

Spitfires Sprouting in the Burmese Spring: The Real-life Quest for Historic Fantasy Aircraft in Contemporary Myanmar

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Abstract: In 2013, a group of British aviation archaeologists began excavation in Myanmar of what they thought would be some 140 mint-condition crated RAF Spitfire MkXIV aircraft. According to their story, at the brink of the end of the Second World War, Allies were stuck with these unassembled aircraft. With neither the funds to send them home nor wanting the craft to fall into enemy hands, the allies buried the crated planes in Mingaladon, Meiktila, and Myitkyina. Like legends of pirate treasure, the story of buried Spitfires carries with it fantastic aura and intrigue. For aviation fans, the pirate's gold is an iconic aircraft, meaningful in patriotic narratives for its role in the Battle of Britain. This paper will discuss this story as a form of military history folklore, but also one stoked by the orientalist perception that Burma/Myanmar's decades of military regimes and purported isolation would indirectly "preserve" the crated aircraft in time. As this paper will demonstrate, Myanmar locals are not bereft of their own legends of buried war materiel and treasure, a point largely lost on British aviation enthusiasts in their quest for their holy Spitfire grail, but one which crucially enabled this quest to manifest itself.

Keywords: World War II; Burma; Myanmar; Transition; Royal Air Force; Aviation; Legend; Buried treasure

When the shovel hits that wooden box, when you go to opening it, in a land of jungles and temples, and you wonder 'What's in there?' It's an Indiana Jones adventure. It's about legends, rumours, fragments of recollections. It tickled our nerves a little bit.

– Victor Kislyi, CEO, Wargaming.net, sponsor of Burma Spitfires excavation in Myanmar

With the end of the Second World War imminent, in August 1945 Allied forces in Burma had a dilemma on their hands: they had received shipment of over a hundred Birmingham-manufactured Spitfire Mk. XIV fighter aircraft, unassembled, and still in their crates. Lacking the resources to send them home, but not wanting them to fall into enemy hands, the soldiers in Burma greased and tarred the planes and their parts for

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long-term storage and buried them thirty feet under the ground at the end of the runways at Mingaladon, Meiktila, and Myitkyina Airfields. Or so the story goes.

Five decades later, a potato farmer from Sandtoft (near Scunthorpe in Lincolnshire), private pilot and aviation enthusiast David Cundall heard this story. His interest piqued, with his own funds, Cundall started to investigate further, and to make trips to Myanmar, hoping to acquire the resources and permission to unearth these legendary British fighter planes. Other groups of aviation historians, archaeologists, and hobbyists were variously sceptical but also intrigued. Some joined and contributed to his quest. But, it was not until the Myanmar political reforms and the regime changes of 2010-2011 that the treasure hunt had the opportunity to manifest itself in full. The so-called political “opening up” of the country further invigorated the arc of the legend of buried aviation treasure. More international eyes were suddenly on this country portrayed as an isolated, even “hermit” state, trapped in time by its political regimes, therefore preserving the heritage of its colonial architecture, and in this fabled case, these iconic aircraft which are seen to have won the Battle of Britain. With the “Burmese Spring” underway, some, including Prime Minister David Cameron, anticipated that over a hundred mint-condition Spitfires would soon sprout and blossom from the mud of history.

Eight years later, despite millions of dollars of sponsorship, search efforts that included the use of ground-penetrating radar, and months of actual digging, the quest has yet to produce a single Spitfire. Turning from the archaeology of the aircraft hunt, and to the archaeology of the military history legend itself, this paper will discuss the ideological underpinnings of the *idea* that there would be crates of unassembled Spitfire aircraft awaiting discovery beneath the soil in Burma. What makes the Spitfires incredibly valuable, hence a treasure, is not just their high monetary value (although

one estimate puts the monetary value of an airworthy Spitfire at 2.5 million pounds, or 3.3 million USD, meaning the total cache of aircraft could fetch around 350 million pounds (Clark 2015; Winston 2017)) but their historical value, and what they represent symbolically. As treasures, therefore, they are “pieces of history, whether as metonymic mementoes of past societies; indexes of disruption and flight; or pieces of symbolic capital (Stewart 2003: 490).” Although the mystique for this story amongst Western aviation enthusiasts is predicated on the symbolic, patriotic value of the historical role of the Spitfire aircraft, Burmese military history and Southeast Asian popular culture and folklore provide their own sets of narratives involving war materiel and booty awaiting excavation; the Spitfire story did not completely fall on deaf ears amongst members of the Myanmar government, or among local Burmese people.

