

## **THE HISTORY AND RECOVERY OF SPITFIRE Mk Vc (T) EE853 UP-O<sup>2</sup> A58-146\***

On 30 August 1971 Langdon Badger landed on the old wartime strip at Vivigani on Goodenough Island in Mooney VH-MBO. He met Patrol Officer Alan Stevens who spoke of a WWII 'Aircraft Dump' nearby, which was not accessible as the kunai grass was two metres high.



*"At Vivigani we were met by some charming ladies"*  
[Langdon Badger]

Next year, on 24 August, Langdon, with his wife Genevieve and sons Magnus, Langdon and Howard, stayed with Alan, arriving by Twin Comanche VH-MED. Owing to a drought it was an easy drive to the wrecks of a Kittyhawk, Douglas A-20 Boston, two Beauforts and a Spitfire.

Alan arranged for prison inmates to carry the Spitfire wings, fuselage and tail the eleven miles to the port at Bolu Bolu. The missionaries from nearby Normanby Island constructed the

crate for shipment to Adelaide.

Removable panels on the Spitfire were hand fitted at production and marked on the underside with the aircraft's production number. On lifting the cannon bay panel, EE853 was clearly stencilled.

EE853 was built by Westland Aircraft Ltd at Yeovil, Somerset, with cockpit c/n WASP-20.484 as part of a batch of 200 Mk. V Spitfires ordered in September 1941 under Contract No. 124305/40. It was one of a total of 22,759 Spitfires of all Marks built.



*The fuselage of EE853 found on the edge of Vivigani airstrip in 1972*  
[Langdon Badger]

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\* Sourced from Langdon Badger's notes and the publication "Spitfire Survivors" A-Eleven Publications Ltd, Gordon Riley, Peter R. Arnold and Graham Trant pages 162-166 [see [www.spitfiresurvivors.co.uk](http://www.spitfiresurvivors.co.uk)]



*Boston fuselage behind the Spitfire on the edge of Vivegani Airstrip in 1972  
[Langdon Badger]*

The restored aircraft carries the firewall c/n 6S-272319, but this may have been installed during the restoration. It was fitted with a Merlin 46 and delivered to No. 8 M.U. on 23 January 1943, moving on to Mo. 215 M.U. at Dumfries on 8 February, where it was packed for shipment by sea to North Africa. EE853 was part of a shipment on the SS *Sussex*, which left England on 9 March 1943 for the Middle East. Because of threat of an invasion of Australia by the Japanese, who had already landed on the north coast of Papua New Guinea,

Winston Churchill ordered the ship to proceed on to Port Melbourne where it arrived on 16 April 1943.

The Spitfires were uncrated and assembled at RAAF No. 1 Aircraft Depot, Laverton, and renamed "Capstans" after the cigarette brand. Their existence was top secret. The desert mid-stone camouflage was over-sprayed with foliage green and all red markings removed. At this time the RAF serial was not changed for the allotted RAAF serial A58-146. Most Aircraft were then flown to Fairbairn's Woolloomanata Station, north-west of Geelong, for pilot training away from possible spying eyes.

EE853 remained at Laverton until 25 May when it was transferred to No. 13 ARD (Airframe Repair Depot). In all probability this was the Reserve Pool, which the unit operated at Breddan, Qld, and on 14 June it was issued to No. 79 Squadron. The aircraft joined the squadron at Townsville on 16 June and was assigned to Pussy Purple "C" Flight. On 17 June it was one of the 13 aircraft of "C" Flight that flew from Townsville to Horn Island, with escort provided by a Lockheed Lodestar, FSGT Andy Byrne making the trip in 4 hours 30 minutes. After a short stop at Horn Island "C" Flight was back in the air – this time with a Beaufighter escort – en route to a strip at Seven Mile, Port Moresby, landing there after 2 hours 15 minutes.



*PLTOFF George Voges taxiing EE853 while in service with No. 79 SQN at Vivigani with airmen on the mainplanes in accordance with No. 73 Wing RAAF orders. Aircraftman 1 F.M. (Frank) Carroll, Flight Mechanic on port wing  
[via Langdon Badger]*

Andy Byrne and EE853 were part of a group of 12 Spitfires that left Seven Mile, Port Moresby, on 18 June 1943 heading for Gurney Strip at Milne Bay. Flying time for the trip varied between 1 hour 15 minutes and 2 hours, the flight having been made in formation, but not all aircraft could land together and some pilots had to hold for up to 45 minutes. The delay may, in part, have been a consequence of Andy Byrne over-running the landing strip on arrival in EE853 causing damage to the aircraft when it tipped over onto its nose. EE853 was allotted to No. 10 R.S.U. at Milne Bay for repairs and was eventually taken on charge at Vivigani on 23 July after a new propeller was fitted.

