Lady Be Good

By John Lowery

The B-24 crew broke all records for human endurance without water, food, or shelter—but died before escaping the Sahara.

A World War II mystery began to unravel in May 1958. British geologist Ronald G. MacLean of D'Arcy Exploration Co., flying in a DC-3 and carrying out an aerial survey in the hardpan of the Libyan Sahara, spotted the wreckage of a B-24. It had bellied-in to the sand about 440 miles southeast of Benghazi and 59 miles from the Egyptian border.

It was *Lady Be Good,* which had been based at a hastily built desert airstrip in Soluch, Libya, about 34 miles southeast of Benghazi. The bomber had disappeared April 4, 1943, while making what was for the aircraft and crew of nine its first—and last—combat mission of the war.

Due to the undercast on that stormy night, the green crew made a gross navigational error; it missed home base and flew two hours deep into the Sahara desert.

The British surveyors quickly reported their find to authorities at the US Air Force's Wheelus AB, Libya. Nine months later, in February 1959, three D'Arcy geologists drove through the desert to the wreck and found the airplane in remarkably good shape.

However, there were no obvious clues as to the fate of the airmen who had gone missing more than 15 years before.

Lady Be Good ***was discovered in 1958 by British geologists conducting an aerial survey.***

Photo via John Lowery

An examination of **Lady Be Good**'s *wreckage revealed a thermos containing still drinkable coffee, a complete desert survival kit, and machine guns that still worked. Right: An aerial photo of the Libyan Sand Sea of Calanscio.*

The Search

In the summer and fall of 1959, Air Force and Army mortuary teams began an exhaustive search for the crew's remains. The bomber had crash-landed on the gravel plain located within the Sand Sea of Calanscio. The teams determined that as fuel began to run out, each propeller had been feathered in turn, until only the No. 4 engine was still running. With the aircraft carefully trimmed, the crew had bailed out, and the pilotless bomber had made a wings-level crash-landing in the desert, coming to rest in a near-level position.

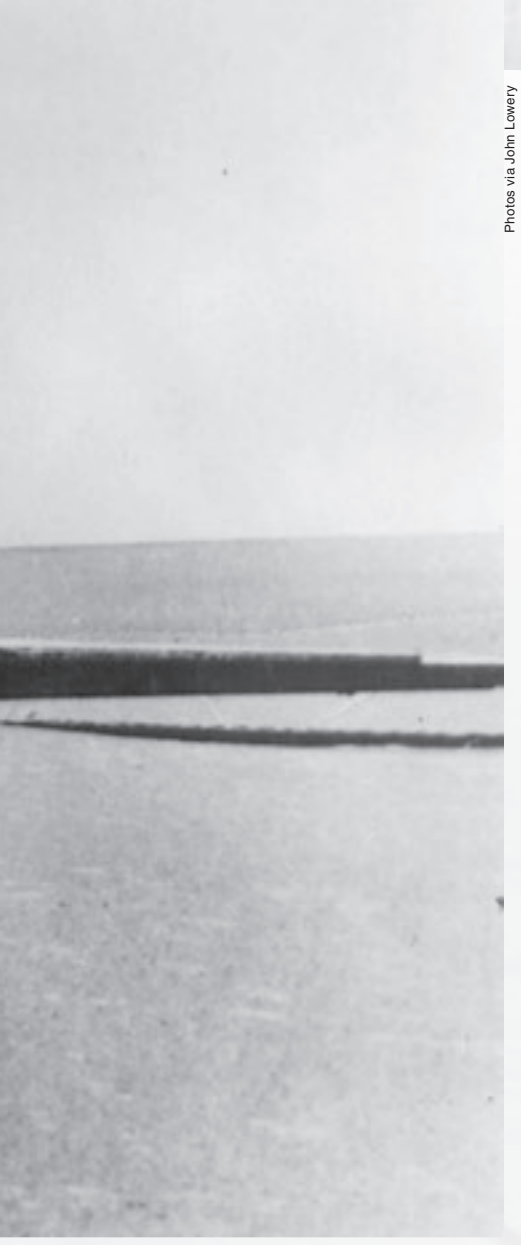
Reasoning that the crew members would recognize that they were southeast of Soluch, the mortuary team guessed the survivors would have walked northwest. Over a six-day period, the team covered some 450 square miles, but found no sign of the B-24's crew.

