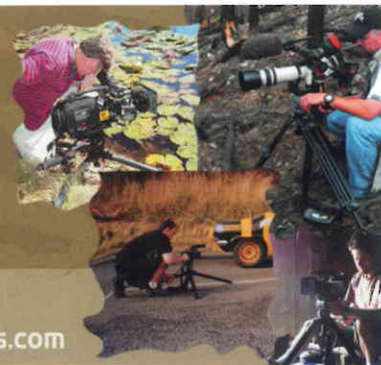


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Flight of the Swamp Ghost

By Wade Fairley

MIDNIGHT, TOWNSVILLE, FEBRUARY 22ND 1942:

Nine American B17 aircraft take off and steer north out over the Coral Sea towards Japanese held Rabaul in northern Papua-New Guinea.

Dawn finds them over target, and maelstrom of fierce Japanese resistance.

One aircraft encountering mechanical trouble with its bomb doors is forced to double back and make a return pass into the thick anti-aircraft fire. A Japanese shell strikes their right wing passing all the way through but miraculously fails to detonate. The aircraft is further damaged by the glancing fire from Japanese fighter aircraft, the finger sized projectiles passing just centimetres above the crews heads. Her load released, the ruffled B17 bomber turns and begins the long flight back south.

In order to make the distance back to Australia, the aircraft is scheduled to refuel at allied held Port Moresby at the other end of PNG. Between them and sanctuary though lie the rugged and altitudinous Owen Stanley Mountains.

By this time its afternoon and heavy clouds have been brewing over the ranges and gathering in thick afternoon tropical storms typical of the region. With fuel low and the weather and mountains between them and safety the pilot makes the difficult decision to make an emergency landing in swamp on PNG's remote north coast than take their chances crossing the precipitous ranges. Choosing a relatively open area the big aircraft lumbers in belly-landing into five metre high Kunai grass.

54 years later I'm standing up to my waist in swamp water next to one of the most remarkably well preserved aircraft wrecks of the Pacific war - 'The Swamp Ghost' as the aircraft has become known. Her metallic aluminium skin once painted olive green is now baked bare silver by the elements and the unrelenting tropical sun, but generally the wreck is remarkably well preserved largely by the fact that the swamp is fresh water.

We're a team of 21. Film crew of five and 16 aircraft and recovery experts assembled from the US



Left: After 50 years, the Swamp Ghost awakes. Top: Wade in the PNG swamp. "The versatility of the Solo tripod legs proved a perfect tool for mounting tracking shots from available equipment such as dugout canoes."

and Australia. We're here with the ambitious aim to see the Swamp Ghost after 50 years dormant in the swamp, fly out of here once again.

Permission to recover the aircraft involved eight years of negotiations between the aircraft recoverers and PNG Government, the country's National Museum and local landowners of the area of the swamp where the aircraft put down.

At the wreck site, over five decades vegetation had of course by this time well and truly embraced the aircraft as permanent swamp fixture. A small army of machete wielding locals made quick work of clearing this, in the process unleashing a steady stream of very upset scorpions and spiders seeking revenge at their disturbance. Fortunately their bites didn't prove any more problematic than a painful sting.

To enable lifting, the B17 Flying Fortress had its four engines, tail plane and wings removed, then each section floated clear of the bed of mud and water with

industrial air bags. This process took some two weeks of sweat and mixed fortunes, then finally the crux with the amazing spectacle and footage as the Swamp Ghost again flew out the same jungle and swamp that it had ploughed into fifty years earlier.

A huge Russian helicopter on charter in PNG to that country's extensive mining industry was brought on site and with lifting gear carefully rigged, the Swamp Ghost was lifted free of the mud and elephant grass, making an incongruous site as it took to the air again skimming over jungle to a barge waiting off shore.

The Swamp Ghost complete with all it's parts is now containered ready for shipment and will be repatriated to the US and eventually completely restored to where it will take to the skies again and fly independently under its own power.

All of the Swamp Ghost's crew survived the crash landing into the swamp in 1942. They then made an epic walk out of the swamp with assistance from natives.

For more info on this iconic WWII wreck visit <http://www.pacificwrecks.com/aircraft/b-17/41-2446.html>