

The Takoradi Route and the Lost Spitfire

This story is an addition to the previous article that I wrote which was entitled **The Takoradi Route in WWII**, and can be found further down on the Research page of the PMHG website.

I received an email in January 2026 from a gentleman in Florida called Colin Sanger, who had been looking at our Group website, and a short while later I was privileged to meet Colin, and talk about the research that his late father, Len, had been carrying out regarding a Spitfire, serial number **JK808**. The story of Len's connection with this aircraft begins when he was a 13-year-old boy in the dark days of 1940. I will let Len set the scene:



"...I decided to try and find out more about Bob [Left], whose fiancé lodged with her mother at our family home in Sidcup, Kent, during the Second World War.

On his visits we got to know him quite well although these were not frequent. The Empire Training Scheme taking him to Canada, flying Harvards, and then to Scotland as part of his training to be a pilot in the R.A.F. On one occasion while on leave, he took cover with us under the oak dining room table which served as our shelter during the worst of the night's bombing in the winter of 1940-41. I was then 13-years-old. Five of us under one table must have looked ridiculous I suppose, now I come to think of it, was it English oak? I don't know, but it did the job when ceilings gave way to gravity...At the end of his [Bob's] training, they were married, a hurried affair, being called for active service within a few days of obtaining leave.

Later in the war we heard sadly he had been killed in a flying accident. By then both ladies had moved and our ways divided, as with the house after surviving a number of narrow squeaks, Hitler finally succeeded when the mother of all squeaks (in modern terms) arrived unexpectedly in the form of a V2 not far from our front door, bringing this phase of the story to a close."



In 1989 Len began his research into what happened to Bob, starting at the little church in Foots Cray, Kent, where Robert (Bob) Sydney Hills married Elizabeth Minnie Hargrove on July 13th, 1941. [left]. Here he was able to confirm Bob's surname. Later, he contacted the Royal British Legion, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the R.A.F. Personal Management Centre and the Air Historical Branch of the M.O.D. (remember, this was before the internet and email). Len continues:

"...the recorded facts finally became known to me and read as follows: **Spitfire Vc JK808** was dispatched by ship from Castle Bromwich [where it was built] to arrive in Casablanca, docking there early in April 1943 and placed on charge to No. 1 Aircraft Delivery Unit Middle East. This aircraft, piloted by Flight Sergeant

R. S. Hills R.A.F.V.R...took off on 22nd April from No. 53 Staging Post, Maiduguri, Nigeria, on the next stage of its flight to, I believe, Fort Lamy, but crashed shortly afterwards due to oiling of the windscreen.”

The Ministry of Defence added that:

“Unfortunately, an oil leak obscured the windscreen resulting in poor visibility and causing the Spitfire’s crash at 07.34 hours, the pilot dying from injuries at 07.45. The actual 1943 date was April 22.

The aircraft...would not have worn any marks except the serial number. At that time **JK808** is unlikely to have been assigned to a squadron or unit prior to departure. **JK808** may have worn a ‘local’ chalked-on number/letter for use as a call sign.”



The Commonwealth War Graves Commission provided the information that Flt/Sgt Hills, 1181269, was 29 years of age, the son of Sydney George and Daisy Mary Anne Hills, of Sydenham, London; husband of Elizabeth Minnie Hills of Sydenham. He is buried in Maiduguri Cemetery, Bornu Province, Nigeria, European Section, Grave 3. [*The grave is the one on the extreme right*].

The grave inscription reads,

“TRUE LOVE BY LIFE,
TRUE LOVE BY DEATH IS TRIED;
LIVE THOU FOR ENGLAND
HE FOR ENGLAND DIED.”

Len added:

“Maiduguri, I have read since, was a staging post on what was to become known as the Takoradi Run [Route], a tortuous ferry route from the Gold Coast around the Southern Sahara, then up over the Sudan to Khartoum and then to Abu Sueir a distance of 3,700 miles.”

