

THE SAGA OF THE SHADY LADY

On 1 March 2006, Lindsay Peet captivated the Kimberley Society with the results of his years of research into a wartime incident on the Kimberley coast. The following notes, which he kindly provided, summarise his illustrated talk.

Shady Lady is the name given to a United States Army Air Force (USAAF) B-24 Liberator Heavy Bomber which, in August 1943, took part in the longest land-based bombing raid in the war to that date. By way of background, by early 1943 the Japanese thrust towards Australia had been halted. To the north-west of Australia an air war was mounted against the Japanese-occupied Netherlands East Indies (NEI). Because the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) did not have a long-range heavy bomber force an USAAF Heavy Bomber Group, the 380th, was based in the Northern Territory from May 1943. Targets of a strategic nature were sought by this Group. One was Balikpapan on the east coast of Borneo where there were refineries, storage tank farms and port facilities for loading tankers.

The date for the first mission to Balikpapan was set for Friday 13 August 1943. Late in the afternoon eleven B-24s were dispatched from Darwin at five-minute intervals, two turned back due to bad weather. Nine reached the target and bombed individually, with eight making it back to Darwin. The ninth one, the *Shady Lady*, ended up on the Kimberley coast. Its saga comprised the rest of my talk.

Before *Shady Lady* took off from Darwin it was assigned an addition to its ten-man crew, a RAAF photographic officer, Flying Officer H R Rustin from Perth, to take end-of-strike photographs of Balikpapan with a special aerial camera.

With extra fuel tanks in its bomb bay and carrying a heavy bomb load *Shady Lady* needed the whole of the runway at Darwin to stagger into the air. On the way to Borneo it entered an intense tropical storm near Makassar which it took two and a half hours to fly through. When it reached Balikpapan the weather was reasonably clear. The pilot, Lieutenant Doug Craig, made a bomb run from the east. Almost immediately *Shady Lady* was bracketed by a Japanese searchlight. Craig tried violent evasive manouvres but without success. During this run the intercom between the bombardier and the pilot stopped working hence no bombs were dropped. A second bomb run was tried and the bombs were successfully dropped on a tank farm. A third run over the target was considered an unnecessary waste of valuable fuel so Craig turned the B-24 homeward.

Near Makassar a tremendous tropical front was encountered. Craig and his co-pilot battled with the storm whilst trying to find ways of getting around it. Eventually the

pilots heeded the warnings by the Navigator and the Flight Engineer that too much fuel was being used and the course for Darwin resumed. After two hours *Shady Lady* came out of the storm and encountered a huge island across its track. The Navigator decided that it was Timor and recommended a change of course to a closer friendly airfield, that at the Drysdale Mission in Western Australia. Soon, on the new course, the B-24 approached another large island – it was realized that this was the western end of Timor and the previous island was actually Flores. It was estimated that there was just about enough fuel to make Drysdale. *Shady Lady's* track was going over the Japanese Airbase at Penfui; to detour would use too much fuel so the risk of fighter attacks was taken. Two Zeros took off and soon caught up with the bomber and then commenced a series of co-ordinated attacks. As a defensive manoeuvre Craig started turning his aircraft into each attack – this unfortunately used up valuable fuel. The aerial fight went on for about an hour during which time the forward and upper gun turrets of the B-24 went out of action and one of the waist guns jammed. Eventually some low clouds appeared; Craig flew into them and the Zeros made their final passes.

Miraculously none of the engines or fuel tanks had been damaged and none of the crew had been hit. The amount of fuel remaining became their major concern. Craig announced that he would ditch *Shady Lady* in the ocean if land was not sighted within 30 minutes. Twenty-five minutes had passed when a very rugged part of the Australian mainland, probably Cape Bougainville, was sighted. The bomber was turned to the left in the hope of finding Drysdale.

Flying over the Anjo Peninsula a large salt pan was seen near Mary Island. After consulting his crew, Craig decided to make a controlled forced landing there whilst the four engines were still running. He made his approach from the east touching down on the boundary between the white and grey areas of the salt pan. *Shady Lady's* main wheels bounced once then settled on the ground as power was reduced. Craig kept the nosewheel off the ground for as long as possible; it touched down three times before it stayed down. As Craig could see a low ridge with bushes coming up rapidly he touched the brakes, the result was that the nosewheel broke off and brought the bomber to a screeching halt. The front compartment was flattened and the forward turret damaged. There was only one minor injury. *Shady Lady* had been airborne for just over 16½ hours and it was now Saturday morning.

