

TIGHAR TRACKS

newsletter of

The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery

Spring 1986

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Proof of Concept

February 11, 1986. Baggage Claim--San Francisco International Airport. The overhead said 11:00 p.m. but our watches said 2:00 a.m. For Bruce Hoy, on the other end of a poor phone connection to Port Moresby, it was 5:00 p.m. tomorrow. The news was bad. The Ministry of Civil Aviation, Culture and Tourism had disapproved the recovery and export of B-17E 41-2446, and imposed a moratorium on all historic aircraft recovery in Papua New Guinea. For Bruce, Curator of the National Museum's Modern History branch, it meant he no longer had any way to trade for services he desperately needed to do his job. For us it meant a screeching halt to the largest aviation archeological expedition in history, just as we arrived in California to conduct a pre-departure briefing of the recovery team.

The choices were obvious. We could abandon the project, return what remained of the sponsors' money and walk away cursing; or we could step back, take a deep breath, and press on. It's easy to say "Press on" but there's nothing easy about spending recovery money on a no-guarantees diplomatic mission to the other side of the world. Even if we were successful in finding a way to put the project back on track there would now have to be much more fund-raising done before the recovery could come off. After some drama that will never appear on television, the decision and the trip were made.

Now we're back, not only with the diplomatic understandings and assurances that should make the recovery a reality but, more importantly, with proof that the concept of an unbiased international advocate of responsible aviation archeology really works. There is sure to be more trial and crisis before the B-17 comes home, but the problems will be tackled by a TIGHAR who has come of age.

MIDNIGHT GHOST

The Puzzle's Missing Piece?

A compelling body of evidence points to the wilderness north of Machias, Maine as the long sought resting place of l'Oiseau Blanc, the White Bird of Charles Nungesser and Francois Coli. Had the giant white biplane completed its non-stop Paris to New York flight on May 9, 1927, its heroic crew would today hold the honored place in history won less than two weeks later by Charles Lindbergh. Instead, Nungesser and Coli vanished, in the words of their successor, "like midnight ghosts."

Over the past two years TIGHAR has examined and re-examined every shred of available evidence which might yield a clue for the solution of the mystery. Accepting nothing on faith and tracing information to the original sources TIGHAR has seen traditionally held theories fall away and new information bring fresh insight into the problem. Slowly the pieces of the puzzle have come together but it also has become increasingly apparent that a key piece is missing.

Witness reports reliably trace the path of l'Oiseau Blanc to an area about 15 miles north of Machias, Maine. The only witness to the flight's end was woodsman Anson Berry who heard, but did not see, an aircraft approaching from the east. He told friends that he believed the aircraft crashed into the Round Lake Hills. In 1984 and 1985 search operations combed those hills but the results were negative. Then in late 1985 a new witness came forward with an account of an engine he had seen in the woods in 1970. His testimony was subjected to rigorous scrutiny and judged to be genuine. What he described could very well be the wreckage of l'Oiseau Blanc. The trouble was, he saw it two miles south of the Round Lake Hills. How could that be reconciled with Berry's account?

May 9, 1927—A Turn of Fate

New York is a forgotten dream as the White Bird, on its last dregs of fuel, pushes inland over coastal Maine. The crew is consoled in the knowledge that they have accomplished the first east to west crossing of the Atlantic, and with every minute they remain aloft the quartering tailwind helps add miles to their world record for non-stop distance. Scudding through the base of the lowering overcast they are reassured by the many lakes that slide by below, testimony to their wisdom in selecting an aircraft with water landing capability.

