

COST OF WAR

WITH THIS ISSUE, WE RETURN TO OUR FILES TO SELECT PHOTOGRAPHS OF AIRCRAFT THAT WERE DAMAGED OR DESTROYED IN COMBAT OR IN ACCIDENTS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

The more remote the war zone, the more quickly damaged aircraft were picked apart for useful components to keep other planes flying. That is exactly what is happening to Supermarine Spitfire Mk. Vc JG726/AN*L of No. 417 (Canadian) Squadron at Gourbrine airfield in Tunisia. During 1943, the field was used by the USAAF for the North African Campaign against the *Afrika Korps* and was home to the 51st Troop Carrier Wing and its four squadrons of C-47s for a brief period of time. After the USAAF moved out, the area reverted to agriculture and today no trace of the field can be found. No. 417 Squadron was also short-lived. Initially equipped with Hurricanes, the squadron was ordered to the Middle East to defend the Suez Canal and Nile Delta. Converting to Spitfires, it was the only Canadian squadron in the Desert Air Force and was to provide air defense and close support to the British Eighth Army through the closing stages of the Tunisian campaign and throughout the Sicilian and Italian campaigns. The squadron disbanded on 30 June 1945. Spitfire JG726 was being flown by F/Lt. W.J. Whiteside on 19 April 1943 when he hit a Lockheed Hudson on takeoff. He escaped without injury and the Spitfire could have been repairable but there were no facilities for such work so it was disassembled (note two other Spitfires in the background) for parts. This view is extremely interesting since it shows how the young mechanics used anything at hand to accomplish their task. The right wing is supported by 55-gal barrels while being stripped of parts and also gives a good view of the top roundel. The yellow leading edge identification stripe has been painted out with brown paint and the camouflage colors have been faded out by the intense sun.

This image is from a Japanese postcard and shows destroyed Royal Air Force aircraft in Malaysia. The early days of fighting in Malaysia were disastrous for the RAF. Equipped with a blend of obsolete aircraft, the RAF was no match for the battle-hardened Japanese pilots and many of the RAF pilots had received no training in aerial combat. The photo also shows why there are hardly any surviving Brewster Buffalo fighters in existence today. The Buffalos were literally blown out of the air but these aircraft seem to have been victims of ground accidents and several appear to have been stripped for parts. On the upper left is a Hawker Hurricane.