Squadron Leader Alan Rawlinson DFC and Bar, AFC, OBE, led 79 Squadron, with overseas hardened pilots brought up to strength with Australian pilots. When asked what Squadron code letters he wanted, he said "UP and I will have U". Up you!

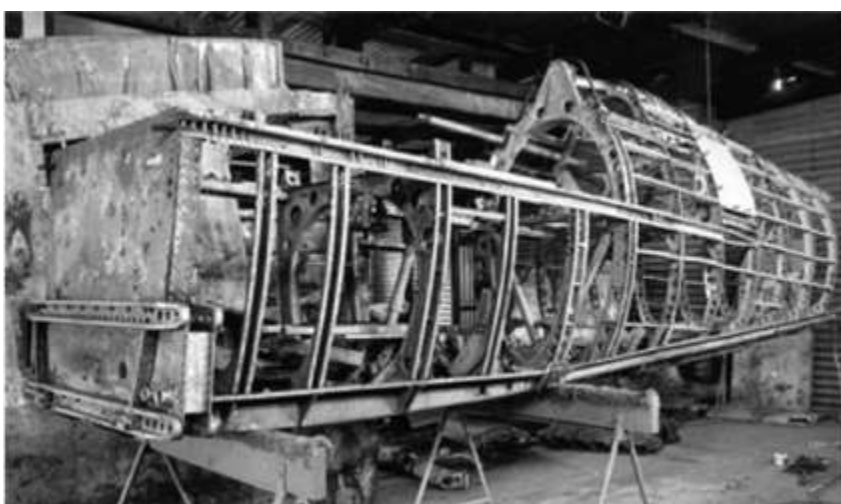
EE853 was allocated the individual code "UP-O" and air tested for 45 minutes on 25 July by PLTOFF George Voges, who noted that it had problems with the armament and an oil leak.

Voges made a further 55 minute test flight on 29 July after which it was passed fit for service. FSGT Alec Chomley took her up on an altitude test flight on 1 August, reaching a recorded 35,000 feet over Vivigani.



*EE853 came to grief on 28 August 1943 when it swung on landing and ran off the runway, colliding with a low embankment. The "August Girl" mascot is just visible above the port wing leading edge.*  
[via Langdon Badger]

Following the US occupation of the Woodlark and Trobriand Islands in early July 1943, 79 SQN received an order on 29 July to transfer from Vivigani to a new base at Kiriwina, the principal island of the Trobriand group. Whereas Goodenough Island had been mountainous, Kiriwina was very flat with its highest point being a 100 foot high coral cliff.



*The fuselage of EE853 in the early stages of restoration in Adelaide in October 1974.*  
(Peter Sledge via Langdon Badger)

No. 79 SQN's Operations Record Book states that on 18 August 1943 the squadron finally departed Vivigani and flew to Kiriwina. Alec Chomley flew EE853 as part of Black Section, taking off from Vivigani at 1530 and arriving Kiriwina at 1615. Interestingly, Alec's logbook states that the flight took place on 19 August. Both sources agree that he took EE853 up on the afternoon of

22 August for a squadron formation and practice attack exercise. George Voges took off the following morning for a recce scramble with nothing being intercepted.

EE853's final flight was on 28 August 1943 when FSGT Alec Chomley 418232 took off from Kiriwina at 1632 for a squadron formation and AA strafing practice flight but on landing at 1725 at the end of the exercise the aircraft swung off the runway, mounted an embankment at the side of the strip and was extensively damaged. Chomley was uninjured but EE853 was a write-off. Rather than leaving the wreck at Kiriwina, it was transferred to No. 26 R.S.U. at Vivigani – with the location code "Ginger" painted on the components – where it arrived on 8 September. Following a survey it was decided on 10 September that it was beyond economic repair and was recommended that it was only suitable for "conversion to components".

While Alec Chomley had bad luck ground looping our aircraft, his other accidents were mainly a result of mechanical failures. On 26 June 1943 in UP-X ES307 A58-169, after an aerobatic display for the Minister for Air, he belly landed on the pressed steel matting following a fault in the undercarriage selector. On 12 December, he lost UP-X LZ844 A58-213 after a brake failure caused one wing to hit the cabin of a Blitz Buggy and he ended up in a coral pit beside the runway. On 8 May 1944, a glycol leak resulted in engine failure at sea, north of Los Negros, in UP-V JL380 A58-206. Alec bailed out and was rescued by the destroyer U.S.S. Stockton which luckily came over the horizon in his direction.

Langdon Badger's Spitfire was one of the replacements for UP-H JG897 after FSGT Gardiner overran UP-K EE954 of FLGOFF Paul Brennan DFC, DFM at Gabut Field, Townsville Qld. EE853 did not become UP-O<sup>2</sup> until 10 July 1943 when UP-O<sup>1</sup> EE851 of FSGT McKellar had an engine failure at 35,000 feet over Goodenough Island. As they were out of white paint, her code letters of UP-O were uniquely painted in sky blue.