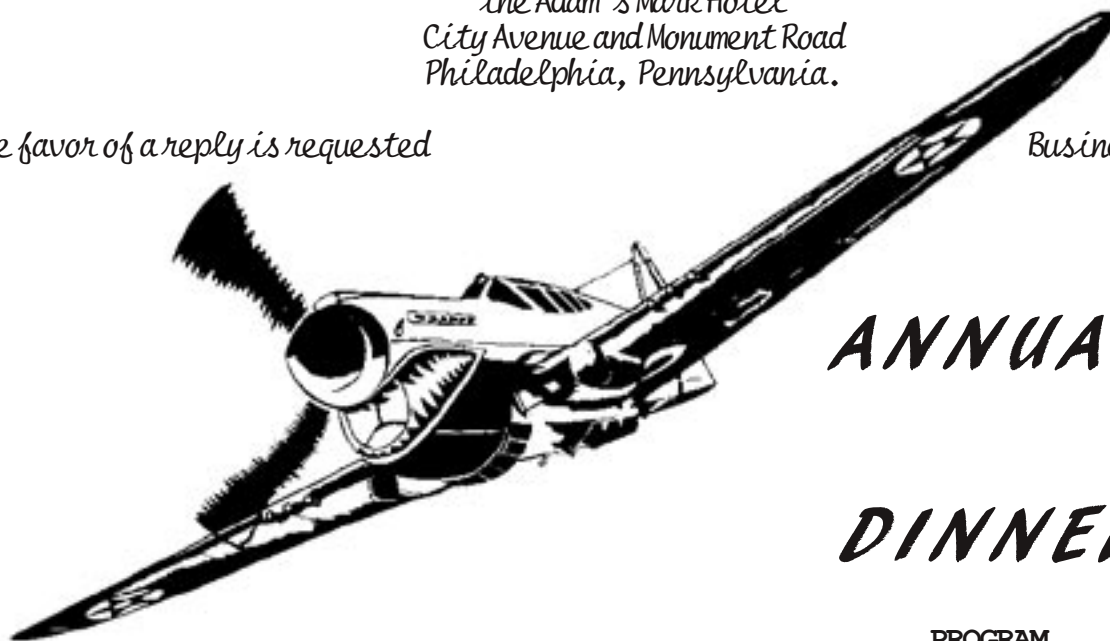
It is in the forty-second hour of flight that the engine of the White Bird finally sputters and dies. The failing light and gathering mist have almost eliminated forward visibility, but they have just passed over a lake which is more than adequate for a safe landing. Nungesser begins a gentle instrument turn back around to the left while Coli engages the mechanism which locks the twelve foot propeller in the horizontal position, in preparation for a water landing.

Below, Anson Berry has traced the sound of an approaching aircraft from his canoe near the foot of Round Lake. As the sound comes near it sputters and stops, and he knows what that must mean. What he cannot know is that the unseen aircraft has begun a silent turn back to the south. For Nungesser and Coli, the helpful tailwind has now become an enemy, widening and slowing their turn back to the lake, until the mist reveals not welcoming water but a wall of trees. If a faint ripping crash echoes through the hills and reaches the ear of Anson Berry, still gazing expectantly toward the Round Lake Hills, it only confirms his expectations.

*The International Group
for Historic Aircraft Recovery
requests the pleasure of your company
at its Annual Dinner
on Monday, the sixteenth of June
at six o'clock in the evening
in the Adam's Ballroom of
the Adam's Mark Hotel
City Avenue and Monument Road
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*

The favor of a reply is requested

Business attire



*The International Group for
TIGHAR
Historic Aircraft Recovery*

The Annual Dinner will feature TIGHAR's B-17 project this year. Space is limited, so send in your reservation early. Your tax-deductible contribution of \$75.00 per person helps us defray the costs of keeping the doors open at TIGHAR. The evening will start with a cash bar reception at 6 p.m. Dinner is at 7 p.m., followed by the program. If you are traveling to Philadelphia and need local transportation or assistance, please call the TIGHAR office. Those wishing to stay overnight at the Adam's Mark should call the hotel directly. A special rate of \$89 for a single, \$101 for a double, is available by referencing TIGHAR. Please reply by June 14, 1986. Enclose your check for \$75 per person, made out to TIGHAR, and list the persons who will be attending. Thank you for supporting aviation archeology and TIGHAR, and come have a good time!

ANNUAL DINNER

PROGRAM

Lady In Waiting.

A video-taped presentation on B-17E 41-2446 filmed in the Agaiambo Swamp, Papua New Guinea.

Acquisitions and Restorations at the Air Force Museum.

Guest Speaker, Jack Hilliard, Curator, United States Air Force Museum.

