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# FLIGHT OF DOOM

A Douglas C-47 and its 19 passengers vanished at sea off Papua New Guinea in 1945. Canberra historian **Bob Piper** reveals how a 20-year search may have led to the discovery of its wreckage.

Follow the trail on pages 4-5.



# Glimmer of hope for long-lost souls

By Bob Piper

Nearly 67 years ago, an RAAF Douglas C-47 transport aircraft with 19 on board disappeared minutes after take-off from Milne Bay in Papua New Guinea.

The location of its wreckage of the ill-fated flight, struck by wet weather and poor visibility, has always remained a mystery, but now some compelling evidence has surfaced.

In 20 metres of water in Milne Bay, an Australian tour boat operator and divers have found a wreck. It is in the same location where oil, lifejackets, mailbags and cushions surfaced after the accident in September, 1945.

Rod Pearce, a well-known PNG diver who operates his charter boat *Barbarian II* throughout the islands, and Norwegian diver Kasper Sommer and Danish diver Roy Torgerson have confirmed the location of the plane.

They have recovered a number of items including a propeller, tail wheel tyre as well as aviation cable and a control quadrant part.

Both wings, engines, undercarriage and the tail, which match a Douglas C-47, have also been sighted in murky water where sediment from nearby mountain rivers reduces visibility on most days.

However, no remains of those on board have been found or a positive identification made that it is A65-56 (VH-CJ), the missing plane.

Pearce, who has just visited Canberra to confer with Defence officials, has assisted the RAAF in other successful recovery operations of remains from submerged wartime aircraft. He also plans to dive and examine the aircraft further in future months.

It perhaps fortunate, and coincidental, that detailed reports and a map on the subject by Lieutenant Eddie Stanton, of the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU), have been recently rediscovered.

This paperwork confirms the same position in the original court of inquiry and which Pearce had marked on his chart. That position is 200 metres offshore on the eastern side of the bay and adjacent to Gurney airfield.

Air force transport A65-56, from No. 33 Squadron, departed Gurney Strip at 10.15am on September 11, 1945. On board were its crew of three and 16 passengers on a routine courier flight to Dobaduna, on the northern coast.

On take-off weather conditions were described as "not good with a visibility of six to eight miles". Heading down the bay VH-CJ disappeared into the "bad patch", which quickly moved up the bay and closed the landing field they had just departed from. Minutes after take-off the Douglas, now

## THE MISSING ...



**The transport acknowledged the signal by "Ok, will try" . . . no further signal was heard.**

The Beaufort bomber crew who were aboard the missing transport plane, back, Flight Sergeant Neville Davis, Flight Sergeant Kevin Rutherford, in front, Flying Officer William Reedman and Flying Officer William Gordon; Flight Sergeant Kevin Rutherford, right; PNG diver Rod Pearce who found the wreck; aircraft control wires recovered from the wreckage and the wreckage itself. On the cover: a Douglas C-47 transport aircraft taking off from Gurney Strip, Milne Bay, during World War II, identical to the one believed to be found.

enveloped in a heavy tropical downpour, radioed back and the crew advised they were "returning and asked to be homed".

At 10.37 the aircraft was instructed by Aeraradio to "climb to 5000 feet and head north-east, strip closed, call back". The transport acknowledged the signal by "OK, will try" and though they were subsequently repeatedly called, no further signal was heard from A65-56. Nothing more has been seen or heard of the aircraft and those on board since.

As well as 13 RAAF passengers on board there were also one navy and two army personnel. Included

in the passengers was a crew of four from a Beaufort bomber (No. 6 Squadron) as well as a RAAF entertainment group. The latter consisted of Corporal Neil Mackay (violinist), AC1 John Haslam (cellist), Sergeant Keith Devenish (piano) and a singer.

One of the army men, Lieutenant Noel Williams, was from ANGAU and carrying a payroll of more than £2000, a considerable amount of money in 1945 and about \$500,000 in today's values. Williams was a former Commonwealth Bank employee from Cairns.