As this paper will argue, the hunt for buried Spitfires represents a confluence of three powerful discourses, not all of which are entirely British in their origin or fantasy: first, the quest for buried treasure is spurred by the symbolic and historic value of the Spitfire in British imperial history and its special place in the hearts of certain aviation enthusiasts (particularly white men); second, the political changes in Myanmar following the transition from the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military rule to a democratically-elected parliament drew the world’s attention to the country anew, and the “isolation” narrative which can be seen as “preserving” colonial buildings and heritage created a spatio-temporal window of opportunity for the unearthing of the buried treasure. It is this constructed timeline which creates the Hollywood-like arc to the story. Political changes in Myanmar created the enabling catalyst for the legend to be acted upon. And finally, third: the fantasy that war materiel was buried in Burma is not a Western invention. In fact, there are numerous stories, legends, novels and movies

in Burma (and other places in Southeast Asia) which tell stories of World War Two caches of abandoned gold, weaponry, and other goods.

Therefore, following a summary overview of the history of Spitfire deployment in Burma during the Second World War, and the use of the Spitfire by the Burmese Air Force, this paper will consider the aircraft's status as an icon, an index of British air-mindedness and spirit of empire. The excavation represents the confluence of multiple motivations, but the global intrigue, particularly in Western media is due to two factors: 1, the special symbolic heritage status of the Spitfire aircraft; and 2, the timing of Myanmar's "opening up" and for many outside the country, the perception that the country had been in a state of isolated stasis for the seven decades between the end of the Second World War and the present. Finally, this paper will reflect on popular legends and folklore regarding Japanese wartime caches of gold and related folklore in Southeast Asia. Although this particular Spitfire legend has been found to be a British aviation enthusiasts' fantasy, the narrative was not incongruent with related legends in Myanmar.

Spitfires, British Empire, and Burmese Independence

The aircraft itself, the Supermarine Spitfire, is a single propeller-driven, single-seat fighter plane produced from the 1930s, through the Second World War. There are many variants to the craft, indicated according to Mark, or "Mk," followed by a number. The aircraft is most famously associated with the Battle of Britain (July to October, 1940) in which the Royal Air Force (RAF) engaged with Nazi Germany's Luftwaffe; even though other RAF fighter aircraft were more numerous, it was the performance and symbolic association which gave the Spitfire particular renown (မင်းမြတ်စုံ 2013: 132).

Prime Minister Winston Churchill included these words in a speech to the House of Commons on 20 August, “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few²,” in reference to the crews of the Royal Air Force. It was because of that phrase that the RAF pilots who fought in the Battle of Britain were later known as “The Few,” and a poster of RAF pilots was graced with the quotation, “Never was so much owed by so many to so few.” A film made in 1942, *The First of the Few*³ dramatized the story of R.J. Mitchell, the designer of the Spitfire (Howard 1942).

Popular culture and patriotism further indelibly fused the role of that particular aircraft to ideologies of British empire, battle mythology, and the protection of England from Nazi invasion. As the most famous British combat plane, the Spitfire “... in all its power and beauty has come to represent the spirit that saved the country in those desperate days when Britain stood alone (AP Archive 2015; Saunders 2018).” A former Spitfire pilot, Mary Ellis called the aircraft, “a symbol of freedom (BBC 2018).”

Although the mythological aura of the aircraft is associated with the Battle of Britain, the aircraft was used by the RAF in various other theatres during the war, including Europe, East Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Following the end of the war and the technological advances in aircraft design, particularly the advent of the jet engine, the Spitfire fell out of production; arguably the retirement of the craft helped to seal its legend to the Battle of Britain in 1940. In total, over 22,500 Spitfire aircraft were manufactured, and by 1954 they were retired from service with the Royal Air Force (Saunders 2018). Although no longer in use in Britain, many Spitfires continued to see action in other countries for decades after the war, including in Burma.

² The supposed rousing nature of this speech is also the stuff of legend. It has been noted that this particular speech “seemed to drag” and that only part of the speech was related to aviation battles, and of that part, more was dedicated to the daylight bombers than the Fighter Command (Overy 38).

³ The title was changed to “Spitfire” for the American release.

After a brief return to British rule following the end of World War Two, The Union of Burma achieved independence in 1948. At the time of the Burma Air Force formation in December 1947, they already had three Spitfires in their fleet of 63 aircraft (Maung Aung Myoe 1998: 28). Four Supermarine Spitfires were acquired by the national air force following the Second World War (Selth 1997: 2). It was during the initial years of independence, or the Parliamentary Democracy period, that the new government had to contend with an armed Communist insurrection, Kuomintang incursion, as well as ethnic separatist armies dissatisfied with Burman-dominant rule. As such, it was during this period, predicated on these conflicts, that the Tatmadaw (or army) expanded rapidly (Callahan 2003). During this period, the Burmese military bought Spitfires to be used against the various insurgencies.

