



## **Boeing B-17E *Flying Fortress***

Serial Number 41-9234

### **Location**

On a hillside not far from Kaisenik Village

Near Wau, Papua New Guinea

GPS 7.20.14S 146.48.21E

It remains one of the most accessible, spectacular and intact wartime relics in New Guinea. Yet for many years its true identity was shrouded in mystery. It should have been easily identified by the serial number stencilled on the fin, but this Flying Fortress displayed Royal Air Force markings, with roundels on the wings and fuselage and even a British serial number – FL 461. There is no record of British or Australian units flying B-17s in the SWPA, so rumours persisted about secret missions and suchlike for years. In fact, the British markings, although real, were misleading. As a result of years of exposure to New Guinea's elements and hot sun, the old bomber's wartime American markings had been erased, revealing the earlier British lend-lease markings beneath them.

The Black Cat Pass Fortress is one of thirty-two brand-new Flying Fortresses delivered to Cheyenne, Wyoming, USA, between May and June 1942, en route to Britain as part of President Theodore Roosevelt's Lend-Lease agreement. Boeing applied the RAF roundels and numbers at the factory, but retained their original Army Air Forces radio call numbers on their tails. These would be painted over after the aircraft arrived in England. However, during the first week of August 1942, four of this batch of Fortresses - #41-9196, #41-9234, #41-9235 and #41-9244 were assigned instead to the 19<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, based at 7-Mile Strip near Port Moresby. Within a few months of their New Guinea arrival two of these Fortresses had been lost however - #196 was shot down over Rabaul on 5<sup>th</sup> October 1942, and #235 which had been named CLOWN HOUSE, was ditched off Cooktown a few weeks later on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1942. In late 1942 the two remaining Fortresses from this English batch, #234 and #244, were transferred to the 43<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Group when the 19<sup>th</sup> BG was returned stateside by Commander of the Fifth Air Force, General George C. Kenney.

At this stage of the war the Japanese were determined to hold Lae and Salamaua at all costs, thus it was that Allied aircraft continually patrolled the sea lanes leading to these strategic areas, from Rabaul to the Huon Gulf. On 6<sup>th</sup> January 1943 a convoy reported as "*two light cruisers, four destroyers and four medium transports*", was sighted heading for Lae. The 43<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Group's Fortresses had a job to do. Two days later, at 1000 hours on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1943, Captain William Thompson, in PANAMA HATTIE, took off from 7-Mile with Lt Ray Dau and Francis Denault in LULU BELLE as wingmen. Dau was flying #41-9234 on their thirteenth mission. A third Fortress turned back soon after takeoff, but Thompson and Dau proceeded. The two reached Lae at midday, wary of Japanese fighters which were always quick to defend Lae.

On the bomb run Dau's bomber was rocked by at least three bursts of anti-aircraft fire which shattered the nose, damaged two engines, and put the top turret out of action.

## **⇒ PACIFIC GHOSTS ⇒**

Flight Engineer Sgt Lloyd DuMond, tail gunner Sgt Henry B. Bowen, and radio operator Sgt Robert Albright were all wounded by shrapnel, Bowen and Albright seriously. To cap matters off Japanese fighters fell on the two as they turned for home, and a thirty-minute running battle with them ensued. With only two good engines Dau and co-pilot 2/Lt Donald Hoggan could neither climb nor turn. Dau recalls,

*"We were headed up a small valley and couldn't get over the mountains. I knew it was just a matter of time, so I began looking for a soft place to set her down. We glided in on the side of a mountain at about 110 miles an hour, and as luck would have it, there were no trees - nothing but nice soft grass - so we slid along into a crash landing".*

The crash had been observed by Australian troops near Wau and Cpl John Smith led a small rescue party to the crash site. The wounded airmen were carried to Wau on litters, reaching there about dawn on 9<sup>th</sup> January 1943, but Albright and Bowen soon died of their wounds.

The recent wreck of the bomber, clearly visible from the air, attracted the attention of Fifth Air Force fighters and bombers flying to and from New Guinea targets. The official diary for the 8<sup>th</sup> Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron for 26<sup>th</sup> January 1943 records,

*"For several days we have been trying to photograph a wrecked airplane sighted by the 39<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron in the vicinity of Wau. But each time we followed the pursuits, we have never even located Wau. Today we varied the procedure and 2/Lt Loos led the pursuit to Wau. Result: photos of the wrecked ship, a B-17. This only proves what we already knew".*

Of the original batch of four Fortresses diverted from England, only one now remained - #244. Named HONIKUU OLOLE, this bomber was then lost too – on the evening of 21<sup>st</sup> May 1943 she was shot down by a J1N1 Irving night-fighter assigned to the 251<sup>st</sup> Kokutai over Gazelle Peninsula.

The wreck today is impressive, with little or no corrosion in the airframe. The walk there is relatively easy, and the closest native village is Kaisenik. Because of its accessibility most of the fittings have been taken although, despite the efforts of many over the years, both control columns remain firmly in place.