



# TIGHAR TRACKS



newsletter of

The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery

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Summer/Fall 1985

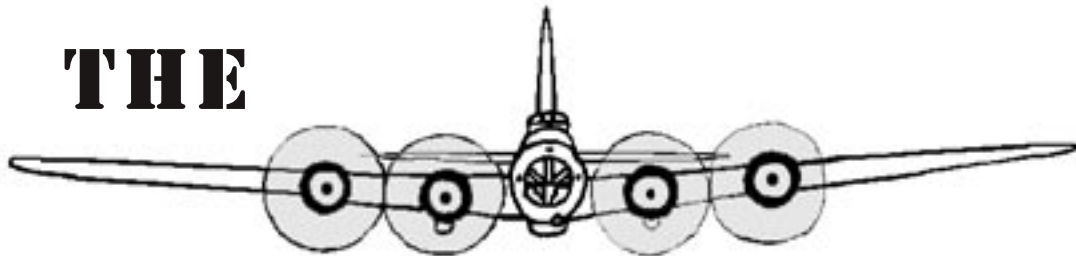
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Vol. 1, No. 3

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## NOTICE OF EXPEDITION

**THE**



**AGAIAMBO E**

**SITE** Agaiambo Swamp, Papua New Guinea  
**OBJECTIVE** Recovery of B-17E 41-2446  
**DATES** January 13--28, 1986

The following is an excerpt from a letter received October 30, 1985, by the Pentagon Air Force Public Affairs Office from the National Geographic Society:

"... We are happy to accept the Air Force's generous invitation to accompany its expedition with The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR) to New Guinea.

"The story of the B-17, its pilot, and the recovery process is fascinating and certainly worthy of national television coverage. We are excited about the opportunity to document the recovery project ..."

(cont. on next page)

Years of campaigning and months of negotiation have resulted in this plan:

- On January 13, 1986, a joint TIGHAR/USAF expedition will depart Travis AFB California for New Guinea aboard C-5A aircraft.
- In Port Moresby the expedition will transfer to RAAF Chinook helicopters for transportation to the recovery site in the Agaiambo Swamp.
- The B-17 will be disassembled in the swamp for airlift by the RAAF to Port Moresby.
- There the B-17 will be packed and loaded aboard the C-5A for return to Travis AFB.
- The aircraft will be restored for display as part of the Air Force Museum collection at the Travis Air Force Museum.

Membership on this expedition will be severely limited. The work force will be made up of highly experienced maintenance personnel from the Travis Air Force Museum. TIGHAR members who feel they have exceptional skills or experience, can be gone for three weeks, and are in excellent physical condition, may apply through TIGHAR for membership in the expedition. Final approval in all cases rests with the Air Force.

This is a project characterized by superlatives. The aircraft is the world's only restorable B-17E. It is the oldest original and complete B-17 in the world (NASM's B-17D "The Swoose" is a composite of cannibalized parts). It is one of four surviving B-17s that actually saw combat (the other three are "The Swoose," "Memphis Belle," and "Shoo Shoo Baby"). Of these only "Memphis Belle" and the Agaiambo E shot down attacking enemy aircraft. The operation will be the most ambitious, expensive, and complex recovery of a single historic aircraft in history. The Agaiambo swamp is one of the most hostile environments on earth. The level of private sector/military/international cooperation and coordination required to bring the B-17 home is without precedent in aviation archeology. The coverage of this historic operation by National Geographic will be the first time that prestigious organization has covered an aircraft recovery project. Fred Eaton, the pilot who set the B-17 down gently into the tall kunai grass in 1942, will be part of the recovery team. His reminiscences will lend a human side to the story National Geographic plans to weave around the B-17. The result should be a documentary that brings TIGHAR's message, the value of responsible aviation archeology, to millions of people.

The Travis Air Force Museum is doing a great job with the military logistical and technical preparations. TIGHAR has brought National Geographic into the project, making top level Air Force approval possible. International coordination with the Australian military and the Papuan government is progressing. The one big hurdle remaining is funding to cover living and other expenses during the 16 day expedition. These "incidentals" could run to more than \$100,000 but unless the money is found the free transportation from the USAF, the free helicopter support from the RAAF, and the coverage by National Geographic are meaningless. Compounding the problem is the time factor. We're racing the onset of the rainy season and if we don't get her out by the end of January we'll be skunked until next year. By that time, after all the publicity, she could be seriously vandalized by souvenir hunters. It's now or never.