In 1950, at the World Jewish Congress, Baghdadis from Burma, as well as a significant Israeli diplomatic presence in Rangoon helped set the stage for Israeli purchase of Burmese products as well as future development and trade deals (Cernea 2007: 106). The ties between Israel and Burma in the 1950s are considered to be a tremendous diplomatic success for Israel, in that Israel was able to gain a strong connection with Mainland Southeast Asia. In October 1959 President Yitzhak Ben-Zvi visited Rangoon and two years later, David Ben-Gurion travelled to Burma on what has been described as a “pilgrimage” to meet U Nu as well as to learn more about Buddhism.

Returning to the Spitfires, Burma and Israel established official diplomatic ties in 1953, and in August 1954 a Burmese military mission visited Israel (Beit-Hallahmi 1988: 25). Not long thereafter, in December 1954, the Burmese government arranged the purchase of thirty Spitfires⁴ which had been acquired by the Israelis from

⁴ In addition to Spitfires, the Israeli military sold a number of Seafire aircraft, which are essentially Spitfires, only modified for maritime aircraft carrier ships; they are sometimes counted as different aircraft, which can cause confusion. Thanks to Andrew Selth for bringing this issue to my attention.

Czechoslovakia; the planes had been used in the 1948-1949 Arab-Israeli wars (မင်းမြတ်စွာ 2013: 177). The Israeli military sold the aircraft because they were more interested in modern jet fighters, and were able to obtain a good price for the old Spitfires from the Union of Burma; furthermore, the Cold War agenda of using the planes to fight communism ideologically facilitated the deal (Linebarger 1955: 109). The aircraft sale also included other weaponry such as machine gun ammunition, bombs, rockets and spare parts. The Israeli Armed Forces (IAF) trained six Burmese pilots in Spitfire aircraft operation, in addition to other Burmese Army officers who received training in Israel (Beit-Hallahmi 1988: 25; Selth 2000: 48; Lintner 1994: 126).

Because of the Cold War and the regional sentiments toward the Israeli military, it would not have been possible for Spitfires with Israeli tail numbers and Israeli pilots to ferry the aircraft to Burma. So, Israeli Air Force pilots (in civilian attire) ferried the planes to Cyprus, and then the planes were given Burmese insignia. In Cyprus, the planes were met by a team of British pilots, including Jackie Moggridge, a woman pilot who had flown Spitfires during the Second World War, ferrying them between factory airfields and military bases. Their route was set to be Cyprus-Habbaniya-Bahrain-Sharya-Karachi-Johdpur-Cawnpore-Calcutta-Rangoon, and if asked they were told to feign ignorance of the planes' origin in Israel (Moggridge 2014: loc 2278).

According to a U.S. Department of State memo dated 13 December 1954, the planes were stopped in Baghdad, Iraq, whereupon the pilots were ordered to return to Cyprus; the registry of the aircraft came into question, and whether it would be a matter to turn over to the Burmese government (Ass't Secretary Foreign Affairs 1954). They later encountered diplomatic trouble in Lebanon. The British Government also protested on behalf of the Burmese government, arguing that the planes were the lawful

property of the Burmese Air Force, and should not be hindered on their journey East. However, and a point that Moggridge details in her autobiography, is that when the Iraqi and Lebanese diplomatic authorities originally gave clearance for the Burmese-owned aircraft, they were not made aware that their vendor was Israel (Moggridge 2014: loc. 2601). During the aircraft hold-up in Lebanon, the authorities sought a “clarification of their precise title and an examination of the military value to Israel of such a sale (Linebarger 1955: 109). Eventually, the aircraft reached their Southeast Asian destination.

It is evident that in Burma, Spitfires were indeed active and used for decades after the end of the Second World War, and they are mentioned to have been used in missions against the Kuomintang in Shan State as well as the Karen National Defense Organisation, among others (မင်းမြတ်စုံ 2013: 178; Smith 1999: 138).

However, the legend of the crated, intact Spitfires almost wilfully ignores these other histories of Spitfire action in Southeast Asia. The teams of excavators in 2013 were not interested in the Spitfires used in Burma by the Burmese Air Force, but rather were fixated on finding the brand new, virgin, unassembled Spitfires that were buried deep in Burmese soil by the Allied soldiers in 1945, and therefore unsullied by local use in the intervening seven decades. Like the most valuable of vintage toys, these Spitfires would still be in their original packaging.

Finding Buried Treasure or Spitfiring into the Wind?

Although digging for Spitfires started in 2013, this team got its inspiration nearly two decades previously. In 1996, Lincolnshire potato farmer, private pilot and aviation

enthusiast, David Cundall learned of the legend from an aviation archaeologist, Jim Pearce.

