site. They set to work on the 24th July 2012.

Aside from substantial damage caused by the crash landing the Kittyhawk remained remarkably intact. The propeller and spinner were torn off but remained in close proximity to the airframe while the shattered remains of both main wheels (plus

Work gets underway under lights in the cool of night. In the lower photo the team contemplate how to slide back the jammed canopy.

Success! The wing (background right) is positioned for further disassembly. Following removal of the wing centre section fuel tanks, the wing was separated along the centreline by undoing the connecting bolts.

The underside of the starboard wing protected from UV light for seven decades reveals its Azure Blue paint and remnants of the US applied Sky Blue.

sundry other parts) lay in a debris field extending some 300 yards (274 m) behind the aircraft.

Upon close inspection it was discerned that the Kittyhawk's structural integrity had been severely compromised by the effects of the crash landing. The fuselage back was broken and several stringers were severed between fuselage frames 9 and 10, this damage caused major problems during the dismantling process as the fuselage could not be supported at its normal trestling point, the monocoque shell having buckled. Indications as to the extent of the damage were visible externally in the region of the rear access hatch on the port side plus the corresponding skin sections on the starboard side. As a result the fuselage had to be very carefully hoisted from the wing by positioning the lifting straps forward of frame 9. Additionally the forward fuselage bulkhead (at the junction of the firewall) in the engine compartment had been dangerously weakened by fire damage. An oil flash fire broke out during the crash landing, melting the engine supercharger, carburettor intake, plus both aft rocker covers. The effects of this had induced corrosion on the upper fuselage panels immediately forward of the windscreen, further reducing strength in this region of the monocoque shell.

The P-40 wing is attached to the fuselage as a single unit, both port and starboard sections being mated at a joint along the centre line. The wing is affixed to the fuselage by 68 bolts (34 either side) attached to two longitudinal 'match-angles' located on the wing either side of the centre-line. Several of the forward bolts on ET574 had corroded to the extent that the surrounding metal had also been damaged and these had to be drilled out. Additionally, both match-angles had suffered distortion at the forward extremities due to the effects of the crash landing. This damage made the lifting of the fuselage off the wing a difficult and

Wings safely stowed, the fuselage is prepared for lifting onto the deck of the light truck.

Some .50 inch (12.7mm) rounds still remained with the wreck. All six Browning M2 machine guns (below) were recovered.

Forward of the cockpit and the firewall is the oil tank, containing 13.9 US gallons (49 litres).

View of the aft of cockpit fuel tank. Capacity is 62.5 US gallons (236.6 ltrs). The team have checked the fuel tank, cables and connections to ensure nothing would be crushed once the fuselage was loaded into the container.

Around two miles (3.2 kms) from the crash site the Allison V-1710 engine is prepared for loading onto the container truck. The wrecked propeller is in the foreground.

Close up of the Allison, showing the damage where the reduction housing has been ripped off during the crash landing.

delicate operation. The wings themselves also suffered extensive structural damage during the crash landing, particularly the port unit which received impact damage to the outer leading edge plus the loss of one third of the lower outboard skin. In addition to this the port undercarriage unit had punched its way through the upper surface of the wing when the Kittyhawk initially impacted the rocky desert surface. From this evidence it was clear that the undercarriage had most definitely not been retracted at the time of impact. The starboard wing was in better condition but skin damage and distortion were present throughout the outboard section.

With daytime temperatures routinely exceeded 50 °C (122 °F) working in the cool of the night was the only safe option. The P-40 was dismantled and packed over the course of a week, as closely as possible in accordance with official procedures and guidelines, with due deference towards the airframe's severely weakened state. There was assistance from a largish group of other helpers, multiple vehicles and a crane. Itt proved to be no small (or cheap) operation. The fuselage, wings and all sundry parts were placed on the back of a large special purpose desert going vehicle and transferred to a container on a larger vehicle situated on more suitable ground some 2 miles (3.2 kms) away. The container destination was secure storage at the El Alamein Military Museum.