The crew scrambled out quickly but there was no fire. They knew they were down somewhere in Australia, but exactly where were they, how would they be rescued, and how would they survive in the meantime? They only had a limited amount of food and water. The Navigator estimated their ground position and this was

transmitted to Darwin. As the given position was erroneous it was afternoon before a RAAF Hudson bomber found *Shady Lady* and signalled to the downed airmen that a rescue party would reach them the next afternoon (Sunday). Meantime at Drysdale the RAAF was arranging with the Benedictine Mission Superior, Father Thomas Gil, for the Mission's lugger, the *Teresita Moa* (or *Little Flower*) to be used for the rescue; it would be commanded by Father Seraphim Sanz.

By Sunday morning drinking water for the airmen was being rationed. Mid-morning they saw three Aborigines on the other side of the salt pan. In due course they made contact with them, finding that they were Christians from the Drysdale Mission. About this time, Rustin took a photograph of the American crew and three Aborigines. In response to the acute shortage of drinking water the Aborigines found a supply of brackish water in a creek bed further to the south. Later in the day, a party including Father Sanz, four RAAF personnel and about five Aborigines arrived at the salt pan.



The *Shady Lady* on the salt pan, with the American crew and the three Aboriginal men.

After another uncomfortable night the airmen and the lugger party were at the landing beach before dawn. Rustin took photographs at the beach. It took over five hours for *Teresita Moa* to sail around the tip of the Anjo Peninsula to the Old Mission at Pago. The airmen were trucked to the Drysdale airfield where the RAAF's No. 58 Operational Base was stationed. Here they met the crew of the Hudson bomber which had assisted them over the previous two days. Later in the evening they visited the Mission to meet Father Thomas and to thank Father Sanz for his role in their rescue. The next day (Tuesday), the Hudson flew the airmen back to their home base at Fenton in the Northern Territory.

By the end of the week, Father Sanz had taken USAAF engineers out to *Shady Lady* in *Teresita Moa*. With the assistance of about 30 Aborigines the B-24 was raised off its nose for a detailed inspection. It was considered that the damage was repairable and that there was just sufficient length along the salt pan for a take-off.

The repair of *Shady Lady* commenced in earnest on 28 August. Because the *Teresita Moa* had sailed to Broome, the repair effort had to be totally supported by aircraft. A DH-84 Dragon and a DH-82 Tiger Moth were used to ferry personnel and equipment out to the salt pan from Drysdale airfield. The only item which could not be flown out was a wooden and canvas replacement nose for *Shady Lady*: this was carried some 65 km overland on poles by six Aborigines, taking two days. The repair was a race against time because local spring tides were due on 11 September and would flood the salt pan.

To make it as light as possible for take-off, all excess weight was taken from *Shady Lady*. This included removing its guns and clearing out all the used and live 0.5 in ammunition which was simply thrown onto the salt pan. Only the minimum amount of fuel sufficient to warm up the engines and then fly to Fenton was loaded. The crew was kept to two, both volunteers. There was to be emergency assistance, including a doctor, on standby on the salt pan in the event of a crash.

Two days before the spring tides the take-off occurred without incident except that the engines were damaged due to the use of excessive power because the B-24's wheels were starting to dig in. The outcome of all of this effort was that once *Shady Lady* reached Fenton it was carefully inspected and it was decided that it was structurally unsound for further combat operations. It was sent to Townsville for return to the United States, but nothing is known of what eventually happened to it.

I put the saga of the *Shady Lady* together from a multitude of sources some of which I came across fortuitously. Apart from several books, there were two personal wartime diaries in Perth, archives at the Benedictine Community at New Norcia, RAAF historical records in Canberra, Japanese combat records in the Military History Department in Tokyo, material in two archives in the United States, interviews with several crew members, wartime photographs from veterans in the United States, and finally an initial inspection from the air and then two short visits to the site by helicopter. Interestingly, *Shady Lady's* landing tracks are still clearly visible on the salt pan, due to a particular geological process. Much discarded wreckage is still there as is the discarded ammunition, making up an interesting archaeological site which has been classified by the National Trust.

As a final word, in the 1990s I found out that for many years the Coastwatch organisation had been aware of *Shady Lady's* landing tracks, considering them to be made by a modern drug-running aircraft. I was pleased to tell them that it was only a 1943 military site!

Lindsay Peet

Further Reading:

Fain, J. (ed.), *The history of the 380th Bomb Group (H) AAF, affectionately known as the Flying Circus*, printed by Commanday-Roth, New York, 1946.

Horton, Glenn R. and Horton, Gary, L., *King of the heavies*, The Authors, Inver Grove Hts, Minnesota, 1983.

Horton, Glenn R., *The best in the southwest*, Mosie Publications, Savage, Minnesota, 1995.

Wright, J., *The Flying Circus: Pacific war – 1943 – as seen through a bombsight*, Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut, 2005.