According to the legend, in Burma, crated Spitfires Mark XIV (manufactured in Castle Bromwich, and with Rolls Royce Griffon engines), surplus at the end of World War Two were buried rather than repatriated. The cost to return them to England was high, plus they did not want the aircraft to fall into enemy hands. Pearce had heard the story decades earlier, but later confirmed it in Florida in 1974 in a conversation with an American Combat Battalion veteran, the latter of whom claimed that he had been involved in a project to bury crated Spitfires at the end of the runway at Rangoon's Mingaladon Airfield (မောင်သာ 2016; Brockman et al 2015: 30). Other burial sites, as the story went, were located at Meiktila and Myitkyina, and the three burials took place at different points in the concluding months of the war and withdrawal: August and December 1945, and March-June 1946 (Brockman et al 2015: 20-21). As a British aviation enthusiast, this piqued Cundall's interest, and he began to seek out more accounts of the story and to collect corroborating evidence.

Another man from the British Midlands, Andrew Johnson, claimed that his grandfather -- who served in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War -- had assisted in the burial of the crated planes. As Johnson said, "I can pretty much guarantee they were buried there. My grandfather was Flight Sergeant with 96 squadron and details from his Squadron were sent to bury them (Winston 2017)." Cundall began to travel to Myanmar, hoping to acquire more information and potentially dig for the aircraft. In the subsequent fifteen years, Cundall would make 16 visits to Myanmar, and spend a total of 135,000 pounds of his own money on the Spitfire project (Clark 2015; မောင်သာ 2016).

One of the early Myanmar connections Cundall made was with Keith Win, founder of the Myanmar-British Business Association. This was in 1999, when Myanmar was still ruled by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) government. Win was able to arrange a meeting with (then) Secretary – 1, Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt, who – according to Win – thought the Spitfire project had British government backing. In any case, the meeting comprised of Keith Win, Khin Nyunt, the Foreign Minister, the Burmese Ambassador to London as well as local journalists (Popham 2013).

In 2004, Cundall sponsored a geophysical survey that he hoped would corroborate his witness testimonies about when and where the planes were buried. The geophysical surveys were carried out by Dr Adam Booth from Imperial College, London, and Cundall had acquired additional assistance from Australian and Singaporean enthusiasts (Brockman et. al. 2015: 22). One of the survey sites demonstrated significant areas of metal materials located approximately ten meters underground. Electromagnetic survey imagery showed large pieces of electrically conductive material there (Jones 2012). With UK sanctions expressly forbidding the movement of war material in or out of the country, Cundall was not able to commence his search.

Cundall later said, “There was a low point, in 2007, when unfortunately some monks were shot dead in the street and I gave the project up. I didn’t really want to be associated with Myanmar, and my agents told me in 2009 that they were becoming democratically elected, and well, I thought, right, well I’ll try again (Forces TV 2012).” With renewed interest in the project, Cundall continued to pursue, and by 2012, announced that he had pinpointed three locations where the aircraft were buried: Mingaladon, Meiktila, and Myitkyina. He had in his portfolio eight eyewitnesses: Burmese, Americans, and British, all of whom Cundall had met personally. On 19 February 2012, at the Park Royal Hotel, Yangon, Cundall and his Burmese partner

company Shwe Taung Paw held a media conference about their plans to follow through with the dig. Cundall reaffirmed his motivations for the project:

This is a story about preserving aeroplanes, and I believe in preserving them. We don't have enough Spitfires, certainly not enough flying Spitfires, and I believe that these aeroplanes will be flying again in two to three years, and my goal is to bring my share back into the UK. Generate jobs, and have them flying at air shows, just to let people know what a Spitfire is really like. And the Spitfire was really made for a tool of war. I'm trying to make it as a tool of friendship to bring Myanmar and Britain closer together (Forces TV 2012).

In another interview, Cundall promised that he would bring one of the planes back to Birmingham in order “to honour the descendants of the people who made them (Winston 2017).” The year 2012 also coincided with the first visit of a British Prime Minister to Burma since 1955, and during his visit, PM David Cameron expressed interest in the excavation of the Spitfires (မင်းမြတ်စံ 2013: 179). Cameron even brought the issue up with the Myanmar government in April 2012. He went as part of a business delegation, and a spokesperson had said, “Following the agreement discussed with President Thein Sein, we hope this will be an opportunity to work with the reforming Burmese government to uncover, restore and display these fighter planes and have them grace the skies of Britain once again (Bodenham 2012).” Although Cundall had been working to get a contract to excavate for two years prior, undoubtedly the push of the Prime Minister was key to the Myanmar government’s approval of the project, which was eventually signed by Chief of the Department of Civil Aviation, Tin Naing Tun, and Htoo Htoo Zaw, CEO of Cundall’s Myanmar partner company Shwe Taung Paw (ရွှေတောင်ပေါ်ကုမ္ပဏီ).