It's up to TIGHAR to raise the money. We're approaching possible corporate sponsors and feel good about the prospects but it's a delicate job that must be done quickly. Phone calls, proposals, graphics and meetings in corporate boardrooms are expensive and we're calling on all TIGHAR members to help make it happen.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP BRING BACK

### THE AGAIAMBO E

Run the ad on the reverse of this page in your local paper. The bigger the paper, the bigger the ad, the better. There are thousands of people out there who will help if they are asked. Let's give them the chance. And send your own tax-deductible contribution to TIGHAR. We've arranged for the following premiums for contributions in appreciation:

#### \$50 Contribution.

News about this project is going to be breaking very fast between now and January. Each Friday we'll mail out a one page mission update to all expedition members. For \$50 you'll receive the Mission Update and, when the recovery is completed, a certificate of appreciation suitable for framing.

#### \$150 Contribution.

Video tape copies of the National Geographic coverage of the B-17 recovery will not be available commercially. TIGHAR will receive its own copy and have duplicate copies made and sent to those who have donated \$150. You will also receive the Mission Update and a certificate of appreciation.

#### \$250 Contribution.

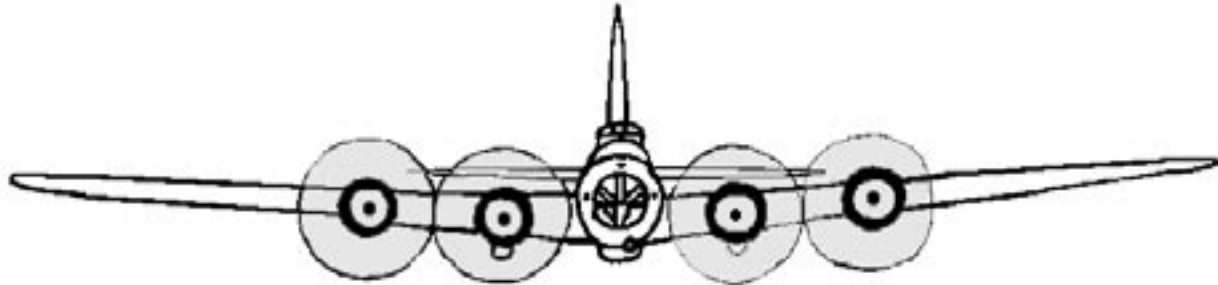
TIGHAR has commissioned award-winning aviation artist Donald Gillespie to produce a commemorative painting of the Agaiambo E which will be donated to the Air Force Art Collection. Limited edition prints of the painting, signed by the artist and by pilot Fred Eaton, will go to those who have supported the aircraft's recovery with a contribution of \$250 or more. The painting, in production now, will depict the B-17E on its final approach to the swamp--gear up, flaps down, inboard props feathered and outboards turning, just as it happened in 1942. Mission Update and certificate of appreciation included.

### THE STORY OF THE AGAIAMBO E

On December 6, 1941, B-17E Army Air Corps serial number 41-2446 was rolled from the Boeing factory at Seattle. She was the 49th of the 512 E's to be built. The E model was the first of the breed to deserve the appellation "Flying Fortress." Among many improvements over the earlier models Boeing engineers had given the E a greatly enlarged empennage with a giant vertical fin for bombing stability, and a twin .50 caliber stinger in the previously vulnerable tail. Another addition was a remotely operated Bendix belly turret aimed by means of a periscope housed in a blister. (The unit proved impractical and was replaced in later aircraft with the now-familiar Sperry ball turret.) As she sat on the Boeing ramp B-17E 41-2446 represented the finest bombing airplane in the world.

