

**THE MYSTERY OF THE LADY BE GOOD, THE AMERICAN B-24 LOST IN THE DESERT FOR
15 YEARS**

THE BODY OF ONE CREW MEMBER WAS FOUND 200 MILES FROM THE CRASH SITE

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The Lady Be Good as it appeared when discovered from the air. (U.S. Air Force photo)



The Lady Be Good as it appeared when viewed at ground level. . (U.S. Air Force photo)

all that's interesting

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You'd think that it would be difficult to lose a bomber that's nearly 20 feet tall with a wingspan of more than 100 feet. But, that's what happened to a U.S. bomber during World War II.

FOR 15 YEARS, A U.S. B-24D LIBERATOR CALLED "LADY BE GOOD" WAS MISSING AND NO ONE HAD THE SLIGHTEST CLUE AS TO WHAT HAPPENED TO IT



Photo of the "Lady Be Good" crew taken before they vanished

On April 4, 1943, *Lady Be Good* of the 514th Bomb Squadron in Soluch Field, Libya. The nine crew members responsible for the plane had also just arrived in the country, and their first-ever assignment was to join a squadron of more than 20 bombers and attack the harbor of Naples, Italy across the Mediterranean. After the mission, the bombers were expected to return back to their base in North Africa.

Upon departing Soluch Field on April 4, *Lady Be Good* immediately encountered high winds and reduced visibility due to a sandstorm. The aircraft nevertheless flew on to Naples, not willing to let something as simple as the weather keep them from doing their jobs. The plane made it to Naples, but it was already nighttime and they'd suffered a few technical problems with various gear.

They decided to return to their base in Libya.

Around 12 AM, Lt. William J Hatton radioed the base, saying that his navigation devices were not working. The base fired flares into the sky to signal its location, but *Lady Be Good* never arrived.

For the next 15 years, no one had any idea what ever became of the plane or its nine crew members.

It was not until 1958 that the mystery was finally solved. An oil exploration team spotted an aircraft hundreds of miles from Soluch.

It was *Lady Be Good*.



The wreck of the "Lady Be Good", which was surprisingly intact.

In February 1960, the United States Army discovered the bodies of the crew members. Five of the crew's remains were found 78 miles north of the crash site. A sixth was discovered 24 miles northwest of the first five. Meanwhile, a seventh crew member — Sgt. Rip Ripslinger — was found 26 miles away from Shelley.

The eighth crew member was not discovered until August 1960, while the last body was never found.

Evidence revealed that the crew had parachuted out of the plane. While one man fell to his death when his parachute failed to fully open, the rest survived for eight days in the desert. They attempted to head north to civilization in vain.

Parts of the wreckage of the *Lady Be Good* were brought back to the United States but most remained in Libya, where it sits to this day.

Parts were strewn by the Consolidated B-24D Liberator *Lady Be Good* as it skidded to a halt amid the otherwise empty Libyan desert. Engines 1, 2 and 3 visible in the photograph had their propellers feathered.

PARTS AND CREW ITEMS

After the *Lady Be Good* was identified, some parts of the plane were returned to the United States for evaluation while the rest of the wreckage remained. In August 1994, the remains of the craft were recovered by a team led by Dr. Fadel Ali Mohamed and taken to a Libyan military base in Tobruk for safekeeping. They are now stored at Jamal Abdelnasser Air Force Base, Libya.

Over the years pieces of the plane were stripped by souvenir hunters. Today, 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 from the Lady Be Good 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 on display. An altimeter and manifold pressure gauge were salvaged from the plane in 1963 by Airman Second Class Ron Pike 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.

After some parts were salvaged from the *Lady Be Good* and technically evaluated, they were reused in other planes belonging to the American military. However, some planes that received these spares developed unexpected problems. A C-54, which had several autosyn transmitters from the *Lady Be Good* installed, had to throw cargo overboard to land safely because of propeller difficulties. A C-47 that received a radio receiver crashed into the Mediterranean. A U.S. Army de Havilland Canada DHC-3 Otter with an armrest from the bomber crashed in the Gulf of Sidra. Only a few traces of the plane washed ashore and one of these was the armrest from the *Lady Be Good*.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

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. They then located each other by firing their revolvers and signal flares into the air.

However, one crew member, Woravka (the bombardier) did not rendezvous with the others. The configuration of the parachute found with his body suggested that it did not fully open, and that Woravka died as a result of an overly rapid descent.

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 400 miles (640 km) inland. It has been speculated that the dark and empty desert floor may have resembled open sea.

The crew members who survived the descent had died while walking northward, because 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. After walking 130 km (81 mi) from the crash site, the location of the remains of the five airmen shows they had waited behind while the other three (Guy Shelley, "Rip" Ripslinger and Vernon Moore) set off north, to try to find help.

The body of S/Sgt Shelley was found 32 km (20 mi) away while 43 km (27 mi) further on were the remains of T/Sgt Ripslinger.

The official report in the American Graves Registration Service states:

The aircraft flew on a 150 degree course toward Benina Airfield. The craft radioed for a directional reading from the HF/DF station at Benina and received a reading of 330 degrees from Benina. The actions of the pilot in flying 440 miles [710 km] into the desert, however, indicate the navigator probably took a reciprocal reading off the back of the radio directional loop antenna from a position beyond and south of Benina but 'on course'. The pilot flew into the desert, thinking he was still over the Mediterranean and on his way to Benina.



The navigator on the *Lady Be Good* thought he was flying on a direct path from Naples to Benghazi. But the base's radio direction finder only had a single loop antenna. As the plane's direction finder could not distinguish between a signal in front or behind the aircraft, there was no way to identify reciprocal readings. The same bearing would be returned whether the plane was heading inbound from the Mediterranean or outbound inland.