According to the terms, Cundall and his team would have permission to dig at Yangon International Airport for two years, so long as they didn’t interfere with airport operations. In exchange for permission to dig, the Myanmar government would be

allowed 50 per cent of the profits from the eventual sale of the aircraft, 20 percent would go to Shwe Taung Paw and the remaining 30 percent would go to Cundall's organisation (Clark 2015). Cundall also suggested the possibility of selling the fleet to American or Israeli investors (Bodenham 2012).

With approval to dig, as well as the backing of the UK Prime Minister, David Cundall's project to excavate received a flurry of international media attention. It was also at this point that the Wargaming.net corporation finds out about the project and contacts Cundall with the idea of sponsorship and also making a documentary of the excavation (Brockman et. al. 2015: 23). Wargaming.net is one of the most popular publishers of historic military simulator games, operating *World of Tanks* and *World of Warships*. The games are free to play on-line; all one needs to do is register, and there are over 150 million registered players. The operation makes its profits by selling premium recreations of historic military hardware. For example, a 1930s Leningrad-class Soviet destroyer costs \$25.99 to access. Before taking an interest in the Spitfire digs, the company also contributed funds to the recovery of the last Dornier Do 17 light bomber aircraft and to the restoration of the last Maus superheavy tanker. Wargaming.net sponsors events at military museums as a way to reach out to its fan base (Baker 2016).

Thus, the interest of Wargaming.net CEO in the Spitfire excavation would hardly come as a surprise. The company produces online video fantasy games predicated on battle simulation. They create these simulations through historical research and reconstruction of historical battle specs. As Victor Kislyi explained, "For our most loyal players, who are so evangelical about the game and who spread the word, historical accuracy is all-important. This way, the guys can see that we don't just talk about historical accuracy, we act on it (Senior 2012)." It was only after meeting with Cundall,

and reviewing his file of accumulated evidence, which included shipping manifests, photos, letters, and scans of the site, that Wargamers.net agreed to join the project (Brockman et al 2015: 8). Their new game *World of Warplanes* was set to be released within the same year as Cundall's first dig, so sponsoring (a successful) excavation no doubt would create good press for the game.

On 9 January 2013, Cundall, along with consulting expert U Soe Thein, Retired Professor of Geology Yangon University, had another press conference at the Yangon Park Royal Hotel to announce that they had discovered visual evidence of the Spitfires under the ground in Mingaladon. According to the article, during the Second World War there were 134 Spitfires buried, and over thirty of them buried in the vicinity of Mingaladon (ဦးစိုးဝင်း 2013). It was that month that their team began to dig in earnest.

Stanley Coombe, a British war veteran and one of Cundall's witnesses, at the age of 91 years old, travelled to Yangon to have a look at the search and excavation process. He told media that nobody believed his story about the Spitfires until he met David Cundall; Coombe claimed to have witnessed the burial of six Spitfire aircraft (Popham 2013).

In an interview with Burmese television on 22 January 2013, Professor U Soe Thein answered questions about the project, particularly in relation to the international teams having given up on digging at Mingaladon:

As for what exactly is deep in the earth, and how to expose them, I don't have much knowledge. The foreigners are teaching about it. But, between one another, they have disagreements. As for us, in the Irrawaddy riverbed, we have been able to expose sunken boats. We can refer to those. Using the latest methodologies of geographic imagery, they can specify where things are. They have used the technology to locate the buried planes. (A reporter asks, 'So you believe that they are there at Mingaladon?') It's not a belief. Have a look at the website, and as for how to find the buried things, you can find out. Some foreigners they have records, for example: the Dhammazed Bell, the Myanmar records didn't have it. So one can look at other country's records. That individual David Cundall showed the records and the geographic imagery. He has the latest iPad; he checked on it. The 92 year old Stanley Coombe has said precisely where they are. And with satellite imaging, you can take a photo and specify with certainty (ကျော်မိုး 2013).

However, according to local employees of the Myanmar Department of Civil Aviation, the foreign excavating teams were making a mess, and found their quest more important than the country's use of an active runway. In the excavation team's own report, they conceded that they had dug "large trenches in Myanmar's equivalent of Heathrow (Brockman et. al. 2015: 19)." They were seen by some as interfering with the airport, which was one of the clauses which they were expected to follow on their agreement. At one point, the digs struck some underground cables that connected to the airport (မောင်သာ 2016; Winston 2017). The team did unearth a wooden crate in Myitkyina, Kachin State, but the crate was so flooded that that they could not see what was inside it until the water was pumped out. To the diggers' dismay, the crate contained nothing but old fencing material (မောင်သာ 2016).

Moreover, evidence of actual Spitfires was not forthcoming. In digging near Mingaladon Airport, Andy Brockman, the lead archaeologist for the Burma Spitfires project noted,

One of the trenches we opened up earlier on in the week, it was an area that David was interested in, he directed us where to put it. When we came to excavate it, we got down to about 3 metres (9.8 feet) and then we hit natural clay. Now, that clay could be anything from 500 to 10,000 years old. There's no way that a Spitfire that was supposedly buried in 1945 or 1946 can be underneath that (AP Archive 2015).

