

## **THE LOST SQUADRON AND "GLACIER GIRL" A P-38 WARPLANE BURIED IN ICE FOR OVER 50 YEARS**

WWII began officially, for the United States, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941 and Hitler, with his Axis partners, had attacked Poland and other European countries. I was seven years old, my younger brother five years old. Over the next years millions of lives all over the world were affected and many, many, lives were lost to the war.

Today, some 69 years later, there are fewer and fewer alive who experienced the horror of WWII in its entirety. Every one of those men and women had a story, some good, some terrible, and everything in-between. Here is a story involving airplanes and airmen in the early stages of the war who were just trying to deliver some warplanes to Europe.

In 1942 the weather forecasting over the North Atlantic was just beginning to be established and radio technology was crude and unreliable at best. Pilot training up to the beginning of the war for fighter pilots usually took about 300 hours before a pilot was judged ready for combat, but these were desperate times and fighter pilots on this mission had closer to 160 hours before being assigned to the front in Europe. Still better than in WWI when pilots fought their first air combat with as little as 25 hours of flight training.

Operation 'Bolero' was begun to fly warplanes to Europe, instead of shipping them by boat, because German U-boats were running wild and sinking huge numbers of transports. On July 7, 1942 two groups of aircraft left Goose Bay in the U.S. on a flight to Greenland. Each group consisted of one B-17 as a 'mother' ship to handle radio communications and navigation for four Lockheed P-38s. The groups were called 'Tom Cat Yellow' and 'Tom Cat Green'

It must be said that all the airmen involved in this adventure were young and cocky as many young men still are today. They were in good health and ready for a challenge. They also were not issued life jackets or life rafts. Summer weight flying suits and sheepskin-lined jackets were the order of the day. They were expected to fly close formation on the B-17 bombers.

On arrival at Greenland weather was bad and the two groups were forced to return to Goose Bay. Two days later they left again, but two of the P-38s had mechanical problems and turned back. The rest flew on and found more bad weather at the destination airbase, A base further North near the Arctic Circle was forecast to be clear and they changed course for BW-8 at Narssuaq.

The weather deteriorated even more so the decision was made to return to base once again. The problem was they were unable to make radio contact with WB-8

and unable to get a celestial fix due to the clouds so they were effectively lost and fuel was beginning to be a consideration. When the planes finally got a visual fix on location, they were shocked to find they might not get back to base on the remaining fuel and the only thing below them was the frozen wastelands of Southern Greenland.

Dropping down to just a couple of hundred feet above the icy plains the pilots discussed options and decided on a group emergency landing. The B-17s had more fuel reserve and as they circled overhead Lt. Brad McManus prepared to land and decided to test the surface hardness by lowering his gear, feathering the props and touched the surface.

While hard, the surface would not support the wheels, and as the wheels dug into the ice and snow, the airplane flipped over on its back and came to a halt. The pilot had guessed wrong and if it had been a dirt surface the canopy would have been crushed and McManus would be dead or seriously injured. He had however survived and crawled out of the cockpit to wave at the aircraft overhead.

One by one the other P-38s belly-landed forming a stationary formation with the B-17s nearby. McManus suffered a minor injury and all the other crewmen were safe. They immediately set about making the bombers into shelter and managed to get electrical power by shoveling snow from around two of the propellers and found they could run those engines enough to generate power for the batteries. Immediately SOS signals went out and eventually were heard, aircraft were sent out with survival material, and a rescue expedition mounted.

After a long seventeen-mile march rescuers reached the crew and they all managed to return to the rescue ship, to base, and on to other missions. The vertical tails were still visible in 1961.

The eight aircraft were left on the snow in good enough condition that at least seven of them could have been repaired and flown if they were only closer to facilities. It would be 47 years before recovery efforts would begin.

In 1980 Richard Taylor and Pat Epps flew a Beech Bonanza 3000 miles on a quest to fulfill a 'bucket list' desire by rolling the Bonanza inverted as they passed over the North Pole. Neither pilot had ever rolled the Bonanza and in any case the weather turn bad and they were forced to turn back so they set course to look into the story of the 'lost squadron' on the way home. They had no idea what they had set into motion.

On a 1988 expedition the planes were finally physically located almost three miles from the original landing site. They had been moved glacially buried in snow and ice over the years. In 1989 a core drilling tool picked up a piece of B-17 wing skin some *264 feet below the surface.*

The effort to recover one or more of the aircraft takes a whole book written by author David Hayes (The Lost Squadron: a fleet of Warplanes Locked in Ice for Fifty

Years) and was expected to take about two to three years. It took until 1992 to pull the last piece of the P-38 flown by Lt. Harry Smith out of the ice and the cost ran into the millions of dollars.

The original intention was to retrieve three P-38s, but the effort and cost became an insurmountable hurdle and only one aircraft was sent to Pat Epps hangar in Atlanta GA for restoration. A deal had been made with Kentucky businessman and aviation enthusiast Roy Shoffner to finance the restoration. He was also on the 1992 expedition to free the aircraft. Shoffner named the aircraft "Glacier Girl" and work began.

Below: A photo of the center section of 'Glacier Girl' just before disassembly to hoist the center section out of the icy prison. Although damaged, the aircraft was complete even down to the machine guns and ammunition.



Restoration was completed and the first flight of 'Glacier Girl' took place on October 26, 2002 when Steve Hinton, a well known race pilot, left the ground for the plane's first flight since that fateful day in 1942 when it belly landed in Greenland.



The plane has since been sold to Rod Lewis, Texas oilman and businessman for a price reported to be around \$7,000,000.

#### References

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