

UNLUCKY LADY

The mysterious tale of "Lady be Good", B-26, 376th Bomber Group

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THE MISSION

The story of the ill-fated B-24 "Lady Be Good" is one of the most riveting and strange tales of World War II. During a mission in April 1943, a B-24 Liberator bomber named the "Lady Be Good" simply disappeared.

Most assumed that the plane had been lost in combat or had ditched in the Mediterranean. Soon, in the horror and loss that is war, the plane, its crew, and the mission would be all but forgotten, except to the families of those lost.

Sixteen years later, long after the end of the war, an oil exploration team in the distant southern deserts of Libya came across the wreckage of a plane -- over 400 miles south of the former air fields that once had lined the coasts along the Mediterranean. The plane looked as if it had crashed in the desert. There was no sign of the flight crew. Yet strangely, all of the weapons, equipment and survival gear were still on board. It was the "Lady Be Good".

The investigation that followed into the last days of the crew of the "Lady Be Good" revealed a tale of mystery, determination, and death in the desert. The human drama and story that subsequently would unfold captured the interest of the world, was featured in LIFE Magazine, and has gone down in history as one of the most trying, difficult tales of sacrifice, loss, and courage from the war years. Here is the story of the "Lady Be Good".

The story of the "Lady Be Good" began with the story of the 376th Bombardment Group. The 376th had formed from the First Provisional Bombardment Group, a unit that had originally carried the code name "HALPRO" (for Halverson Project). It was one of the Air Corp's first units, founded soon after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. HALPRO assembled its crews and equipment together and trained in Fort Myers, Florida.

In the months that followed Pearl Harbor, it seemed like defeat after defeat were piling up. Morale among the volunteer aircrews was good, but the public mood was that the war was not going well at all. The military was growing rapidly and needed to reorganize. Thus, the First Provisional was soon expanded, then recommissioned as the 376th Bombardment Group, nicknamed the "Liberandos".

With Rommel's famous Afrika Korps threatening Libya, the 376th had been deployed to Soluch, along the northern coast, and had fought an extensive campaign. By Spring of 1943, replacement crews and aircraft were arriving from Florida to bring the unit back up in strength, with so many lost in combat against the Germans. Among the new planes coming over from America to the 376th's base at Soluch was a B-24D Liberator, Tail No. 41-24301, that the crew had named the "Lady Be Good".

For the "Lady Be Good" crew, the flight across the Atlantic Ocean to Africa had been uneventful. The original crew of the plane, headed by 2nd Lt. Samuel D. Rose, was looking forward to flying in combat against the Germans in their new plane.

However, now that they had arrived at Soluch Army Air Field, Rose's crew was surprised to find themselves tasked to fly a mission on another airplane instead, a war weary B-24. Regretfully, they left their beloved "Lady Be Good" at Soluch AAF and headed off against the Germans in a beat-up, war weary plane -- such was the lot of many new crews arriving in the combat theatre. On their first mission, engine trouble put them down for repairs at Malta. Meanwhile, another new crew -- that of 1st Lt. William J. Hatton -- was assigned to fly the "Lady Be Good" on the next evening's mission. The mission was to be a high altitude bombing run over the harbor at Naples, Italy. Nobody knew it at the time but the stage was set for disaster.

The first mission of the "Lady Be Good" called for twenty-five of the 376th Group's B-24s to go against the Germans at Naples from high altitude. No protective escort of fighters was laid on, meaning that the B-24s would be on their own. The plan counted on catching the Germans by surprise, with the bombers arriving at the target from over the sea, bombing at dusk, and then returning to Soluch AAF at night. Between the darkness and the surprise attack, the hope was that the German Air Force fighters would be left sitting, unmanned on the ground.

Lt. Hatton's crew would be flying their first mission together since arriving at Soluch. There was a lot to learn about combat in North Africa, but the crew looked forward to the test. The flight looked to be a good one -- well-planned, they felt. They were even more enthusiastic to have a fresh, new B-24 in their hands. Yet from the start, the mission went awry. While the first section of aircraft departed uneventfully, the second section, including the "Lady Be Good", had taken off through a sand storm. Half of those had aborted the mission and returned to base with sand clogging the planes' engines. The "Lady Be Good", however, soldiered on with the remaining planes from the second section. Compounding matters, they were running behind and having engine problems due to the damaging sand that had found itself in the air intakes and into the carburetors. Though they did not recognize it at the time, the stage was set for disaster.