A little over two months later, February 23, 1942, 41-2446 took off in the pre-dawn blackness half a world away. Already a veteran of the desperate post-Pearl Harbor battle to stem the Japanese advance, the airplane climbed away from its base at Townsville Australia piloted by Lt. Fred Eaton. Their target was the Japanese naval stronghold at Rabaul 1,000 miles to the north. After a harrowing seven hour flight through a tropical storm front they bombed their target through a hole in the overcast, scoring hits on Japanese shipping. Two of twelve attacking Zeros were shot down but the bomber took hits in her fuel tanks. Unable to make it to the scheduled refueling stop at Port Moresby, New Guinea, Eaton decided to land wheels up on "what looked like a nice grassy field" inland from the New Guinea coast. The grassy field turned out to be the ten foot tall kunai grass of the Agaiambo swamp. The bomber slid to a stop virtually undamaged and Eaton and his eight crew members began a six week jungle odyssey that brought them back to their squadron alive but very much the worse for wear. 41-2446 stayed in the swamp, hidden by the tall grass and protected from scavengers by the snakes and crocodiles. Found by the RAAF in 1972, the bomber rests today much as the crew left her in 1942.

the world's only surviving



# **B-17E FLYING FORTRESS**

is scheduled for recovery from a  
swamp in Papua New Guinea  
in January of '86

## ***HELP IS NEEDED***

contact



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# MIDNIGHT GHOST

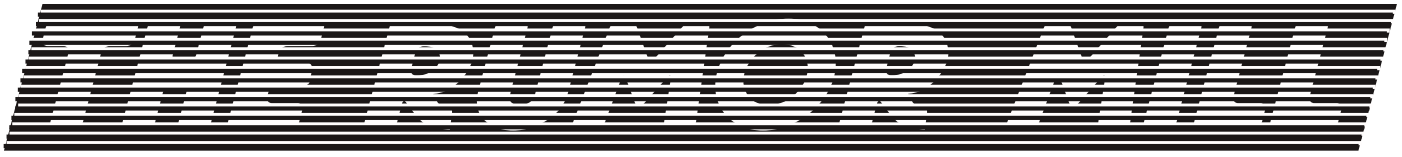


On October 18, 19, and 20, TIGHAR returned to the Round Lake Hills of northeastern Maine to continue the search for l'Oiseau Blanc, the White Bird of Charles Nungesser and Francois Coli. A team of 22 TIGHAR members from 10 states conducted operations in the Maine wilderness assisted by many enthusiastic local volunteers. The expedition resulted in new evidence regarded to be of such significance as to prompt an immediate return to Maine on November 8, 9, and 10 to try for discovery before the weather closes in for the winter. We have decided, in the interest of security, to withhold the new evidence from publication until we've had a chance to check it out thoroughly. If it turns out to be the real thing, TIGHAR members will be among the first to know. If it's a bust, we'll tell you that too.

As we prepare to head north once more, it is appropriate that we take a moment to restate our ultimate goal and review our accomplishments so far. It was 58 years ago when Nungesser and Coli "vanished like midnight ghosts." Had they succeeded in their Paris to New York attempt they would have beaten Lindbergh by almost two weeks. It is tempting to speculate on how the development of aviation might have taken a different course with a French victory replacing the triumph of the Lone Eagle. What is certain is that the drama of their attempt and the agony of their disappearance had a profound affect upon the world's response to Lindbergh's success. Unraveling the riddle of their fate will in no way discredit his achievement, but will instead solve one of aviation's greatest mysteries. It is the human compulsion to know the truth that fuels our efforts.

The task is awesome. The trail is 58 years cold and fraught with false leads and side-tracks. All that can be expected to survive of the wood and fabric aircraft are its massive twelve cylinder engine and a scattering of debris from cowlings, fuel tanks, etc. This wreckage, scant as it is, is likely to be almost completely buried deep in heavily forested wilderness. Against these odds are marshalled the cooperative efforts of TIGHAR, the National Air and Space Museum, the French Musee de l'Air and Bureau de l'Aviation Civile, the families of the crew, and the technological assistance of NASA.

Two years of work have resulted in a compelling body of evidence that the aircraft crashed near Round Lake in Maine. It is now a matter of finding the needle in a well-defined haystack. A series of expeditions last year began the process of narrowing down the search area, and we hope that this year's efforts will pay off with a discovery. When the aircraft is found, it will be meticulously excavated and analyzed so as to learn as much as possible about the final moments of the flight. Then the remains of l'Oiseau Blanc will be flown in a French aircraft to New York, and so complete its journey. Nungesser and Coli will then return to Paris to receive the belated tribute of their countrymen.



