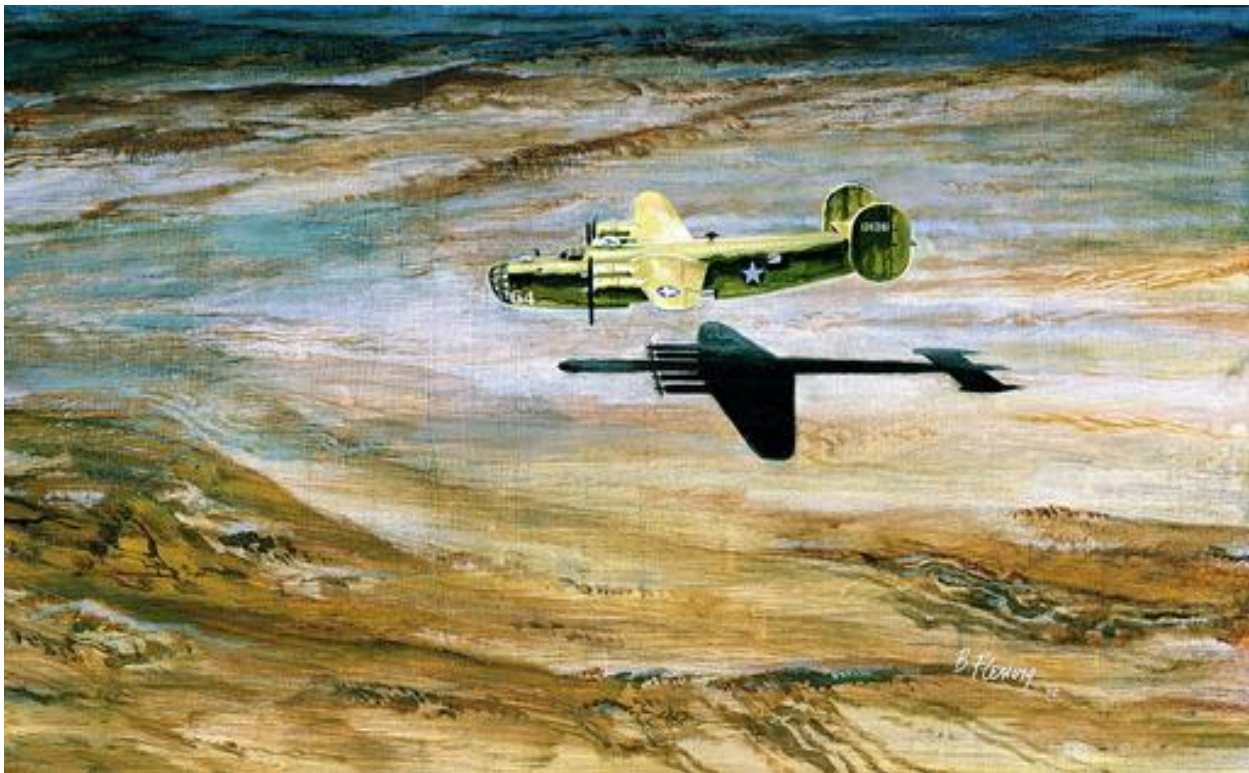


The Proud Lady That Died Alone

Written by Andy Owen



William Hatton was the last to leave her.

Once he had gone, she was all alone. She knew she was going to die.

And it was going to happen soon.

The wind was howling through the open door and she was losing height quickly now, although she stayed pretty much in level flight.

Engines 1,2 and 3 had already been feathered and the remaining engine was losing the battle to keep her in the air.

She had flown 26 kilometres on her own after the crew left her. She started to shudder with fear as she was 50 feet from the ground.

Incredibly, she landed on her belly on the sand and her momentum carried her about 700 meters, before she came to a stop. The remaining engine was still running as she hit the ground, but it stopped soon after.

The fuselage broke in half behind the wings, seconds before she came to a stop, so it stayed almost touching the rest of the plane.

The rest of her was intact.



She was hurting. But she was still alive for now.

But, she was very angry that she had been dumped like this. She had been abandoned and was now completely alone in the Libyan desert.

It was April 4th 1943. This had been her very first mission.

Her sad story started only a few weeks before. Lady Be Good was a USAF B-24D Liberator.

She had only just been assigned to the 514th Bomb Squadron on March 25th. She became part of the 376th Bombardment Group (Heavy) based at Soluch Field near Benghazi in Libya.