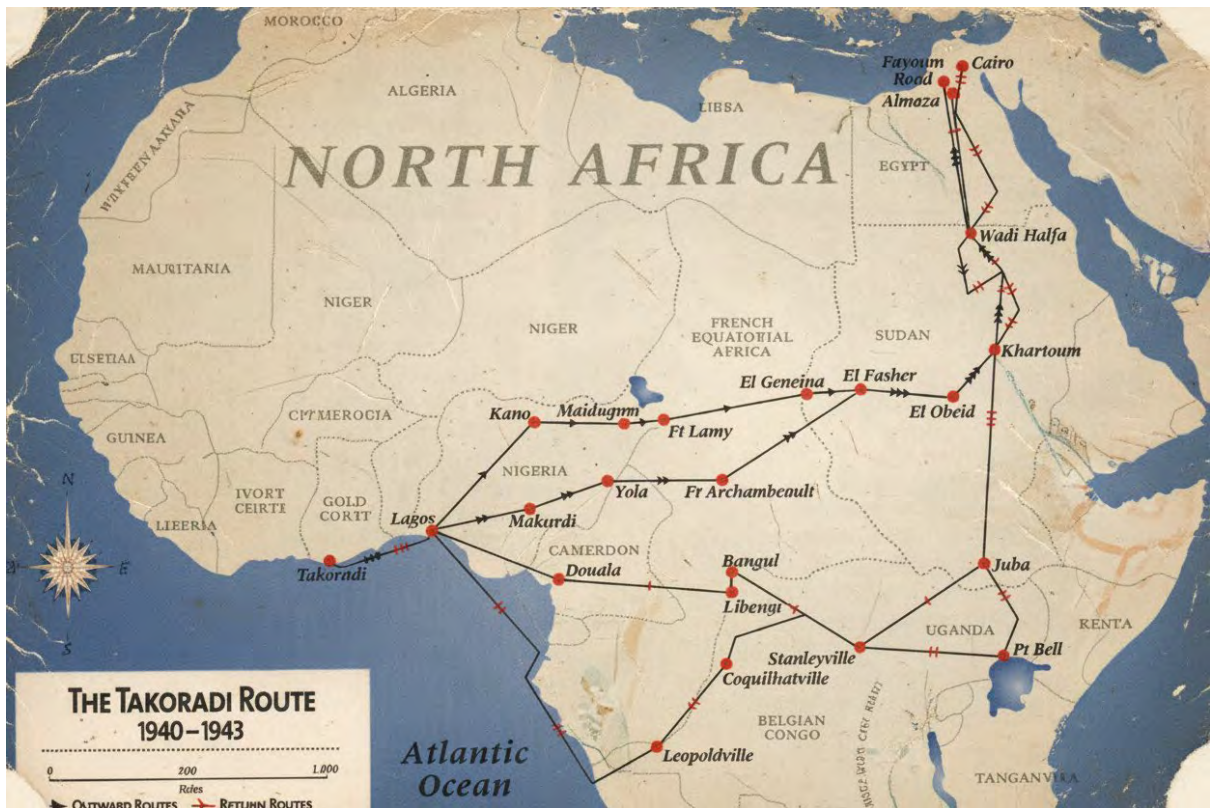
When in 1992 Len was looking through the April issue of FlyPast magazine, he came across a story entitled ‘*Spitfire Yugoslav Mystery*’. This was about a Mk V Spitfire that had served in the Yugoslav Air Force, and the writer, Peter R. Arnold, was musing on the fact that in two different photographs the aircraft had two different serial numbers. One, JK448, which was its number while in Yugoslav service, yet in 1944/45 while already in Yugoslav Air Force markings, for a period of time it carried the serial **JK808**. What’s more, he discovered that this aircraft still existed and was on display in the Belgrade Aviation Museum, Serbia, (previously the Yugoslav Museum of Aviation). The serial number on the fuselage, after a full restoration, is **JK808**.

It seems incredible but the evidence points to the fact that **JK808** crashed in April 1943 killing the pilot, but was subsequently recovered, repaired and sent on to eventually be handed over to the Yugoslav Air Force. (***JK808** in the museum below. This aircraft is quite a rare survivor having been fitted with a tropical filter under the nose*).



The Takoradi route was one gigantic ferry flight operation in WWII. More than 5,000 aircraft of several types were ferried across that route from 1940 to 1943. The R.A.F. had recovery teams, specialist, skilled groups of engineers and technicians whose job it was to recover crashed aircraft along that route. Tractors and trailers specially designed were precious tools in the hands of these men. Many aircraft crashed in the desert due to running out of fuel or overdue for mechanical reasons but when they were spotted the rescue teams were despatched and soon the crewmembers and planes were saved. (*Below: **JK808** in Yugoslav Air Force markings in 1944*).





The Takoradi Route (*above*), showing the port of Takoradi and Maiduguri along the route, where **JK808** crashed.

Despite the state of any aircraft, they were dismantled and sent back to the RAF maintenance service centres along the route. There the teams worked hard to replace damaged parts and get the aircraft ready to fly again. For those severely damaged, the useful parts were salvaged for re use. Spare parts were in short supply and R.A.F. engineers were often able to build a new aircraft from the remains of 2 or 3 others. (*Below, JK808 in the Yugoslav Air Force in 1945*).





Colin Sanger, very generously gave me Len's research plus two of Len's paintings. One painting was a fantastic picture of **JK808** (*above*), as it would have looked while being flown by Flt/Sgt Hills.

We will let Len have the final word, who joined the Navy when he grew up. It is a simple tribute to the men of the R.A.F. in WWII:

"Thinking back to far off days, more than 50 years ago and although eventually my uniform was navy blue, I will always have a weak spot for those who, like Bob, wore the R.A.F. lighter hue. Why? Well, I still remember looking up with more than a little pride at the antics our fighter pilots from Biggin Hill were getting up to; to show the Luftwaffe they were just not wanted over London and certainly not over the hop fields of Kent. Becoming an old fellow now, who likes his occasional pint, I am ever more convinced those chaps had the right idea."