The crew might have survived if they had known their actual location. If they had headed south the same distance they walked north, the group might have reached the oasis of Wadi Zighen.

After the crew bailed out *Lady Be Good* continued flying south for 26 km (16 mi) before coming to land, and there was also a chance that the crew might have found the aircraft's relatively intact wreckage, with its meager water and food supplies. The aircraft's working radio could have been used to call for help.



Three of the four engines were not running when the plane crashed, suggesting that they had been feathered as the plane ran dangerously low on fuel. The crew probably remained in the plane as long as they felt they could. The fact that they bailed out with their Mae West life vests suggests they thought they were still over water.

In 1960, the US Army conducted a formal search of the area for the crewmen's remains. In February, five of the crew were found some eighty miles from the crash site, indicating they had walked for quite some distance after bailing out of the aircraft.

The desert in this region of Libya is not the endless vista of sand dunes one might imagine. Instead, much of it is a gravelly plain. Some researchers have proposed that they walked Northwest following truck tracks on the rocky surface of the desert. The crew had no way of knowing those tracks were over ten years old.

The eight survivors did not know they were some 440 miles from home. Sadly, had they chosen to walk South they would have, in all likelihood, found the wreckage of their plane and been able to gather some supplies before continuing South. Some have suggested that they would have also been able to use the plane's radio to call for help.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS / DATA / INFORMATION

A. Despite 16 years in the desert, the crew log inside was still legible, the radio still worked, and even a thermos of tea was still drinkable.

B. Later in 1959 and 1960, the bodies of eight of the nine crew were found and brought home; The copilot's diary was found intact on the body of 2nd Lieutenant Robert Toner, which told the crew's heroic but futile struggle for survival. (See the contents of this Diary at bottom of this page.)

C. Known to the USAAF as 41-24301, the "Lady Be Good" (named after the musical) was a new aircraft with a new crew, assigned to the 376th Bomb Group based at Soluch, Libya.

D.



DAYTON, Ohio -- One of the four propellers and an engine from the "Lady Be Good" are on display in the World War II Gallery at the National Museum of the United States Air Force. The propeller was transferred from the 40th Troop Carrier Squadron. (U.S. Air Force photo)

THE DIARY RECOVERED FROM ROBERT TONER'S POCKET DOCUMENTED THE CREW'S TORTUOUS WALK THROUGH THE DESERT



Sunday, April 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, April 5: Start walking N.W. Still no John. A few rations, 1/2 canteen of water, 1 capful per day. Sun fairly warm, good breeze from N.W. nite very cold, no sleep. Rested and walked.

Tuesday, April 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 and rested all nite. 15 minutes on, five off.

Wednesday, April 7: Same routine, everyone getting weak, can't go very far, prayers all the time, again p.m. very warm, hell. Can't sleep. Every one sore from ground.

Thursday, April 8: Hit sand dunes, very miserable, good wind but continuous blowing of sand, everyone now very weak. Thought Sam and Moore were all done. LaMotte eyes are gone, everyone else's eyes are bad. Still going N.W.

Friday, April 9: Shelly, 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 degrees, good wind from the N. , no shelter, one parachute left.

Saturday, April 10: Still having prayer meetings for help, no sign of anything, a couple of birds, good wind from the N., really weak now, can't walk, pains all over, still all want to die, nights very cold, no sleep.

Sunday, April 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 to put our tongues to. Have hope for help very soon, no rest, still same place.

Monday, April 12: No help yet, very cold night.

The entry from Monday was the last, written in thick pencil lines

Shelly, Ripslinger and Moore continued working their way Northwest.

Shelly's body was recovered by a team of BP oil explorers 24 miles from the group of five and Ripslinger was located by the US Army 42 miles from the group in May, 1960.

Vernon Moore's body has never been recovered. In 1953, a British Army patrol came across an unidentified body in the desert and buried it in place. It may have been Moore's remains. It equally possible that he walked into the sandy portion of the desert where his body was eventually covered by drifting and shifting dunes.

The other eight crewmen's remains were returned to the United States and were laid to rest. They gave their all and now, all we can do is remember them, and thank them



THE CREW OF THE "LADY BE GOOD" FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

Hatton, Toner, Hays, Woravka, Ripslinger, LaMotte, Shelley, Moore, Adams.



LESSONS LEARNED

While the navigational error that led to their predicament speaks for itself, the subsequent survival performance of the eight-man group was extraordinary. Their superhuman progress over the desert testifies to both good training and discipline, combined with an exceptional will to survive.

Moreover, they never gave up and remained rational and organized to the very end.

The mission and crew provided the inspiration for a 1960 "Twilight Zone" TV series episode titled, **"King Nine Will Not Return."**

Lady Be Good's airmen obviously followed their aircraft commander, Hatton, in an orderly fashion. And in the best survival tradition, they left behind a trail to be followed by anyone who might search for them. While going blind from the sun's glare and blowing sand, and too weak to continue, five of the group urged the remaining three to go on and continue searching for help.

The crew of *Lady Be Good's* eight-day survival in the Sahara Desert —without shelter, food, or water—**exceeded contemporary estimates of human capability—and by a wide margin.**

Despite the torturous conditions, they continued in the best traditions of military airman: They died trying.

THE LADY BE GOOD WRECKAGE - TODAY

Below are 2 pictures of the wreckage of "Lady Be Good". The wreckage is now stored at **Jamal Abdelnasser Air Force Base, Libya**