The pilot of the missing

transport aircraft was Flight Lieutenant Eric Beer, of Boort in Victoria, who had earlier seen action with No. 30 Squadron in Beaufighters. On one of the operations with that unit he had crashed in the sea and he and his observer had spent a day and a night in a dinghy before being rescued.

Aerial, sea and ground searches at the time for the missing aircraft initially found nothing. Two of No. 6 Squadron's Beauforts as well as No. 33 Squadron's Douglas VH-CJ scoured the local area. United States and Australian shipping as well as a RAAF crash boat also

checked the local waters. Then village Constable Wahae, of Wagga Wagga village, searching in a canoe sighted two yellow lifejackets, cushions and oil floating up to the surface shortly after noon on September 12.

Launches subsequently patrolled the area as well as American forces dragging the bottom for the aircraft. Dynamite was also detonated underwater in order to try to break up the wreckage and release the bodies, all to no avail.

Although it is reported hard hat divers stood by in water that was only 30 metres or less deep, none were sent down as no wreckage had been snagged in the dragging operations.

Papuan people at the village of Duabo, which is perched on the range at 330 metres overlooking the Gumini and Gibara rivers on the south-west side of the bay, did not see the aircraft in the heavy rain but were certain from the sound "well below" that it did not enter Sagara Valley to the south-west, or rise to their height, but they did hear it crash into the sea. They also stated it only circled twice (probably using the Gurney Strip radio beacon as a guide and reference).

People from the coastal village of Buituni also heard the aircraft and its last anti-clockwise circle of the bay before a loud noise, as if it had hit the sea. One person described it as "like dynamite was being set off underwater".

They also described how they had first heard the plane flying very low during the morning near the Gibara River, however, they did not see it owing to the heavy rain.

Milne Bay, at the eastern tip of Papua New Guinea, is surrounded by 1500-metre high mountains and is often subject to torrential rain and poor visibility. A pilot suddenly caught in these conditions can find himself in a very precarious position, especially shortly after take-off.

Aircrew can either attempt to slowly climb away on instruments to the west, or head east out of the bay knowing that there is a very small gap or cone of safety of only five degrees that they must remain inside to avoid striking any land mass or high ground. To the north and south are peaks that require 5000 feet of altitude to safely clear. In fact Milne Bay is virtually ringed by high country and obstacles for pilots and aircraft flying in instrument conditions.

When caught in desperate situations like this, a pilot can also circle down low and try to stay in sight of the ground or water and attempt to retrace their steps back to the aerodrome. The latter is apparently what Flt Lt Beer attempted as his engines were heard very low in the area by a number of witnesses before it is believed he struck the sea and quickly submerged. The other two





## THE WRECKAGE ...



crewmembers lost when the plane disappeared were the second pilot, Flight Lieutenant John Mackay of Sydney, and radio operator Sergeant Frank Sullivan, of Melbourne.

It is also known that the mother of the pilot, Mrs Beer, wrote where possible to the relatives expressing her regret at the loss of the aircraft and those on board. It is

unfortunate that other official letters to the relatives of those on board, by the then Department of Air, mistakenly stated that the aircraft was in 100 fathoms (200 metres) of water and as such the bodies would not be recoverable. In fact, the known depths of the water then, and now where the plane debris surfaced, is only 20 or 30 metres deep.

Gurney airfield, and the surrounding tropical waters of Milne Bay, was the scene of many air, land and sea actions by RAAF fighter and bomber squadrons during 1942-43. Coincidentally Gurney field was named after Squadron Leader Charles Gurney DFC, an early commanding officer of No. 33 Squadron who lost his life in May 1942 when the

American B-26 Marauder he was flying in crashed at Owi Island, north of Milne Bay.

Two of the families of men on board contributed significantly to this story – the Rutherford family (Flt Sgt Kevin Rutherford) in Victoria and the Mackay family (LAC Neil Mackay) in Queensland.

The RAAF operated a number of Douglas C-47 squadrons

throughout the Pacific during and after the war.

The loss of A65-56 remains one of their last unsolved mysteries – until now.

■ Bob Piper is a Canberra-based aviation and wartime historian who learnt to fly in PMC and once lived at Milne Bay. Solving wartime mysteries is his passion.