With daytime temperatures reaching 130 degrees Fahrenheit and nighttime near freezing, the teams searched along a northerly route for 35 miles, then east and west for 10 miles, but still they found nothing.

Then, on June 16, a clue appeared: Some 19 miles north of the crash site, searchers found a pair of small-size, fleece-lined flight boots. They appeared to have been deliberately placed, as they were left close together with toes pointing north.

The team then made random sweeps to the northwest and found the wheel tracks of five large, heavy vehicles, heading northwest.

Guessing that the tracks could be 16 years old, the searchers looked along them. In only 2.3 miles, they found a pair of medium-size flight boots, along with a mound of parachute shroud-line cuttings and the



Photos via John Lowery

small spring-activated frame of a pilot-chute. About 1.5 miles further on was the liner of an electrically heated flight suit.

A few hundred feet beyond that were two parachutes. One had been cut, weighted down with small stones, and placed in the form of a six-foot arrowhead, pointing northward along the five-track trail. Searchers found the parachute sign chiefly because of the pattern made by the stones.

At the base of the pattern was a section of parachute harness with the name V. L. Moore stenciled inside. SSgt. Vernon L. Moore was the B-24's assistant radio operator. Over the next few miles, pieces of equipment and parachute halves were laid out as arrows marking a route.

On July 17, Maj. Gen. H. R. Spicer, commander of 17th Air Force, joined the search and brought along helicopters to assist. They followed the five vehicle tracks 51 miles into the dunes, but found no further sign of the crew.

Three days later, a radio operator in the general's party was being driven back to the B-24 site to establish contact with Wheelus when he spotted a seventh parachute-centered, stone-outlined arrowhead. Only faint traces of shredded white parachute silk were visible through the sand at the center of the marker.

Located 60 feet east of the five vehicle tracks, it was pointing on a heading of 335 degrees. This led to finding still more gear.

By this time, the comprehensive search had revealed numerous items of equipment, but there was still no trace of human remains or of the crew's ultimate fate.

Finally, on Sept. 2, 1959, the teams felt they had done all they could and called off the search. A C-130 cargo aircraft landed in the desert and airlifted the investigating team and its equipment back to Wheelus. The search was officially ended. The investigative report stated, "All the evidence indicates that if the crew members had died on the gravel plain their remains would be evident on the surface." Based on the "experience of desert personnel, in addition to observations of investigators," the team determined "that remains would be covered with sand during the intervening years."