Despite every effort by Hatton's crew, the "Lady Be Good" could not make it to the target before nightfall -- nor did any of the other aircraft in the second section for that matter. Hatton led a group of four aircraft in from the mission's planned diversionary course to Sardinia, then flew directly to Naples. Unable to identify the harbor or the city below, the crews jettisoned their bombs into the ocean, then turned south together. In the darkness, the four aircraft of the second section were soon separated. The "Lady Be Good", like the other aircraft, continued flying alone into the absolute darkness of a moonless night over the Mediterranean. While the other aircraft in the second section flew home uneventfully, some diverting to other airfields, for the "Lady Be Good", the flight back was anything but routine.

As the plane headed southward away from Italy, they had no idea that their aircraft was being tracked on a German night fighter's radar. Tracking the "Lady Be Good", the German crew took a radar bearing and centered up the reflection, probably assuming that they were closing in from behind. Suddenly, at the last moment, they realized that they were lined up for a dangerously fast head-on pass. Seeing the B-24 loom out of the darkness at pointblank range, the German night fighter opened fire and pulled up just in time to avoid a collision.

For the crew of the "Lady Be Good", suddenly the night sky lit up with tracer fire as the German night fighter flashed past, very close. Yet just one of the fighter's 20 millimeter cannon shells struck the "Lady Be Good", damaging the number two

engine. Although the German night fighter crew certainly turned for a second pass, the crew of the B-24 successfully evaded the night fighter's return attack and headed south again, now shutting down the damaged number two and running with just the remaining three engines.

For the aircrews waiting at Soluch AFF, all that was known was that sometime after midnight, the "Lady Be Good" simply disappeared. The next day, the usual air-sea search was undertaken, but the loss of a plane like this was far from unique. Furthermore, nothing was found. For those at Soluch, the conclusion was direct -- if the plane had ditched, it had gone down with all of its crew. Maybe, if they were lucky, they had been captured by the Italians. Some felt that the German night fighters may have found the plane. In any case, it was just another loss for a squadron that had suffered too many losses already. The surviving crews flew their next missions, and the mystery of the "Lady Be Good" was soon forgotten.

The 376th BG would fly into the teeth of history, leading the first low-level raid on Ploesti, flying the desperate missions over Regensburg, and eventually ending the war with a highly illustrious record. It was a record, however, that was paid for in the blood of hundreds of men who were lost. In fact, of those who flew in the flight of four that day with Lt. Hatton to Naples, only one pilot survived the war.

How the plane passed by Soluch AAF later that night is still a matter of conjecture. What follows, therefore, is a best guess, assembled from the facts of the two year investigation that followed the plane's surprise discovery in 1959, years after the end of the war: The crew of "Lady Be Good" had flown toward Soluch AAF in the darkness, navigating surprisingly well. The aircraft's radio compass was quite good, actually, but apparently it was not used. Instead, the crew followed a heading given them by the Soluch AAF radio station. What they didn't know, however, was that when they asked for the heading, they were already south of Soluch. The plane was even heard by one of the other crews in the Bomb Group that night as it flew overhead, who dismissed it at the time.

As many who have flown over the desert can attest, at night there are few lights. In fact, a pilot can get vertigo and see the stars above as if they are the lights on the ground and the darkness below as the skies -- thinking that the plane is inverted. Additionally, at night the desert sands and the surface of the sea can appear almost identically -- a vast dark shadow. When following a heading given from the ground, based on a radio direction finder, it is critical that one knows generally where they are relative to the station. An inexperienced navigator and crew can easily fly right overhead and continue beyond the station, then ask for a heading based on a radio long count. For the ground operator, they turn a ring antenna until the reception is best, which gives a line to or from the aircraft in the air. In fact, the "Lady Be Good" did exactly that, flying overhead, then getting a heading and simply continuing onward to the south, away from the base, all eyes scanning the "water" below (which was actually already the desert) for any lights that would tell them that they had made landfall. Eventually, the plane simply disappeared into the heart of the Libyan desert.

For Lt. William J. Hatton and his crew of nine, it was a navigational error that would cost them their life. They were never seen again. Later that night, running out of fuel and thinking they were still over the sea, the crew bailed out wearing their life preservers. The plane continued on without its crew for a short while before its fuel

was exhausted. Gliding down, incredibly, it crash landed on its own into the hard packed desert sand some miles away.

LOST AND FOUND

In May of 1959, fully 14 years after the end of World War II and 16 years since the "Lady Be Good" had disappeared that fateful day, a team of geologists was exploring the Libyan desert in search of oil. Geologists Ronald G. MacLean and S.V. Sykes were working for the D'Arcy Exploration Company, Ltd., of Tripoli and Benghazi. These two men, with their pilot (whose name is unknown), were in an area about 385 miles south of Tobruk flying aerial recon for their company. Looking down, MacLean was surprised to suddenly see what appeared to be a slightly damaged B-24 bomber resting in the sand below. He had the pilot circle for a time overhead. Clearly, the plane was in excellent condition, having been apparently crash landed in the desert by its crew. Why it was there, however, was a real mystery -- during the war, few if any missions were flown from bases in Libya heading south into the emptiness of the desert.