Her 9-man crew were also new - as they had only arrived in Libya a week before, on March 18th. They were:

1st Lieutenant William J. Hatton, Pilot

2nd Lieutenant Robert F. Toner, Co-Pilot

2nd Lieutenant D.P. Hays, Navigator

2nd Lieutenant John S. Woravka, Bombardier

Technical Sergeant Harold J. Ripslinger, Flight Engineer

Technical Sergeant Robert E. LaMotte, Radio Operator

Staff Sergeant Guy E. Shelley, Gunner/Asst Flight Engineer

Staff Sergeant Vernon L. Moore, Gunner/Asst Radio Operator

Staff Sergeant Samuel E. Adams, Gunner



Left to right: Hatton, Toner, Hays, Woravka, Ripslinger, LaMotte, Shelley, Moore, Adams.

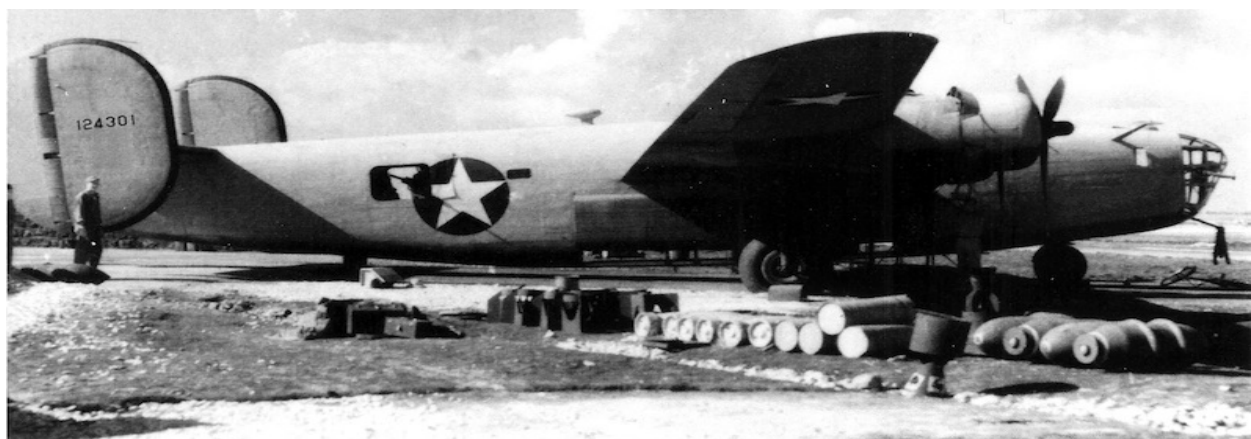
On that morning, Lady Be Good and her new crew discovered that they would be flying their first combat mission with twenty-four other B-24's, to bomb the harbour of Naples late in the afternoon, in a two-part attack.

The leading group of twelve B-24s would go in first, followed by a second wave of 13 planes, including Lady Be Good. Following the attack, all planes were expected to return to their various bases in North Africa.

There was a mixture of excitement and nervousness as the pilot of Lady Be Good, 1st Lieutenant William Hatton and his co-pilot, 2nd Lieutenant Robert Toner, pushed the four Pratt & Whitney engines to full throttle for takeoff.

Lady Be Good lumbered down the Soluch airstrip and was soon airborne over the Mediterranean. It was 2.15pm.

The B24 was not altogether a popular plane with crews as it was not an easy handle. Liberator pilots had a reputation for having big biceps from wrestling non-stop with clumsy control capabilities.



She was the 21st of the 25 to take off and almost immediately experienced poor visibility, flying through a sandstorm.

This kept her from joining the formation of the 12 other Liberators.

She fell behind the others - and was on her own. Something she was going to experience a lot more of...

Nine of the other B-24s aborted the mission after developing engine trouble because of the sandstorm.

Lady Be Good arrived over Naples at 7:50 pm at an altitude of 24,900 feet.

The harbour and surrounding area were completely socked-in by bad weather.

Trying to bomb the primary target was impossible.

Lady Be Good decided to try and hit the secondary target, but it appears that this also proved impossible, so they turned for home and dumped their bombs in the Mediterranean on the route back to Libya.

Flying alone, Hatton radioed Soluch airfield at 12.12 am for directional assistance, as the aircraft's automatic direction finder was no longer working.

What happened after that is a bit of a mystery.

Their base at Soluch had lit flares to guide the plane in, but, for some reason, these were not spotted by the crew and Lady Be Good continued to fly southward over North Africa, deeper and deeper into the Sahara Desert.



Clearly, the crew thought they were above the Mediterranean. From far above and in the dark, it would have been easy to mistake the empty dunes for rolling waves.

They flew on and on. For two more hours.

At 2 am the fuel became critically low and Hatton ordered everyone to put on their parachutes and prepare to leave the aircraft.