With the disappointment of not having found any precious aircraft, the naysayers' narratives began to get more press. The lack of evidence lent less credence to the story of how the Spitfires would be buried in Burma, but instead as to why there *would not* be any such crated aircraft deep in Burmese soil:

(The) documents tell a story of appalling weather conditions (in August 1945) at Mingaladon (airbase) and shortages of everything from heavy equipment to timber and labour all of which we believe suggests it would be almost impossible that the Royal Air Force could have buried aircraft thirty feet deep in wooden crates even if it had wanted to do so. The team now believes, based on clear documentary evidence, as well as the evidence from the fieldwork, that no

Spitfires were delivered in crates and buried. Most significantly, the archival records show that the RAF unit that handled shipments through Rangoon docks, 41 Embarkation Unit, only received 37 aircraft in total from three transport ships between 1945 and 1946. None of the crates contained Spitfires and most appear to have been re-exported in the autumn of 1946 (Stone 2013).

Despite excavation at three separate sites, no crated Spitfire was found.

Furthermore, participants in the project started to bring to light other dissenting information they had learned along the way. Keith Win, the early partner of David Cundall, and original liaison with Brigadier General Khin Nyunt, detailed some of his experience collecting background data for the project:

In 1997, I contacted Brigadier Derrick Baynham, who had been the aide-de-camp to Reginald Dorman-Smith, the British governor of Burma at the end of the war. He had been an officer in the Special Operations Executive and he said, 'This story cannot be true. I would have known about it. I would have seen documents.' So you had people like him, at a high level, saying 'This is not possible,' and the only person saying yes (Coombe) was a private (Popham 2013).

However, rather than concede defeat, Cundall suggested that perhaps the crews simply had not been digging in the correct places. In 2016, he acquired permission from the Myanmar government to commence digging anew (Halifax 2016). As of August 2019, not a single crated Spitfire has been unearthed in Myanmar.

Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Aircraft

Historical understandings of the legend of the buried aircraft, together with projections about the intervening years as well as the contemporary context in Myanmar crucially framed the context of the excavation project, both materially as well as ideologically. Various international news reports would refer to the supposed location of the aircraft as the "Burmese jungles (Drury 2013)."

Western explorers "discovering" valuable objects trapped in Southeast Asian jungles is a familiar trope, spurred by ideologies of colonial-era orientalism. French missionary propaganda of the nineteenth century, for example, would portray the

Vietnamese emperor Minh-mang as closed off from outside influences; although ample historical evidence demonstrates that this was hardly the case (Owen 2005: 114). In discussing nineteenth century French naturalist Henri Mouhot's expedition to Siem Reap, historian Penny Edwards articulates this ideology, describing how the wonder of contemporary (colonial) discovery is contrasted with projected years of local neglect and abandonment. As she writes, "Angkor would no doubt remain in his (Mouhot's) imagination as it became in European conceptions and as it first appeared to him in that moment of awed discovery: as the fantastic, picturesque burial ground of a 'dead' civilisation (Edwards 2007: 20)." Although the Spitfires are hardly examples of indigenous civilization, there is a strong undercurrent to the story of the masculine hero, the aviation enthusiast, with his quest to rescue the buried Spitfire, for the latter to return home for her maiden flight.

Numerous international interviewees about the project invoked the figure of Indiana Jones, the adventurous archaeologist of Hollywood fame. The figure was initially mobilised as a positive descriptor for the project. According to Wargaming.net CEO Victor Kislyi, "If you think about this, it's probably one of the last, greatest adventure's we're looking at. It sounds like Indiana Jones to me. So, if this quest is fruitful, we hope we will see a squadron of Spitfires flying over London one more time (Forces TV 2012)."

However, once the project was deemed a failure and frustrations mounted, the Indiana Jones figure was invoked again, this time to disparage the project leader's supposed lack of due diligence and research before digging. This time, it is Keith Win from the Myanmar-British Business association speaking, "David seems a little bit erratic: he runs from pillar to post, promising things to many different people. He's a

dreamer – he wants to make himself out to be a bit of an Indiana Jones. Myself, I’m very, very sceptical of the story (Popham 2013).”

A later report framed the value of the project not just in terms of the potential to recover the aircraft, but also an equivalent to a ...

CSI Missing Spitfires; an evidence-led, scientific study into how the legend of the Spitfires of Burma arose and whether it had a basis in fact. To accomplish that task it was necessary to see the facts in the ground at Yangon and the physical context of the purported ‘crime scene’ (Spaight in Brockman et. al. 2015: 11).