The recovery team also spent considerable time

The fuselage back was broken and as a result had to be very carefully hoisted by positioning the fuselage lifting straps forward of Frame 9.

searching for any human remains in the vicinity of crash site during the early morning and evening when the light was still good and the temperatures bearable, but soon discovered that it was a pointless exercise. (Reports that bones had been discovered around 5 miles (8 kms) from the wreck, subsequent failed DNA testing, a second set of bones discovered and bones being 'lost' thereafter etc. are murky to say the least, and will not be pursued further in this article.)

THE BEST LAID PLANS

With the aircraft out of reach of the mindless, negotiations as to the final disposition of the P-40 could resume. The singular and agreed upon plan was that the aircraft would be gifted by the Egyptians to the British Government and ultimately the RAF Museum. The recovery & subsequent gifting of the aircraft had been brokered by the British Embassy and had the full support of the Ambassador and Defence Attaché. The handover was scheduled to have been at the 70th Anniversary celebrations of the second battle of El Alamein in October 2012. However the upheaval across Northern Africa known as the 'Arab Spring' made for an extremely volatile political situation and by mid 2012 Mubarak was out and on 30th June 2012 Mohamed Morsi was elected President of Egypt. One of his first acts was to fire all of Mubarak's Generals, with whom the 'deal' had been struck and their replacements reneged on the agreement. However negotiations continued and a later date for a handover was 'agreed' The Kittyhawk was again to be handed over in the first quarter of 2013. Again, this did not happen. It became apparent that the 'Generals' were looking for some inducement, something that neither the British Government nor the RAF Museum could legally, nor willingly, do.

Despite the bitter disappointment, the RAF pressed to allow the RAF Museum to undertake the restoration, believing (correctly as it proved) that the Egyptians did not have the resources or skills to carry out the task. The RAF's Chief of Air Staff wrote personally to the Egyptian Chief of Staff to make this offer. It was ignored.

The former Defence Attaché, by this time retired, continued through his connections in the Egyptian military to broker a deal to get the Kittyhawk back to the UK, up until the fourth quarter of 2017. On more than one occasion it appeared that a deal had been successfully negotiated, only to have it scuppered for some unknown reason. Believing that an agreement had again been reached in the second half of 2017, and with a trip planned to Egypt to secure the deal, there was suddenly 'radio silence' from the Egyptians. All communications ended for no apparent reason.

Steven Phipps

The 'restored' P-40 now on display at the El Alamein Military Museum, Egypt. Those areas which suffered destruction in the crash such as the chin cowling/ radiator, flaps etc have been crudely reproduced. Whilst a much needed drawcard for the museum in itself, the amateur rebuild effort has compromised the aircraft as an historical artefact.

DISPLAY AND DISAPPOINTMENT

Around this time, photographs of a new aircraft exhibit on display at the El Alamein Military Museum began appearing, initially on Italian forums, but then on social media. The reason for the abrupt halt in communications by the Egyptians had become clear. The P-40 would not be leaving Egypt.

Once enthusiasts realised that this new exhibit was Copping's Kittyhawk there was a storm of protest, disbelief, disgust and the mandatory finger pointing by those looking to attribute blame. How could a nation which is renowned for its conservation of antiquities have effectively destroyed an historical artefact, albeit a much younger one? One can only speculate why this has happened. Even if the Desert War was essentially not an Egyptian one, it is still relevant and an important chapter in the nation's history.

To the knowledgeable it was clear that any restoration of the damaged airframe to museum quality standards would require attention to detail and considerable expenditure to achieve. The necessary repairs would need to be conducted in accordance with the original Curtiss Aircraft Company and Air Ministry structural repair procedures and only executed by qualified museum aircraft technicians. Given the results, it can only be assumed that a relatively unskilled team from the Egyptian military were given orders to get the aircraft presentable for display, had to work with a limited budget and were supplied with litres of surplus glossy paint! It is also evident that those involved subscribed to the predominant view of most P-40 owners in the USA, that it isn't a P-40 unless it features a shark mouth! Perhaps this is slightly unfair to the Egyptians, it is true that the RAF's 112 Squadron did adorn their fighters with the shark's mouth in the North African / Mediterranean Theatre, and who among the museum's casual visitors would know (or care) that it was a 260 Squadron machine.

