

THE LOSS OF WING COMMANDER A. WARBURTON, RAF.

On the morning of 12 April, 1944, two Lockheed F-5Bs (the photo reconnaissance version of the P-38 fighter) took off from Mount Farm airfield, near Oxford, and one of these F-5s did not return. It's loss caused a major furor at Mount Farm and in the higher councils of the Royal Air Force, because the pilot of this USAAF airplane was an RAF officer who should not have been flying the mission.

The 357th Fighter Group played only a small part in this drama, but it is a story worth telling, even if only briefly.

Earlier this year, I recieved a letter, forwarded from our Art Swanson, from RAF ex-Squadron Leader Tony Spooner, DSO DFC. (for those not familiar with British practice, it is customary to include the initials of their gallantry decorations after their names. In this case, Spooner was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and the Distinguished Flying Cross for W2 service.)

Tony Spooner is the author of WARBURTON'S WAR, the recently published biography of W/Cmd Adrian Warburton. This remarkable man, who many believed to be one of the great aviators of WW2, flew the startling total of almost 400 combat missions out of Malta and general area during the dark days when the island was under continuous attack by German and Italian aircraft. Although he, and his gunner, scored enough victories to be an ace, he was not a fighter pilot, but was involved only in photo reconnaissance, probably the most acclaimed PR pilot of WW2.

With Malta's ordeal over, Warburton was back in England by the early part of 1944, recovering from a jeep accident and acting as a liaison officer with the U.S. 7th Photo Reconnaissance Group at Mount Farm. Although not medically cleared for flying duties, he took off on 12 April, 1944, in company with Captain Carl Chapman, an experienced 7th Group pilot. Their objective was to photograph targets deep in Germany. Upon completion of the mission the two F-5s headed south from Lake Constance. Captain Chapman eventually returned to Mount Farm, but Warburton disappeared under mysterious circumstances and his fate remains unknown.

The purpose of Tony Spooners letter to us (the 357th Grp assn), was to confirm a fact he had just learned - that two 357th Group P-51s had escorted the two F-5s. If this were true it might help to establish other facts.

I was able to confirm this by sending him a copy of our mission report for that date. Although eight P-51s, four from the 362nd, and four from the 36th, were detailed for the mission, six of them lost contact in overcast, and only Kit Carson and Ollie Harris of the 362nd remained to carry out the escort. After rendezvous with the F-5s, they split to photograph different targets, with a single Mustang remaining with each. Apparently Carson was the one who stayed with Warburton, while Ollie Harris accompanied Chapman.

During a recent breakfast re-union with Kit Carson (and Ed and Marion Hyman, of the 362nd), Kit said that he recalled the mission clearly, but had no RT contact with the F-5 pilot and did not know he was an RAF Wing Commander.

The two Lightnings, with their Mustang escorts, joined up again at Lake Constance shortly after noon, with the F-5s heading south, possibly to Sardinia or Sicily, while Harris and Carson returned to base without incident.

The disappearance of the RAF's most decorated photo reconn pilot caused a considerable stir at Mount Farm and in the RAF. There were many unusual and mysterious aspects to the affair, which are fully spelled out in Spooner's book, but cannot be covered here. Colonel George Lawson, commander of the 7th PRG, in a recent letter to me, said that Chapman was a personnel friend of Brig/Gen Elliot Roosevelt, C.O. of the 325th PR Wing, and that Chapman, as operations officer, could have scheduled the mission himself, without Lawson's approval. Colonel Lawson also expressed the opinion that Warburton should not have been flying the F-5 on a combat mission, due to the little time he had in the airplane.

For the 357th, it had been a routine mission and it is unlikely that anyone in the 357th command section was aware of anything unusual. After 44 years we were able to confirm that the two F-5s did indeed RV at Lake Constance, and head south together, a fact which had been in doubt before.

The 357th's part in the affair was small, but it is an interesting sidelight on group history.

Merle Olmsted



Leonard "Kit" Carson
December, 1944
"And it came out here"

Photo-Ed Quillen