Flying home, the two men reported the find to the USAF, who began the long and difficult process of sorting out the mystery and, ultimately recovering the bodies of all but one of the crew. From the beginning of the US Air Force's investigation, the mystery was compelling. When the Air Force first arrived at the crash site, months later, they found the B-24 largely intact. The plane looked as if it had crash landed safely on the desert floor. However, there was no sign of the crew. Even more disturbing, the investigators found much of the desert survival supplies and equipment still on the airplane.

The wreck of the "Lady Be Good" was spooky. Although 16 years had passed, because of the dry, hot conditions of the desert, much of the aircraft's equipment still looked as if it was new. The radios worked, the guns could be fired, the bomb sight was still in place. And yet there wasn't even a single indication that the crew had even been on the airplane after it had crashed into the sands. Certainly, the plane hadn't encountered some sort of Bermuda Triangle incident or had its crew snatched away in midair by aliens. But the mystery of where their bodies were was met with little more than a distant horizon, with trackless desert spanning for hundreds of miles in every direction. The name on the side of the plane, "Lady Be Good", and its tail number had yielded the most critical information. The plane had been lost on a mission and the crew, it had been assumed according to the Missing Aircrew Reports (MACRs), had been lost at sea. How the plane had found itself nearly 400 miles south of its base, however, was the heart of the mystery. That a navigational error of such magnitude could have taken place was too astounding to believe.

As the investigators sorted through clues and records, the story of the plane that fateful night slowly began to emerge. The effort to fully come to grips with the story of the "Lady Be Good" would take over two years. It would become, in the process, a testimony not only to the sacrifices of those who fought in the war, but to the dedication of the USAF, the Quartermaster Corps, and the military as a whole to unravel the mystery and, ultimately, to recover the bodies of almost all of those lost. First and foremost, what the investigators learned, was that although headwinds had been forecasted for the return leg of the mission, in fact, the records showed that other returning aircrews had encountered strong tailwinds, hastening their return to base. Furthermore, flying on three engines, the crew of the "Lady Be Good" had probably felt that they were making very slow progress on the flight home. As a

result, when the crew thought they were nearing the coastline, they were actually already far inland. When they asked for a bearing, they received an accurate one -- but nobody could know that while they were on the line of bearing, they were in fact far south, not inbound to the station from the north, but actually outbound from the station to the south and heading farther away.

Finally, still thinking that the airplane was over the Mediterranean and running out of fuel, Lt. Hatton ordered his crew to bail out. One by one, the crew exited the plane, pulled their parachute ripcords and descended toward what they thought was water below. Much to the surprise of the "Lady Be Good" crew, instead of landing in the Mediterranean, they landed on the desert floor. As dawn approached, the crew gathered together. Eight found one another, but despite some searching, they could not find the ninth member of the crew. Although they did not know it at the time, his parachute had failed to properly open and his body was some distance away -- he had been killed when he hit the ground.

The crew took stock of their condition. They decided it would be fruitless to try to find the wrecked remains of their plane, assuming that when it had crashed it had been completely destroyed. They didn't know exactly where they were, but they understood now that they must have flown over the base and that they were some distance to the south. Discussing their options, they decided to begin walking northward, deducing that the sea couldn't be too many days walk ahead. Little did they know, however, they were hundreds of miles from the nearest village or town.

Furthermore, their survival maps didn't extend that far to the south into the desert, which left them completely oblivious to the presence of two oasis's several days journey away. Ultimately, their maps were as much to blame for their death as anything else, something that the Air Force investigators and Quartermaster Corps took to heart -- a costly, but valuable lesson learned.

On the first day of their journey, the aircrew were heartened to find a well worn vehicular track in the sand. Although they tried to make sense of the tire tracks as they walked, they couldn't piece together where they were.

What they couldn't have known was that the tire tracks were from a small convoy that had driven through years before, their passage surprisingly well preserved in the hard packed Libyan sands (in fact, 16 years later, the USAF investigators were able to follow the same tracks, as if they had been made just the day before). Following their survival training, the crew of the "Lady Be Good" used torn segments of their parachutes and piles of rocks to create arrow markers on the desert sand as they walked, hoping that the air-sea rescue units might find them.

Sixteen years too late, it was these markers that the Air Force investigators spotted in their search and ultimately used to unravel the grim story of a test of survival in the harshest desert lands of the planet.

