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The Tadley Mustang

By Brian A L Jones

During the 1980s I was Secretary of the Aircraft Museum located at Booker Airfield, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. As will be seen from the letter header below, our motto was "Recover to Remember" and to follow that objective our members were always seeking new crash sites to excavate.

BOOKER AIRCRAFT MUSEUM
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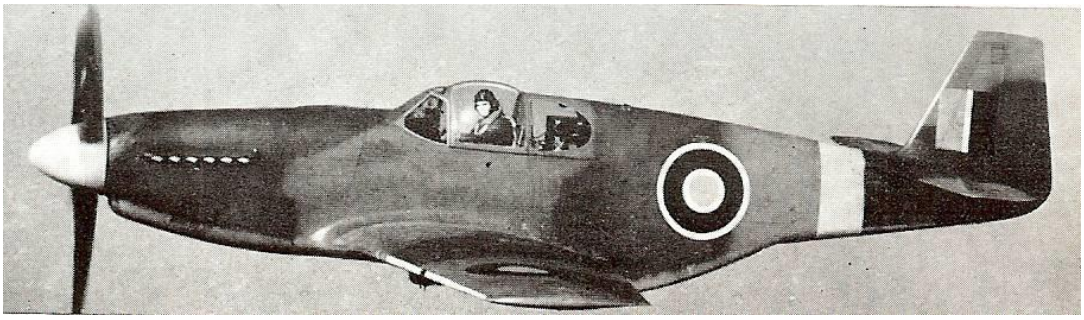
We received information that an aircraft had dived almost vertically into the ground during WWII at Tadley, Hampshire, some miles south-west of Reading, and had not been fully recovered due to the marshy nature of the soil.

Local enquiries pointed to a location near Foudry Brook, a local stream, and concurrent research through Air Ministry records revealed it to be:-

USAAF P-51B-5NA 42-6483 transferred to the RAF as Mustang III FZ142, allocated to the Empire Central Flying School at Farnborough, which was recorded as having crashed 5 miles south of Aldermaston, Berkshire, on 20 March 1944, after the pilot bailed out following an engine fire. The pilot had survived.

One of approximately 637 similar aircraft supplied under Lease-Lend (out of 1750) built at Dallas, Texas. They were constructed with a side-hinged close fitted cockpit hoods. The majority were refitted with Malcolm bulged sliding frameless canopy designed by R Malcolm(1).

The Mustangs were built with Packard Merlin V-1650-7 (Merlin 68)[2] engines having a war emergency rating of 1,695 h.p. at 10,000 feet and a maximum speed of 439mph at 25,000 feet.



A similar aircraft to FZ142, fitted with a Malcolm hood.

A survey using metal detectors was carried out with the approval of the local farmer land owner and a large mass of metal was found on a section of river bank. Having satisfied ourselves that there was something to be investigated, Ministry of Defence approval was sought and obtained, the knowledge that there would be no human remains at the site probably easing its clearance.

The farmer generously loaned our group a JCB and industrial water pump mounted on a trailer as the streamside location was unsurprisingly marshy. Attempted recovery was set for a weekend and about a dozen of us, including my young son, assembled at the site to initially attempt a manual dig with hand tools. Almost immediately a smoking ban was introduced as once the soggy ground was broken a very strong aroma of aviation fuel pervaded the area. Large heavily damaged metal sections soon began to emerge from the hole that was being formed, though at the same time large quantities of water appeared to fill the holes we were creating.

Operation of the water pump initially contained the volume of rising water and the flow was pumped onto land behind the dig rather than into the stream to avoid pollution so far as possible. The JCB was attached to the emerging wreckage with a cable in an attempt to pull it free from the suction created by the liquid mud surrounding it. This enabled us to identify that we were looking at the forward fuselage of the aircraft still attached to large sections of the wings. We also realised that the Packard Merlin engine was still in place, creating a heavy mass that was countering the tractive effort of the JCB, which was struggling on a somewhat unsupportive surface. A second water pump was brought to site on the second day which allowed better access to the wreckage through the still rising waters and we made every effort to recover any items that could be disassembled from the airframe. After two days work we allowed the remaining wreck to sink back into its resting place after releasing the retaining cable and refilled the holes smoothing over the

area. Our group returned home, having the appearance of "mud men" for a second day and then spent some time over the next few weeks at the Museum cleaning up and identifying our "finds". Most of which were subsequently put on public display. A small selection of those parts is shown in the photograph below.

Key to identification of parts:

Top row – (steel) inspection cover: electrical connector and plug

Second row – bracket with right angled electrical connector: cracked rubber fuel pipe: cables coupler (steel): grommet or washer (rubber)

Third row – battery connection cable (with small section of Bakelite battery casing): right angle control cable box, part no MO-211-A # 6357

Bottom row – aluminium length of fuel pipe with (steel) union: aluminium airframe part (marked # 73 ? 1272): aluminium pressed cover

Regrettably, due to an inability to agree terms for continued occupation with the airfield owner, the Booker Museum was closed and the collection dispersed, mainly to other museums. I am not sure whether any more recent attempts have been made to recover the remaining sections and engine of the aircraft.

Notes

1) R (Ronnie) Malcolm had formed the Malcolm Company in 1936. In addition to producing the aircraft hoods, other diverse WWII activities included developing towing equipment for the A W Albemarle GT Mk VI, a personnel mine blast protection shoe, a rotor equipped jeep and a battle tan retrieval hook. Most of this work was carried out near White Waltham airfield in Berkshire. Ronnie Malcolm joined the Air Transport Auxiliary (which had its Headquarters at White Waltham) in 1943, leaving Marcel Lobel, previously chief designer with Fairey Aviation, to move the company forward. The company was renamed ML Aviation in 1946 and eventually was merged into Flight Refuelling Ltd., now part of the Cobham Group. A display of the company's products may now be found at the Museum of Berkshire Aviation, Woodley, Berkshire.

2) The first Mustangs fitted with Merlin engines had been first flown in Britain on 13 October 1942 and in the USA on 30 November 1942.

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