However, it was noted in the archaeological report of the project, that there were differing expectations and appreciations of methodological approaches; Wargaming.net had pushed for incorporating professional archaeologists for the purposes of accuracy and scientific validity. As Martin Brown noted,

[I]t was also clear from the comments made to the Media and in preliminary meetings of the project team that David Cundall failed to understand the proposed methodology and to appreciate the importance of an archaeological approach, fearing it would slow the expedition down (Brockman et al 2015: 148).

As Cundall himself had said in an interview,

My project is to find Spitfires and that’s it. The other archaeology I don’t know and I’m not interested in to be honest ... I think they want to give the impression that they’re doing it properly. That it’s not going to be done in a few days and they want to know the history behind this site and I think that’s fine, but I think more of the Spitfires more than the archaeology and they think more of the archaeology than the Spitfires (Brockman et al 2015: 33).

The suggestion that the Spitfires is even separate from “the archaeology” suggests that Cundall’s appreciation of the craft is in its iconic presence, not its material context. He wants to “just dig” rather than employ other methodologies which would analyse and document the latter, which he perceives as slower.

Continuing with the meaning of the icon, the excavators are not looking for local art or ruins of ancient indigenous civilisation, but remnants of a foreign military presence. For the British aviation enthusiasts, Burma is but a backdrop, a theatre of war for the sorties of their own imperial history. As David Cundall once said, “Spitfires are beautiful aeroplanes and should not be rotting away in a foreign land. They saved our

neck in the Battle of Britain and they should be preserved (Drury 2013).” As such, Cundall identifies strongly with his British nation, and sees the aircraft as iconic of it, regardless of the fact that the aircraft could rightly be seen as an instrument of imperialism, seeking to extend colonial power and dominate other places. The very location of the planes in Burma, according to Cundall implies that they need rescuing; to him, they belong in the air, and only in the air over Britain.

Although the impetus and the arc of the project, its intrigue, and international funding falls squarely on a British aviation-enthused masculinity and war nostalgia, the story of abandoned war materiel did not fall on deaf ears in Myanmar. Even during the excavations, when I was in Myanmar, numerous interlocutors were optimistic in the prospect that the team of international aviation archaeologists would find the planes they were after. Myo Min, the manager of a restaurant in downtown Yangon, himself a history enthusiast, told me in a conversation on the topic back in 2012 that, “Sure, they will find something. That’s the way the Japanese left weaponry when they departed an area.”

Throughout Southeast Asia, where Japanese soldiers were stationed, there remains a pantheon of narratives involving valuable weapons, as well as chests of gold hidden by Japanese soldiers during the Second World War. Although legend and popular fiction will have certain changes in narrative and outcome involving the treasure, they all contain the main premise: that there is hidden treasure left behind by the Japanese. In both Thailand and Myanmar, there exist popular fiction and films which include stories of gold hidden by the Japanese during the war.

Popular culture representations thus serve to perpetuate these legends. The Burmese film *Kyunkale Baw Hma Hnit Yauk Te* (ကျွန်းကလေးပေါ်မှာနှစ်ယောက်ထဲ) “Two of

us on an Island,” directed by Sein Pay Tin contains an introduction of a shipwrecked man coming across a wild island, the nature, fleeing from a bear, then an alligator, then witnessing a Japanese navy ship coming to the island. The Japanese military men take a large crate and on a tender, move it to the island, deposit the big box of stuff in a cave. The shipwrecked man witnesses the Japanese soldiers mapping and later esconcement of the box, followed by the murder of their Burmese porters, ostensibly so they would not know the location of the treasure. After the Japanese soldiers leave, the protagonist digs up the chest to discover it full of gold.

Next door in Thailand, there remain legends of Japanese treasure, very much like those stories in circulation in Burma. There have been multiple major searches for Japanese war gold in recent decades. Along the path of the Thai-Burma Railway, it is argued, Japanese Imperial Army trains delivered shipments of gold, which were then later hidden by soldiers. The Thai government was convinced enough to engage in a two month search starting in December 1995. Though a great deal of old war materiel was found, no valuable treasure chests of gold were uncovered in the hunt (Brooke 1999). In Thai popular media this is referred to as *Tong Kobori* (ทองโกโบริ) “Kobori’s Gold” named after the Japanese soldier protagonist from the popular historical fiction romance novel/soap drama set on the Thai-Burma railway during the Second World War. The story *Ku Kam* (คู่กรรม) “Fated Couple” was first published as a novel in 1968 (วิมล 1968). The story depicts a romance between a lieutenant in the Japanese navy and his Thai lover, Angsumalin. The tensions in the plot revolve around feelings of nationalism, and later the love triangle conflict when Angsumalin’s Thai lover returns after his studies overseas. The story has been remade for television dramas in Thailand multiple times

over the years. Thus, the popular drama moniker Kobori associates war history through this popular series.