On our way to the October Midnight Ghost search we made a side-trip to check out an interesting story. Rumor had it that an auto junkyard in La Grange, Maine (northwest of Bangor) contained a B-17 which had been partly disassembled and deposited there many years ago. We found La Grange (no small feat) and the owner of the junkyard. His response to our inquiry was, "Ayup, just sold it." A week before "two fellas from Illinois" had removed the fuselage which was described as having no turrets. The wings, minus engines, remained, and were to be picked up later. We examined and photographed what was there and we asked a couple of questions. Who are the "two fellas from Illinois?" and what model B-17 is it? At first the description suggested a G modified for civilian use. Turbochargers were still in place and the wings were unpainted. Then we noticed the very clear remnants of "RMY" in large black letters on the underside of the left wing. Unpainted G's did not carry U.S. ARMY on their wing undersides. Previous wartime B-17s were painted OD/gray camouflage. As far as we can determine only pre-war B-17s were both unpainted and labeled U.S. ARMY. Suddenly the "no turrets" description is more interesting. Can anyone shed some light on this?



## Operation Sepulchre

The spring issue of TIGHAR Tracks carried an item in the Rumor Mill section entitled Underground Luftwaffe. For years there have been stories circulating about bomb-proof, booby-trapped hangars and production facilities in tunnels and hillsides in Germany. Supposedly, many such places were not destroyed at the end of the war but simply flooded or covered over and forgotten. The image of FW190s and Bf109s preserved like chariots in a Pharaoh's tomb is an enticing one but, just as with so many other legends and rumors, without specific information and the means to check it out it's just a good story.

Last spring we were at last able to link some specific locations to the legends and were especially fortunate in finding a patron who would fund some on-site research. June found us in Germany examining records in the archives of rebuilt cities, tracking down obscure books and research papers in university libraries, comparing wartime target maps and strike photos with modern topographic maps, and poking around some rather unnatural looking terrain features. We came home convinced that it's not a question of "Do such places exist?" The question is "How many?"

Most of the sites seem to be on land under the jurisdiction of the U.S. military. The next big step in getting them opened up is getting the cooperation and support of the Pentagon. Ironically, German museums are lacking examples of many World War II aircraft. Cooperation and assistance there has already been offered. This project demands cautious and methodical development but has the potential for significant success.



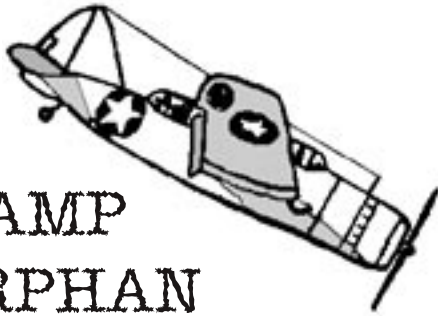
# OPERATION

# GOLD RUSH

Operation Gold Rush is the name we've given to TIGHAR's efforts to re-open the State of Alaska to responsible aviation archeological recoveries. Since 1980 the state has been virtually shut down to legitimate recovery operations, while "salvage pirates" have continued to plunder wrecks illegally. It's a bad situation which will continue to get worse until something is done, and TIGHAR has already made a start toward a solution. Phone calls, letters, and meetings in Washington resulted in TIGHAR being selected as the government sub-contractor to write the recommended standards and criteria to be used in the treatment and management of downed WWII aircraft in Alaska. Our report was submitted November 1 and we're now waiting to see if the government listens to what they asked us to tell them.

Operation Gold Rush could have a tremendous impact on the way state and federal agencies view the recovery and preservation of historic aircraft, not only in Alaska but in the rest of the U.S. as well. TIGHAR is dead serious about bringing aviation archeology out of the Stone Age. You'll be hearing much more about this issue.