All the flyable aircraft in the Pacific were ferried back to the RAAF's No 6 Aircraft Depot at what is now Oakey Army Airfield in Queensland to be melted down for their aluminium. Other metals and parts were buried on the airfield. Langdon flew to Oakey in Aerostar VH-UYY, where he purchased a 'nil hour' RR Merlin 46,



*MK VIII four bladed wooden propeller*  
[via Langdon Badger]



*Stainless steel stabiliser carry through spar under prop hub*  
[via Langdon Badger]

and from farmers' sheds found lots of small items. This engine, RR Merlin 46 94039, was built at Crew against Air Ministry contract C/Eng/405/C28a, tested on 16 January 1943 and dispatched on 21 January. The 46 was a development of the 45 with a larger diameter supercharger rotor and modifications to deliver increased performance at altitude. Maximum combat power was 1,415 BHP at 3,000 RPM +15 Boost and 14,000 feet. Langdon also had a bulldozer remove the dirt on two of the burial sites and found a perfect stainless steel horizontal stabiliser spar for his UP-O restoration, plus other items. Wooden propeller blades and other parts were burnt with 100-130 octane fuel. In all, 660 Spitfires were destroyed.



*Roy bailing water out of the crash site*  
[Landon Badger]

Although EE853 UP-O was 75% original it took many years to find the missing pieces. There were 21 Spitfires listed on the wartime register of crashed aircraft at various sites throughout northern NT and WA, so Langdon and his family visited them in his VH-MED. After excluding those crashed at sea he was able to find three wrecks. One was on La Belle pastoral lease, where Roy Townsend welcomed them and provided considerable help at the end of the dry season to excavate parts at the crash site in a swamp 27 nautical miles south of Darwin. The wreck was JG731, an RAF Spitfire. They collected scattered parts and Genny noticed the

tip of the propeller protruding from the black mud. The engine had separated from the airframe after the fuel tank exploded, and engine and propeller came down like an autogyro with the propeller only breaking off at the reduction gear on impact with the soft mud. This was a wonderful find and the propeller is now on the restored UP-O. Peter Arnold provided the spinner.

After the Cyclone, John Haslett contacted Langdon to offer parts from his collection, including the stabiliser from LZ845 that had collided with BS164, ten miles east-north-east of Straus. The spar was broken but Langdon now had one from Oakey.

North-east of Daly Waters Langdon found the fuselage remains of A58-359 of PLTOFF Griffiths RAF, whose oxygen failed at 25,000 feet causing his crash. Another fuselage, from PLTOFF Little, RAAF ZP-S A58-81 BS199, shot down in the circuit, was donated by James Schofield of DCA from Millingimbi. Langdon then swapped the two fuselages with Bob Eastgate for a Hurricane Rotol Propeller from Australia's only example V7476 A60-1, and a 90 gallon Spitfire Drop Tank. He swapped that propeller with the late Charles Church in England for the help of three of his engineers for three weeks work on UP-O and the supply of some missing pieces.



*Genny with help digging out the propeller*  
*Note the clean tip she saw*  
[Landon Badger]

Looking further afield, Langdon and his family gained permission from the Indonesian authorities after three years to visit Merauke, West Papua, the site of an incident on 17 December 1944 when three Spitfires crashed. They arrived in VH-MED on 18 August 1975. Group Captain Clive Caldwell,



*Genny and sons loading our Spitswagen borrowed from the pub*  
[Langdon Badger]

534 landed against a red light without flaps or brakes, probably because of a pneumatic failure. He crashed into Sturm's aircraft, killing Sturm and causing his aircraft to burn. Crystal suffered a broken leg.<sup>1</sup>

Guy Black copied Langdon's spare Vokes filter and lower engine cowling, as there were no others or plans, to finish MA863 that is now in the USAF Museum Dayton Ohio, painted as an American Mediterranean Allied Air Force



*Genny and sons enjoyed this day and so did the local kids*  
[via Langdon Badger]



*F/L Sturm's wing from A58-478 fire damaged*  
[via Langdon Badger]

leading 452 Squadron, had advised the other pilots before leaving Melville Bay to Merauke with 90 gallon drop tanks that they must run to the end of the long Merauke runway before turning off. After refuelling at Merauke they planned to continue to Morotai. F/L J.R. Sturm landed in A58-478 but was unable to taxi to the end of the runway because his undercarriage failed. F/L A.L. Lumley then landed in A58-525, clipped Sturm's aircraft, and slid off the runway. P/O W.J.H. Crystal in A58-

Spitfire. Langdon regards it a shame that two 79 SQN Kirawina Spitfires now have American markings, desert paint scheme and the wrong registrations. Once the restoration was completed, EE853 was unveiled at a special ceremony in 1975 at which many surviving members of No. 79 SQN, including Alan Rawlinson, David Hopton and Alec Chomley, were reunited. It was then displayed for many years in a specially constructed building at Langdon's home in Adelaide. Then in

August 2001, it was placed on permanent loan in the South Australian Aviation Museum Inc.