SPECIAL GUESTS

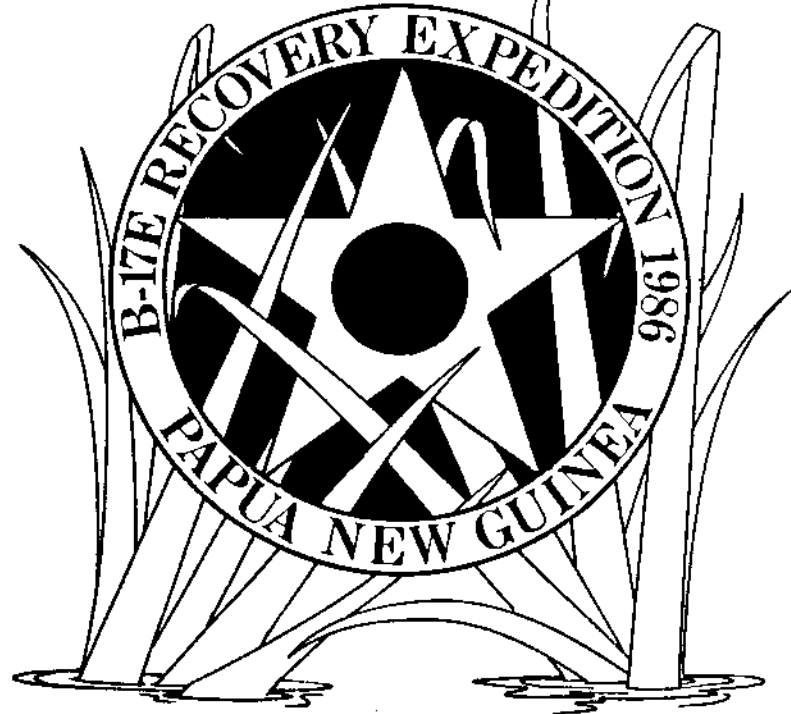
His Excellency Kiatro O. Abisinio
Ambassador to the United States of America,
Embassy of Papua New Guinea

Herbert J. Coleman
Managing Editor
Aviation Week & Space Technology

Wing Commander Raymond L. Perry
Ass't Air Attache, Embassy of Australia
Royal Australian Air Force

Fred C. Eaton
U.S. Army Air Corps-1042
pilot of B-17E 41-2446.

MISSION UPDATE



SUCCESS IN THE PACIFIC

TIGHAR management has returned from Australia and Papua New Guinea with assurances which should put the B-17E Recovery Expedition back on track for this fall. In Australia, meetings with the RAAF in Canberra established procedures and protocols for their full support of the project. A trip to the RAAF School of Technical Training at Wagga Wagga yielded valuable technical advice based on actual experience with similar recoveries, and plans for an international recovery team. The importance of Australian support for this project cannot be overstated.

Meetings in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, with U.S. Ambassador Paul F. Gardner, and at the Australian High Commission with Col. John Robbins, Head of the Australian Defense Force, gave special insight into the political and social climate there. A series of meetings was then begun with officials of the National Museum and Art Gallery of Papua New Guinea, resulting in a consensus endorsing the concept of international cooperation and exchange of artifacts. Finally, meetings at the Ministry of Civil Aviation, Culture and Tourism achieved an agreement in principle concerning the recovery of World War II aircraft. Minister Nahau Rooney, who had previously imposed a moratorium on all historic aircraft recoveries, expressed her support for programs in which two aircraft are recovered, one to remain in PNG and the other to be available for export.

TIGHAR has now submitted a proposed agreement to Papua New Guinea based on the guidelines established in those meetings. Once accepted and approved, that agreement will permit the recovery of B-17E 41-2446 to go forward. TIGHAR would like to publicly thank its members, friends and sponsors who made this trip possible. Special thanks go to Honeywell Military Avionics Division, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Lockheed Georgia, Marietta, Georgia. It was their faith in TIGHAR that kept the project alive when things looked bleakest.

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Lady In Waiting

On Friday, April 18, briefcases were traded for bush knives and a visit was made to the Agaiambo Swamp for a first hand look at the object of our efforts. Space here does not permit a full account of that survey but a few words may give some feeling of the place and the experience.

Papua New Guinea is beautiful and it's big. By helicopter it's an hour and a half of triple-canopy rain forest, mountains, and swamp from Port Moresby to the B-17.

Occasional villages, sharp ridges, deep gorges If the engine of this Jetranger bites it we're all crocodile bait.

Once deposited on the wing of the B-17 (with a promise from the helicopter pilot to return someday), the phrase "ends of the earth" takes on new meaning.

The aircraft is an island in the grass. It's quiet--a quiet few Americans ever hear. A bird sings from the top of the tail, a butterfly lands on a bent prop tip, a column of ants marches past the top turret. Four feet of crystal clear water glints in the fuselage. Tiny fish swim from the radio room into the bomb bay.

The kunai grass is everywhere, screening, obstructing and carpeting. The swamp slowly enfolds and swallows the bomber as an anemone does a minnow.