## THE SWAMP ORPHAN



The Brewster SB2A Buccaneer reported to be in a North Carolina swamp continues to elude us. There are no complete Buccaneers in captivity (as far as we know) and we're beginning to think that this one has learned how to crawl. Pilots en route overhead often report seeing it, but when they go back to look it's gone. Twice now we've mounted aerial searches with good information and even local pilots participating but to date we've seen nothing but swamp. Rumors of recoveries abound and it's difficult to sort out the facts. Here's what we do know: a North American O-47 was recovered by the Marine Corps a couple of years ago in the same area. Initial reports had it that the O-47 had been on its back, while reports of the Buccaneer were of an airplane on its belly. That made us dismiss the possibility of mistaken identity. Recently we spoke with a Marine who participated in the O-47 recovery and he is sure that it was right side up. The two types would appear very similar to the layman and now the possibility that there was confusion seems greater. However, the same Marine tells us that there is indeed a Buccaneer in that swamp and he'll send us the coordinates. Here we go again!

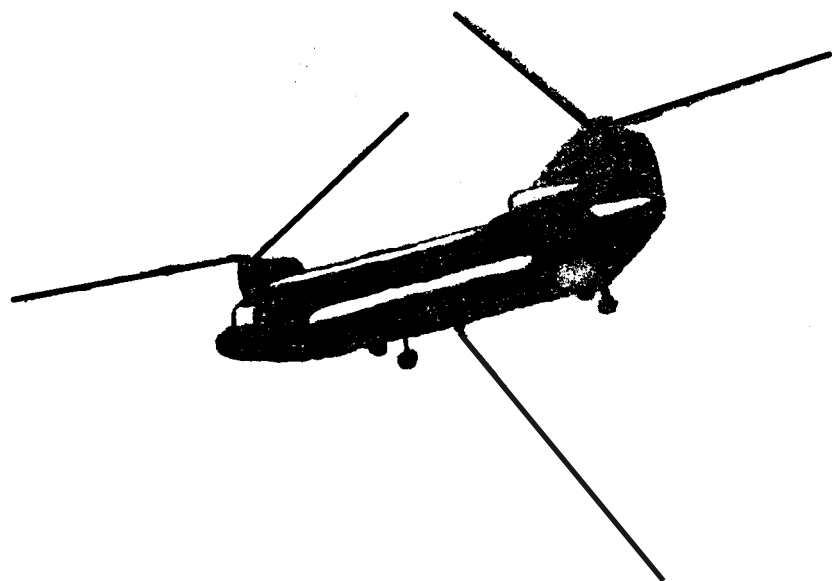
## TIGHAR TRAVELS

For TIGHAR management it's been a hectic summer of travel, research and fund-raising. In June we went to Paris courtesy of a French sponsor who wishes to remain anonymous. Meetings with the Director of the French Civil Aviation Bureau, the Director of the French Museum of Air and Space, and the granddaughter of Francois Coli provided a wealth of information useful in the pursuit of Project Midnight Ghost. At the Paris Air Show we were received with much interest in and enthusiasm for our efforts and found ourselves in demand by the French media.

From France we went to Britain to coordinate with aviation historical groups there. Interest in aviation archeology is high in the UK. On the Isle of Arran off the west coast of Scotland we compared notes with Dr. David Wallace, Donald Cowan, and Stewart Lamby who have documented several WWII crash sites there. A trip up into the hills to the remains of a Fleet Air Arm "Chesapeake" (Vindicator) which augered in in 1943 left us with a great deal of respect for the hardiness of our Scottish friends.

Germany was next for the initial research on what has become Operation Sepulchre. This project has major potential and is dealt with further in this issue of TIGHAR Tracks.

Back home we hardly had time to catch our breath when it was time to head for Oshkosh. A million people came to Oshkosh this year and it often seemed like they all stopped by the TIGHAR booth at once. We came away with many new members, many new leads to check out, and most importantly, confirmation that the aviation-minded public believes in the importance of responsible aviation archeology.



**EACH  
ONE  
REACH  
ONE**

As you can see from this issue of TIGHAR Tracks, TIGHAR is rapidly becoming one of the most influential voices in the aviation historical community. But we haven't even begun to realize our potential as a force for responsible aviation archeology. To do more we need a broader base and that means more expeditions and more members. So, we're asking each of our members to reach just one friend who shares his or her love of aviation history and bring them aboard as a TIGHAR member. Better yet, form a local chapter. Write TIGHAR headquarters for details.



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