<sup>1</sup> There have been some differences in the records and interpretation of the circumstances of this incident and who flew each of the aircraft involved. The description above is derived from an article *Spitfires lost at Merauke December 1944* by Peter Malone, in which he analyses the various records and subsequent reports and concludes as described here..



*Taken at Parafield, then an all-over field, c1976 when UP-O was partially finished*  
 [Langdon Badger – from a slide converted by Peter R. Arnold]

FGT Alec Chomley donated his RAAF log book with all the details of his flying including UP-O and the accident on 28 August 1943: “*Swung on landing and pranged*”. He also has copies of the log book pages of all the other pilots who flew her - SQNLDR Al Rawlinson, FSGT Andy Byrne and PLTOFF George Voges.

During 2009, EE853 was extensively refurbished, which included repainting of the camouflage scheme and new stencils, together with an accurate recreation of the original “August Girl” artwork by local artist and Museum member Janice Eames.



*During 2009 EE853 underwent a thorough repaint, which included an accurate recreation of the original Vargas “August Girl” artwork on the cowling by artist Janice Eames*  
 [Langdon Badger]

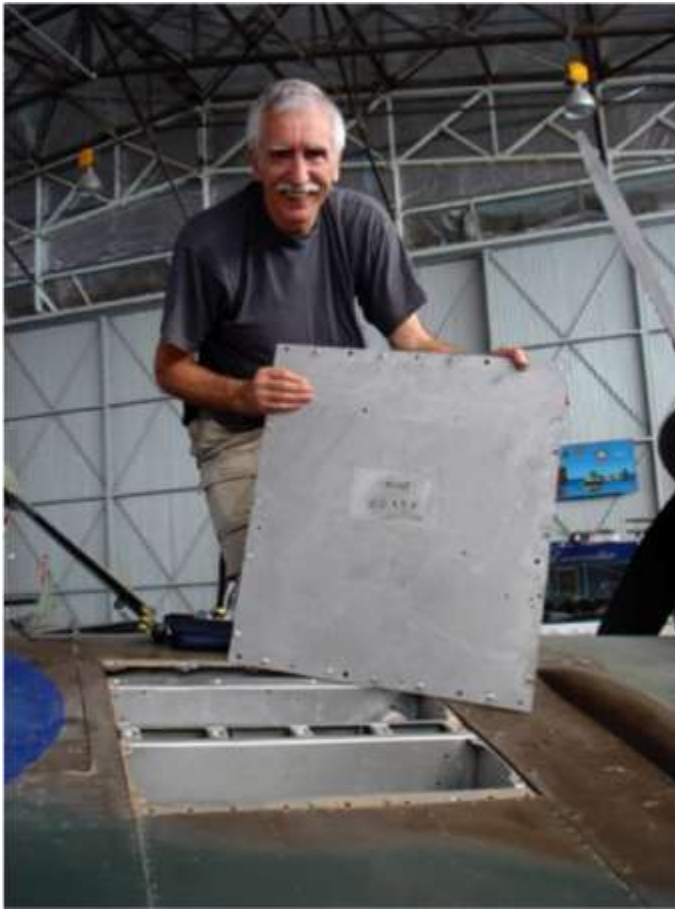


*Following the completion of the artwork Emma Bitmead posed in her grandmother’s 1940s swimsuit for comparison!*  
 [Alf Knoll of Skorpion Photography]

FSGT Alec Chomley had copied the original in late 1942 from a newly arrived 1943 Esquire calendar flown in by the Americans. The original airbrush drawings were by Alberto Vargas and she was “August Girl”.



*Vargas 1943 August Calendar*  
 [via Langdon Badger]



Peter Arnold, a renowned Spitfire historian and author, and president of the UK Spitfire Association, was acknowledged in a footnote on page 1 of this article as an important source of information the article includes. He has shown a long and abiding interest in EE853's restoration and has visited the South Australian Aviation Museum to view the aircraft on a number of occasions. He is pictured in the museum at right holding the port cannon ammunition bay panel, with a close-up of the stencil. and his photograph of EE853's restored cockpit are included on the next page.

Finally, the photograph on the next page shows EE853 restored refurbished and repainted as currently displayed in the South Australian Aviation Museum at Port Adelaide.



*Detail of aircraft identification stencil*



*EE853 Cockpit, November 2013*  
[Peter R. Arnold]





***\*UPO was 70 years old on 23 January 2013***

***Langdon Badger and Mike Milln  
History Group  
South Australian Aviation Museum  
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