Inside it's dark, cool, sterile. Looters have stripped what they could, but like a proud lady she has kept her grandeur despite these indignities. From her unblemished nose to the graceful sweep of her tail, the uncorroded skin returns the lantern's shine. She is clean, not a cobweb, unnatural, and unsettling.

Outside again the equatorial sun is higher. A careless hand on her bare skin gets a blistering lesson in manners. The Agaiambo Swamp seems no longer tranquil, but menacing. The distant beat of the helicopter is a welcome sound.



Produced especially for TIGHAR, Don Gillespie's painting of 41-2446 depicts the bomber on its final approach to the Agaiambo Swamp February 23, 1942. Full color limited edition prints signed by the artist and by pilot Fred Eaton are available.

OPERATION



SEPULCHRE

TIGHAR's campaign to find and re-open underground German hangars sealed since 1945 has been met with intense interest and expressions of cooperation from a wide range of sources. Having confirmed that such facilities did indeed exist, we need to compile as much information as possible concerning locations and status. Once that research is done we will approach the appropriate authorities and set up the actual expeditions which will open and explore the sealed areas.

A PASSION FOR PROTECTION

Since medieval times, Germany has had a fascination for fortresses. During World War II the Third Reich carried its love affair with concrete to unprecedented extremes with the creation of Fortress Europe. In 1943, with the advent of the Allied bombing offensive, Hitler called for German industry to go underground. The influential Albert Speer, Reichminister for Armament and War Production, favored dispersal as a more effective and economical defense, but early in the year Speer fell ill. His duties were taken over, in part, by Ministerial Director Xaver Dorsch. Dorsch, ambitious and eager to please, embraced the Fuehrer's bias for bunkers and, at Goering's behest, embarked upon a project for construction of underground hangars for Luftwaffe fighter bases throughout the Reich. By the time Speer was back on the scene, underground projects were underway all over Germany, and the Reichminister found himself implementing a policy he had opposed.

Of the known underground factories, some are in East Germany (such as the giant slave-labor V-2 works near Nordhausen), and others are well documented (such as the Messerschmitt assembly plant near Landsberg). Archeologically the best opportunities are presented by the numerous but more obscure hangars used to protect fighters from bombs and strafing. As Allied armies advanced into Germany in 1945, many such hangars were sealed, bull-dozed over, or if practical flooded, rather than risk booby-traps left by retreating forces. After the war Luftwaffe airfields were often taken over as U.S. Air Force or Army air fields, and today many of the most promising sites are on installations still under American jurisdiction. These include:

A U.S. Army air field reported to be a former night fighter base, and still having small abandoned houses whose chimneys are really ventilation shafts.

Another Army installation which has long spawned stories of children who play on airplanes underground.

A major airport where the lower floors of a giant command center were flooded by the invading armies, and is reported to still have stairways leading down into water that has never been explored.

A war-time assembly center for FW190s and Bf109s where last summer a TIGHAR team discovered a hill with bunker entrances and evidence of a massive caved-in entryway. The hill is still called Baunsberg-roughly, Industrial Mountain.

RESEARCHERS NEEDED

Members interested in participating in this project are urged to help with the research. We need recent accounts of suspected locations, ideally with photographs of entry points. Names, addresses, and phone numbers of persons having first-hand knowledge of underground hangars and factories are also valuable. Please get in touch with us soon to begin a coordinated assault on this project.

PHANTOM PHORTRESS PHOUND

In this section of TIGHAR Tracks we publish rumors and legends just as they come to us in the hope that by putting our heads together we can find out if there is any truth to them. The case of the Phantom Fortress is a classic example of how the Rumor Mill works to bring to light new discoveries.

OUR STORY SO FAR...

TIGHAR Tracks
Rumor Mill, Summer/Fall 1985

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?

TIGHAR Tracks
Rumor Mill, Winter 1986

In last issue's Rumor Mill we described a B-17 which was recently sold from a junkyard in Maine and asked if anyone could help us find out where it went. Member Ernie Raudenbush from Vero Beach, Florida, wrote in to tell us that a man from Massachusetts bought it for what he considered to be a very low figure, until he realized that keeping it would also cost him his wife. He elected to part with the Fort and sold it to "someone in Illinois," quadrupling his money in the process. We're still tracking the airplane. Tune in next issue for the next thrilling installment in this tale of the phantom Fortress.