Another relatively famous story of Japanese hiding assets in caves is known as Yamashita's Gold. It is a legend which details the planned spiriting away of vast wealth accumulated from 12 other Asian countries in the caves in the mountainous areas in Luzon, the Philippines (Seagrave and Seagrave 2003: 1). The legend has inspired both novels as well as Hollywood movies, and spurred countless treasure hunts.

In addition to the legends themselves, there is historical and cultural meaning in studying the contexts in which these legends are acted upon; inevitably there are members of society who believe in such legends, and conversely, there will be naysayers, but for the mobilization of resources to act on the legend, there must be a firmer commitment among the believers, and others willing to invest in the story. There have to be certain circumstances which spur one to act upon a legend, and these circumstances, as we will see, can sometimes influence one's adherence to the narrative as well.

For example: on 25 June 1954, a group of soldiers from the separatist Karen National Defense Organisation, or KNDO hijacked a Union of Burma Airways DC-3 Dakota scheduled passenger aircraft. Their objective was to commandeer the flight over the Dawna mountain range and land it near a supposed cache of heavy weapons abandoned by retreating Japanese forces during the Second World War. This cache of war materiel purportedly included 40 weapons, including 10 bazookas. The hijack mission to retrieve the weaponry was ultimately unsuccessful; those in the plane were unable to connect with the KNDO operatives on the ground, and when it was discovered that the plane carried with it 700,000 Kyat in cash destined for the Kyaukpyu Treasury, the hijackers changed their plans to take the money instead (လှေဝေ 2012: 1, 60). The

point, however, is that the elaborate and dangerous mission was sparked by the belief that there would be a cache of abandoned World War Two weapons to make the whole operation worthwhile.

Conclusion: Blossoming in the Burmese Spring?

In his discussion of dreams of historical treasure among Greeks, anthropologist Charles Stewart (2003) argues that such treasures “... are secretions of history, deposited at the moments of rupture that historians subsequently use to demarcate historical periods (Stewart 2003: 481).” It is treasure stories themselves and their very retelling which can serve as a form of “commemorabilia” (Rose 2009: 137) offering aviation enthusiasts a new context in which to celebrate the past victories of the Spitfire. However, as demonstrated by this article, the ways in which those treasures animate a certain moment in history is actualised by political and cultural activity in the present. Indeed, it is only through a nostalgic lens that look upon a certain period as Their Finest Hour.

The perception that Myanmar was opening up politically spurred wartime nostalgia and added momentum to the search for the Spitfires. The timing of the actualization of the digs for the Spitfires, and the ways in which it garnered international media attention ties into the “Burmese Spring” narrative which was popular following the commencement of President Thein Sein’s nominally civilian government in March of 2011. The idea of spring as political metaphor dates back to the series of 1848 revolutions in Europe known as the “springtime of nations (Sluga 1998: 100).” The concept is used to designate people’s movements, ends of autarchies, and greater rights and liberties extended to citizens, particularly the bourgeoisie; a political “climate” is described as such. In more recent political history, the seasonal metaphor

was applied to another wave of peoples' movements: the Arab Spring, taking place across North Africa and the Middle East from 2010 (Dabashi 2013). In June of 2011, Aung San Suu Kyi herself compared the democratic movement in Myanmar to that of Tunisia, and journalists also likened Myanmar's transition to the Arab Spring (Castle 2011). The moniker "Burmese Spring" was used for many news and special reports starting in 2011, including (among many) those of *The Economist*, *The New Yorker*, *Forbes*, and *The Guardian*.

The Spring metaphors likens the country's political process to that of countries elsewhere, and emplaces its situation as part of that trend: it is opening up, it is changing, it is blossoming into something fragrant and beautiful. Further, the cursory discussion of the previous years of military rule, by structural logic the winter that in which spring is predicated on (Northern hegemony of seasons notwithstanding) suggest the country had been isolated, closed, and indeed "frozen." Although previous accounts of Myanmar would acknowledge its relative isolation, this contrast, and its prominence in the international media created more public awareness of – and enthusiasm for – Burma/Myanmar. The seasonal caricature in place, the years between colonialism and the present were seen as placeholders or "decades of isolation," or even "isolated from the world for 60 years" (Rhoads and Wittekind 2018: 176, 177).

Crucial for the Spitfires project as well, Britain had lifted sanctions on the country, so it would be viable to deal in weapons with the Myanmar regime. Although the Spitfire planes would have been of British manufacture, following independence, all ownership of infrastructure was transferred to the Burmese government.

But without any Spitfires, all of this neo-colonial effort seems to have been for naught. As Mingaladon Airport has undergone major expansion, it is unlikely that the Myanmar Department of Civil Aviation would allow excavation crews to tamper with

the areas near their runway and aprons. For the Spitfire flight of fantasy, like the legendary story, now it must go back in the box.

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