In the days that followed, the crew of the "Lady Be Good" walked an unbelievable distance -- far more than most thought was humanly possible. Then, one by one, they died, lacking water and in the incredible heat of the desert -- a heat so intense that dead lizards literally dry where they die. At night, the temperature plummets to near freezing, since there is no moisture in the air to hold the heat. The sun is so bright that it can blind a man in just a couple of hours.

As the dwindling crew walked northward, two kept diaries of their progress and decisions. Amazingly, both of these were found years later in the desert when the Air

Force investigators finally found the bodies. With the information they contained, as well as the evidence on the ground, the investigators would finally piece together the full story -- a story of courage, incredible strength of will, and ultimately, hopelessness. From the diaries, the investigators read that finally the last members of the crew could go no further. They pitched their last parachute cloth as a sunshade and laid down. One of their number, SSG Vernon L. Moore, pressed on ahead alone in a desperate attempt to make it to the sea and bring back help. His body would never be found, lost amidst the dunes of the desert that spread for another two hundred plus miles ahead. The investigators mounted a massive search of the desert before finding all but one of the bodies. Among the personal effects that were recovered with the bodies of the crew were two diaries, aptly demonstrating the extraordinary journey and will of the crew of the "Lady Be Good".

The Diary of Tech. Sgt. Harold S. Ripslinger, flight engineer

Sunday, April 4. Mission to Naples, Italy. T.O. 3:10 and dropped (sic) bombs at 10:00. Lost coming back. Bailed out at 2:10 A.M. on dessert (sic).

Monday, April 5. All but Woravka met this A.M. Waited awhile and started walking. Had 1/2 sandwich (sic) & piece of candy & cap of water in last 36 hr.

Tuesday, April 6. Started out early walking & resting. It's now sundown and still going. One teaspoon of water today. The rest of the boys are doing fine.

Wednesday, April 7. Started early A. M. and walked til about near spent. Terrible hot afternoon. Started again at 6 P.M. and walked all night. One spoon full of water is all.

Thursday, April 8. Tired all out. We can hardly walk. Our 4th day out. A few drops of water each. Can't hold out much longer without aid. Prayers.

Friday, April 9. 5th day out & we all thought we're gone. All wanted to die during noon it was so hot. Morn & nite okay.

Saturday, April 10. Walked al day and night. Suggested Guy, Moore and I make out alone. Palm Sun. Still struggling to get out of dunes and find water.

The Diary of 2nd Lt. Robert F. Toner, copilot

Sunday. 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.

Wednesday. 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.

Thursday. 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.

Friday. 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.

Saturday. 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 wgt. 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.

There is an interesting if not downright spooky footnote to the unlucky story of the "Lady Be Good". In fact, just as unlikely a story as the plane is, what followed the investigation is even more bizarre. The investigators and aircrews who flew to the crash site recovered some of the equipment from the "Lady Be Good", including the propellers, engines, tires, radios, and other gear from the wreck. They loaded the items onto their C-47 and flew them northward to Wheeler AFB, Libya.

While the bulk of the recovered items were for the ongoing investigation and analysis, it was also found that much of the equipment recovered was in such good condition that it could be refurbished and installed in other aircraft. As a matter of cost savings and personal preference, this was done -- and the aircraft that carried parts from the "Unlucky Lady", shockingly and incredibly, one by one, each came to a mysterious end.

For instance, a radio from the "Lady Be Good" was installed in the search supply aircraft, an SC-47. A month later, flying across the Mediterranean, the plane was forced down by a sudden sand storm, killing the pilot, Captain Guy M. Allphin.

Another aircraft, an Army L-19 Otter, was used by the Engineer Geodetic detachment at Benina Airport, Benghazi, Libya. It was one of the first planes to have flown to the crash site of the "Lady Be Good". One of the pilots took an armrest from the "Lady Be Good" and installed it in his aircraft. Seven months later, the plane was caught in a sand storm over the Mediterranean, and disappeared.

The ten crew and passengers onboard were never found. Only a few bits of the plane's wreckage washed up on the beaches in the following weeks -- among the few finds: the armrest from the "Lady Be Good".

Today, you can see some of the equipment and parts from the "Lady Be Good" at the US Air Force Museum in Wright-Patterson AFB, Dayton, Ohio, and at the Quartermaster Museum in Virginia. As for the last bits of the "Lady Be Good", the record is unclear. Some say that Muammar Khaddafi of Libya had the plane hauled away to a military base some years ago. Others say that the bulk of the plane still rests where it crashed years ago on the bleak plateau of Cyrenaica.

Despite the incredible value of the plane, both in dollar terms and in terms of history, nobody yet seems to have any intention of trying to mount a recovery operation and ultimately return the plane to flying condition -- if they did, wouldn't you wonder if yet some other mysterious fate would soon follow?

--- THE END? ---