FINAL IMPRESSIONS

The days of the Imperial powers plundering other countries' treasures at their leisure have long since passed, however the 'fruits' of those earlier conquests are on display around the world, Egyptian antiquities dominating many of the great history museums. Given past injustices it is understandable that the current Egyptian authorities are zealously holding on to whatever historical items remain within their borders.

The RAF Museum for their part followed the correct procedures and did what they could to secure the aircraft for the United Kingdom's premier aviation museum. The management made a timely move, pressed by the fear that the Kittyhawk would be irreparably damaged by souvenir hunters or disappear completely. They weighed the situation up, carefully calculated the risks and took action to secure this significant asset. Sadly, despite the many efforts beginning in March 2012 and continuing through to December 2017, the Kittyhawk was ultimately lost to them. However they must be commended for making the attempt when they could have just as easily sat on their hands and spent the rest of their lives wondering what might have been. At the very least they have ensured the aircraft's survival in some form, despite the end result being far from preferable in the eyes of those who care about such things. Further to the last point, it is obvious in this instance that it would have been historically prudent for this relic to be displayed in an 'as found' condition (whether it be in the UK or at its current location). The aircraft retained much original paint,

particularly on the undersides of the wing. An opportunity to study and put to rest speculation about camouflage colours and techniques used on P-40s in the Desert War is now irrevocably lost.

It is also a travesty that there is no reference to the loss of Flight Sergeant Copping on the information board situated alongside the aircraft. There are reputedly parts of the aircraft (weapons, fuel tanks and sundry items) on display inside the museum, perhaps there is some acknowledgment there, or it is at least planned, after all Flight Sergeant Copping and ET574 are indelibly linked.

Steven Phipps

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE

19 August	Rand Airshow, Rand Airport, Johannesburg, South Africa www.randairport.co.za/rand-airshow Email: info@randairport.co.za
12-13 Oct.	Warbirds Downunder, Temora, NSW, Australia. www.WarbirdsDownunderAirshow.com.au E: info@warbirdsdownunderairshow.com.au
21 Oct.	Air Spectacular, Sir Hubert Wilkins Aerodrome, Jamestown, Sth Australia. www.jamestownflyinggroup.com.au Email: pcsethomas@bigpond.com

NORTHERN HEMISPHERE

14-15 July	Duxford Flying Legends Air Show, Duxford, Cambridgeshire, UK. www.flyinglegends.com
21 July	FHCAM SkyFair Air & Ground Show, Paine Field, Snohomish County Airport, Everett, WA, USA. www.flyingheritage.org
16-22 July	Farnborough International Airshow, Farnborough, Hampshire, UK. www.farnboroughairshow.com Email: enquiries@farnborough.com
23-29 July	EAA Air Venture Oshkosh 2018, Wittman Regional Airport, Oshkosh, WI, USA. www.airventure.org
25 August	FHCAM European Theater Day, Paine Field, Snohomish County Airport, Everett, WA, USA. www.flyingheritage.org
25-26 Aug.	Thunder over Michigan, Willow Run Airport, Ypsilanti, MI, USA www.yankeeairmuseum.org Email: scott@streetmktg.com
15 Sept.	Aero Gatineau Ottawa Airshow 2018, Gatineau Airport, Gatineau, Quebec, Canada. www.aerogatineauottawa.com Email: ken.mcgrath@gatineau.com
12-16 Sept.	Reno National Championship Air Races, Reno Stead Airport, Reno, NV, USA. www.airrace.org
22-23 Sept.	Duxford Battle of Britain Air Show, Duxford, Cambridgeshire, UK. www.iwm.org.uk