He feathered the 3 engines that showed empty on the gauges and trimmed the plane to run level on engine 4 only, to enable a safe bailout.

They all parachuted out. Lady Be Good was on her own again.

Fifteen and a half years later - on November 9th 1958, Lady Be Good was spotted from the air by a British oil exploration team working for BP, in Libya's Kufra District.

The team immediately contacted authorities at Wheelus Air Base in Tripoli, but, staggeringly, no attempt to examine the aircraft was made.

The reason given, was that no records existed of any plane believed to have been lost in that area.

The location of the wreckage was marked on maps to be used by future oil-prospecting teams that were due to set out to explore the Calanscio Sand Sea the next year.

On February 27th, 1959, British oil surveyor Gordon Bowerman and British geologists Donald Sheridan and John Martin spotted the wreckage - and this time a recovery team from Wheelus Air Base eventually visited the crash site arriving on May 26, 1959.



Lady Be Good had been alone in the desert for over 16 years.

The recovery team were amazed at what they found.

She was immaculately preserved.

The machine guns still worked, as did the radio - and there were supplies of food and water. The oxygen bottles were full, the magnetic compass was still fine and there were desert survival kits on board.

A flask of tea was found to be still drinkable.

There were no human remains on board the aircraft, or in the surrounding crash site area, nor were parachutes found. So, it was clear the crew had bailed out.

The logbook of the navigator, 2nd Lieutenant "Deep" Hays, which was still on board, made no mention of the aircraft's movements after the crew commenced their return leg from Naples.

How strange is that? Maybe it's explained by the fact that Hays had been on his first combat mission. But why didn't they use the radio again, if it was working OK? Surely they could have alerted someone to their plight and the fact they were going to bail out?

Subsequent examinations of the remains and personal items showed that eight of the nine airmen managed to parachute safely down to the desert from the aircraft, 16 kilometres before it finally crashed.

They all were wearing Mae West's, which indicated they believed they were above the Mediterranean. It must have been a real shock when they landed on sand.

They located each other by firing their revolvers and signal flares into the air. However, one crew member - Woravka - did not rendezvous with the others.

They waited a couple of hours and when he didn't turn up, they decided to start walking northwards.

A diary, recovered from the pocket of co-pilot Robert Toner, recorded the crew's suffering on the walk northward. It indicated that none of the men were aware they had been flying over land when they bailed out, or that they were 640 km inland.

They believed they were fairly close to the Mediterranean coast. As they walked, the group left behind footwear, parachute scraps, Mae West vests and other items as markers to show searchers their path.

The diary also says the group survived for eight days in the desert, with only a single canteen of water to share.

In February 1960, the United States Army conducted a formal search of the area for the remains of the crew.



Five bodies - those of Hatton, Toner, Hays, LaMotte and Adams - were found on February 11th.

They had walked 65 miles from where they had bailed out.

With the 5 clearly in a very bad way, the evidence suggests that Shelley, Ripslinger and Moore had set off north, to try and find help.

Three months later, after an extended search, a US Army helicopter found the body of Ripslinger located a further 24 miles further north.

The body of Shelley was found a further 34 miles away. Unbelievably, Shelley had walked 123 miles from the bailout site before the desert took his life.



The bodies of Shelley and Ripslinger were the only ones found during the search.

Another British Petroleum oil exploration crew discovered the remains of Woravka, three months later. The configuration of the parachute found with his body, suggested that it did not fully open - and that he died as a result of an overly rapid descent

The remains of Vernon L. Moore have never officially been found.

However, his remains may have been recovered and buried by a desert patrol of the British Army in 1953. As they were unaware that any allied aircrews were missing in the area, the human remains may have been recorded but then buried without further investigation.

It was an astonishing feat that these very brave men survived as long as they did.

The temperature was 130 degrees during the day and close to freezing at night.

And all they had to drink was half a canteen of water between them all.



The diary of Co-Pilot Robert F. Toner, was found with him and gives a harrowing day-by-day account of their fight for survival:

SUNDAY, APR. 4, 1943

Naples- 28 planes. Things pretty well mixed up- Got lost returning. Out of gas, jumped, landed in desert at 2:00 in morning, no one badly hurt, can't find John, all others present.

MONDAY 5

Start walking N.W., still no John, a few rations, 1/2 canteen of water, 1 cap full per day. Sun fairly warm. good breeze from N.W. Nite very cold, no sleep. Rested & walked.

TUESDAY 6

Rested at 11:30, sun very warm, no breeze, spent P.M. in hell, no planes, etc. rested until 5:00 P.M. walked & rested all nite, 15 min. on, 5 off.

WEDNESDAY

Same routine, every one getting weak, can't get very far, prayers all the time, again P.M. very warm, hell. Can't sleep. Every one sore from ground.