AND NOW, THE THRILLING CONCLUSION...

The TIGHAR booth at this spring's Sun 'n' Fun EAA Fly-In in Lakeland, Florida featured a display on the B-178 Recovery Expedition to Papua New Guinea, proclaiming 41-2446 as "The Last E." Early in the show a young man enquired as to whether it was our contention that the bomber in the swamp was the world's last B-17E. We said we believed it to be the world's last restorable B-17E (there being another E in PNG which is probably beyond full restoration). At this point the young man made a rude suggestion and proclaimed that his neighbor had a B-17E. After calming him down we told him we would be very interested to learn more about his neighbor's airplane. As it turns out,

his neighbor is Michael Kellner Crystal Lake, Illinois, proud owner of—you guessed it—our Phantom Fortress from Maine.

We got in touch with Mike and learned that he believes the airplane to be serial number 41-2595 from numbers still visible on the tail. If he's right then Mr. Kellner has himself one rare airplane, because 41-2595, in addition to being a mid-production B-17E, was modified to become the one and only XC-108A cargo version of the Flying Fortress. The puzzling reports we had heard of no turrets, a cargo door, and in 1942 markings suddenly made sense.

Mike says she's in rough shape, the fuselage having been cut up into four chunks, but he hopes to eventually bring her back to airworthy condition. It's TIGHAR's position that one-offs and last of types should not fly, but that's not likely to be an issue for 2595 any time soon. We wish Mike all the best and thank everyone who helped us solve the case of the Phantom Fortress.

TALK ABOUT RUMORS

Here's one we can dispel right now. The June '86 issue of Air Classics magazine carried on page 10 a hand-wringing account of how the government is going to clean up the Aleutians. "This means all the bases will be leveled and the many artifacts which dot the area will be destroyed. No effort will be made to preserve any of these artifacts."

It is difficult for us to understand how a magazine with such a broad and faithful readership could print as fact such a dangerous and easy to check rumor. One phone call to the Corps of Engineers--Alaska District, the National Park Services, the Alaska State Historic Preservation Office, or, for that matter, TIGHAR, would have told them that World War II "clean up" operations in Alaska are the subject of a massive Section 106 review in accordance with The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Under that program all historic artifacts are carefully considered and procedures for their preservation meticulously laid out. That goes for airplanes too. We know because TIGHAR acted as a consultant under contract to the program (see TIGHAR Tracks Vol. 2, No. 1). Inevitably in such a large program there will be lapses, but the government is trying very hard to protect our heritage, and TIGHAR is doing all it can to help. Come on, Air Classics—get with the program.

- STRICTLY BUSINESS -

NEW BOARD MEMBER

In the Extra Edition of the Newsletter we sent out a few weeks ago, we announced the death of Richard C. duPont, Jr., whose passing left a vacancy on our Board of Directors. That vacancy has now been filled. At the Board meeting held May 21, Richard J. Yersak was elected to serve out Kip's unexpired term. A charter member of TIGHAR, and one of our most faithful supporters, Rick has now agreed to take up our cause on a more official basis. He is an Eastern Airlines pilot and the president of Avpro, a Philadelphia-based aviation service company. He is active in both the warbird and the classic aircraft worlds, and we consider TIGHAR very lucky to have him. Thanks for accepting the nomination, Rick, and welcome aboard.

OTHER BOARD BUSINESS

TIGHAR has engaged the services of a consultant in the field of fund-raising. We are about to embark on a year of planning in preparation for a serious (\$1,000,000) endowment fund campaign. If you have fund-raising experience and/or good corporate contacts, and can help in any way with this campaign, please get in touch soon.

MEMBERS AND EX-MEMBERS

If your membership renewal date is March, April, or May, and you have not renewed (i.e. sent in \$25.00 and the form we sent you), this is your last newsletter. Don't miss a single exciting installment! Renew now! Your membership donation helps us do the work which so desperately needs doing around the world. (If you've lost the form, just send a check and a note, and we'll straighten out the paperwork here.) Thanks for your continued support.

B-17 EXPEDITION

Finalists are now being chosen for the B-17 Expedition. If you have already been selected, you will be notified by telephone very shortly. We will continue to take applications through June 30. If you have not filled out an expedition application and want to be considered for this trip, please send us your application now. Even if you previously sent us a letter and/or resume, we'd like to have the form filled out. If you've lost the form, let us know and we'll send one to you immediately.



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