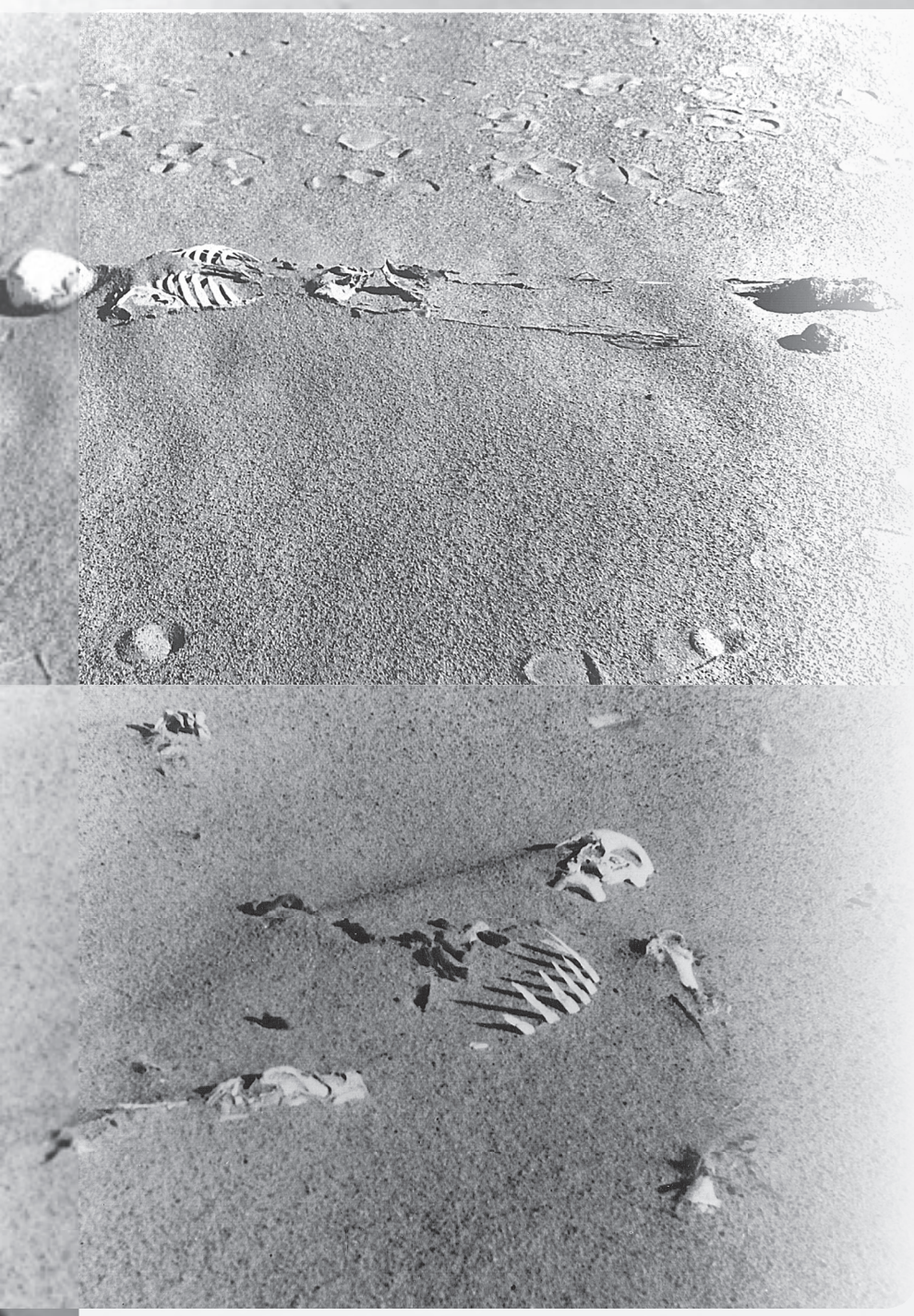
The case of *Lady Be Good* was closed. Over time the story of the wreck—which had initially attracted considerable attention because of the bomber's highly intact condition—faded from the news.

Gone, But Not Forgotten

Five months later, in February 1960, members of a British Petroleum Co. subcontractor team unexpectedly discovered the nearly buried bodies of five of the B-24's crew: 1st Lt. William J. Hatton, the pilot; 2nd Lt. Robert F. Toner, copilot; 2nd Lt. D. P. Hays, navigator; SSgt. Samuel E. Adams, gunner; and TSgt. Robert E. LaMotte, radio operator.

A diary kept by Toner was recovered along with the crew's remains and told the airmen's tragically heroic story.

They had bailed out at 2 a.m. on Monday, April 5, 1943. All but bombardier 2nd Lt. John S. Woravka found each other in the desert; the other airmen never saw Woravka again. The remain-



Photos via John Lowery

ing group of eight proceeded northwest for five days. They pressed on for the better part of a week with very little food and only a pint of water, under extreme conditions of heat by day and cold at night.

On Thursday, they reached the dunes, and Toner's diary noted, "Good wind but continuous blowing of sand. [Everyone] now very weak, thought Sam & Moore were all done. LaMotte's eyes are gone, everyone else's eyes are bad. Still going [northwest]."