THURSDAY 8

Hit Sand Dunes, very miserable, good wind but continuous blowing of sand, everybody now very weak, thought Sam & Moore were all gone. LaMotte eyes are gone, everyone else's eyes are bad. Still going N.W.

FRIDAY 9

Shelley, Rip, Moore separate and try to go for help, rest of us all very weak, eyes bad. Not any travel, all want to die, still very little water. Nites are about 35, good N. wind, no shelter, 1 parachute left.

SATURDAY, APR. 10, 1943

Still having prayer meetings for help. No signs of anything, a couple of birds; good wind from N. Really weak now, can't walk, pains all over, still all want to die. Nites very cold, no sleep.

SUNDAY 11

Still waiting for help, still praying, eyes bad, lost all our weight, aching all over, could make it if we had water; just enough left to put our tongue to, have hope for help very soon, no rest, still same place.

MONDAY 12

No help yet, very (unreadable) cold nite.

Those were the last words written.

Perseverance and Endurance medical experts had previously estimated the limit a man could travel without water, was 25 miles, with a life expectancy of two days.

Yet with only a negligible amount of food and water, these eight men had journeyed 65 miles together, with Shelley walking a further 58, the final 10 of these were on his own, after Ripslinger had died.

I'm sure he will have known that he was the only one of the crew still alive.

Both of Shelley's dog tags were uncovered, three to four inches beneath the sand. Two hours of diligent search uncovered 95 percent of his remains.

Adjacent to the remains were Shelley's trousers. In one pocket were his papers and wallet. In the other they found the papers and billfold of Ripslinger.

When Ripslinger died, Shelley will have removed these effects to give to his family.

The crew might have survived if they had known their actual location. If they had headed south the same distance they walked north, Lady Be Good was waiting for them with provisions, supplies and a working radio.

Still further south, within walking distance, the Oasis of Wadi Zighen awaited their life-saving visit.

The U.S. Air Force decided that since the condition of the plane was so good, working parts could be salvaged and used as spares for other aircraft.

This led to some very weird happenings - and many feel that Lady Be Good appeared to take these opportunities to start venting her anger at what had happened to her.

Three planes that received spare parts from Lady Be Good fell victim to misfortune.

The luckiest got away in one piece, but only after ditching cargo and making an emergency landing.

Another transport plane, which had a radio from Lady Be Good, crashed into the Mediterranean. Its crew bailed out over the ocean in an eerie parallel to the situation Lady Be Good's crew faced.

Finally, and most tragically, a C-47 Skytrain transport plane with parts from Lady Be Good, disappeared completely over the Mediterranean with its entire crew.

One of the few remains that were discovered, happened to be an armrest bearing a serial number from the Lady. The armrest washed up on a Libyan beach, spookily very close to where Lady Be Good had been trying to reach on that fateful night in 1943.

Eventually, the legend of Lady Be Good led to souvenir hunters seeking out her shattered remains to loot whatever could be carried.

We have no records of what happened to these people, but it would be no surprise if some of them encountered big problems.

Death and peril seemed to follow all those who badly treated or disturbed this proud Lady.



In August 1994, the remains of Lady Be Good were recovered by a team led by Dr. Fadel Ali Mohamed.

They were taken to a Libyan military base in Tobruk for safekeeping.

They are now stored at Jamal Abdelnasser Air Force Base, Libya.

Parts can be seen at the National Museum of the United States Air Force.

A propeller can be seen in front of the village hall in Lake Linden, the home of Robert E. LaMotte.

A damaged propeller is displayed in Lake Linden, Michigan.



The U.S. Army Quartermaster Museum at Fort Lee, Virginia has a collection of personal items, such as watches, silk survival maps, and flight clothing from the crew members who were recovered.

Several of these items are still on display.

Shelley's watch was still working perfectly, 17 years after the crash.

An altimeter and manifold pressure gauge were salvaged from the plane in 1963 and are on display at the March Field Air Museum near Riverside, CA.

A Royal Air Force team visited the site in 1968 and hauled away components including an engine (later donated to the US Air Force) for evaluation by the McDonnell Douglas company.

This is a very sad story about 9 incredibly brave, but inexperienced men - and a brand new plane.

They only met each other a few days before the tragic flight.

It was to be a very short, troubled and ultimately doomed relationship.

Mistakes were made. Big ones. And they all paid the ultimate price.

Lady Be Good landed herself on one engine.

She had done her job.

But she was badly hurt - and left abandoned and alone in the desert for sixteen years.



She was a haunted soul.

She was angry.

And, she remained that way for the rest of her days.

What is it they say about a woman scorned?