After five days, they were so dehydrated and exhausted that only three of the group could go on. These were flight engineer TSgt. Harold J. Ripslinger, gunner SSgt. Guy E. Shelley Jr., and Moore.

On Friday, April 9, Toner's diary revealed: "Shelley, Rip, Moore separate & 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 [north] wind, no shelter, 1 parachute left."

The next day, Toner wrote, "Still having prayer meetings for help. No signs of *anything,* a couple of birds; good wind from [north]—really weak now, can't walk, pains all over, still all want to die. Nites very cold. No sleep."

On Monday, April 12, Toner's final entry read, "No help yet, very cold nite."

Perseverance and Endurance

Medical experts had previously estimated the limit a man could travel without water as 25 miles, with a life expectancy of two days. Yet with only a negligible amount of food and water, these eight men had journeyed 78 miles together, while three went even farther. They managed this under the most severe conditions. The airmen had pressed on through wind-blown sand, in extreme weather, for at least seven days—all without shelter.

On May 12, 1960, the BP oil explorers found the remains of a sixth crew member, Shelley. He had traveled an additional 37.5 miles into the Sand Sea, journeying a total of 115.5 miles from the bailout point.

Both of Shelley's dog tags were uncovered, three to four inches beneath the sand. Two hours of diligent search uncovered 95 percent of his remains.

Adjacent to the remains were Shelley's trousers. In one pocket were his papers and wallet. In the other they found the papers and billfold of Ripslinger. This find implied Ripslinger had died earlier and that Shelley took these effects to give to Ripslinger's family.

At this point, however, Shelley's recovery effort had to be called off because of the danger from desert vipers found hiding in the sand.

The recovery team moved on and began searching for Ripslinger, starting from where the five had been found and moving toward where Shelley's remains were discovered.

On May 17, after traveling 26 miles through the dunes, the team found Ripslinger's remains. They were almost completely buried in the sand, with only a small area of skull, right shoulder, and a few ribs exposed. The sleeves of his olive drab wool shirt had tech sergeant stripes attached, and in his pocket was a small diary.

Despite further searches, neither the remains of Woravka nor Moore were found at the time. The team chief theorized they had been covered by the windblown sand and that further

effort was futile. Thus, the case was again closed.

In August 1960, however, another British Petroleum team found the remains of Woravka, about 12 miles northeast of the crash site. He had died instantly on impact when his parachute failed to open completely. His corpse was still encased in his high-altitude suit and Mae West life jacket, while harnessed to the partially open parachute. His canteen was also intact. It contained almost a quart of still-potable water.

By taking a line from Woravka's body, investigators were able to locate the crew's rendezvous point after the bailout. Burned-out flares documented their effort to signal their missing comrade. After he failed to join up, though, they were forced to depart without him.

The remains of Moore are still lost in the Sahara's Sand Sea of Calanscio. But he clearly broke all records for stamina and desert survival.

The silk survival maps provided to the crew for escape and evasion terminated 20 miles north of the Kufra Oasis, 130 miles south. Since the airmen covered 115 miles, heading in that opposite direction might have brought them into contact with nomadic Arab traders in the well-traveled and populated oasis area.

Shortly before the case was closed, a propeller was taken from one of *Lady's* large engines. It was placed on a small stone monument in front of 17th Air Force headquarters at Wheelus. Soon after, however, Libya's King Idris and his government were overthrown, and the expansive, well-equipped air base was taken over by the Libyan Air Force and its Soviet advisors.

Above: A C-47 from Wheelus AB, Libya, lands on the Sahara hardpan to retrieve remains of five of* Lady Be Good's *crew.

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. ■

John Lowery is a veteran Air Force fighter pilot and freelance writer. He is author of five books on aircraft performance and aviation safety. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, *"The Jet-Age Gladiator," appeared in the December issue. This article is adapted from his book* Life in the Wild Blue Yonder.