

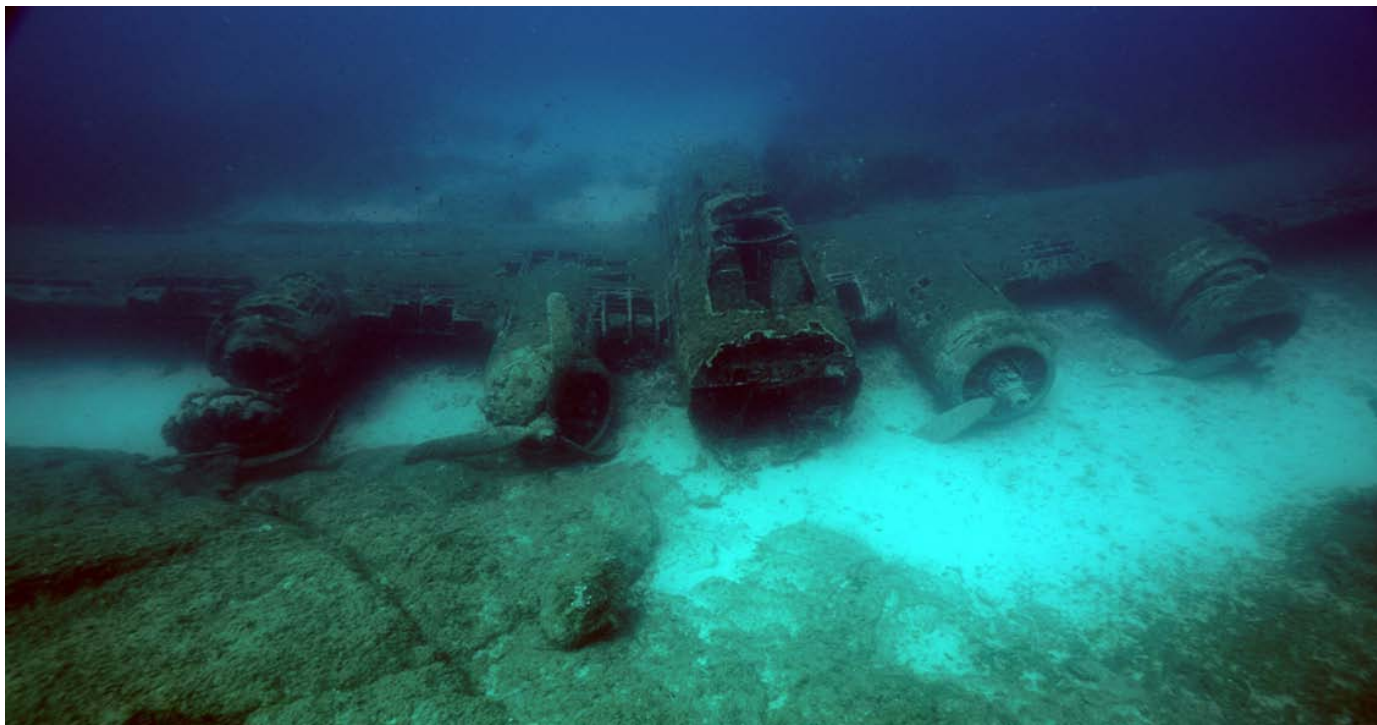
Boeing B17 Her Did

By Marcin Trzcinski

Hickam Field, Hawaii, December 7, 1941

Well, at seven fifty-five in the morning, we heard a low flying plane come over the barracks and all of a sudden the whole island shook. So, we all dashed to the window and here is a plane making a climbing left turn. We had never seen one before, but on the wing there was the Japanese mark of the Rising Sun. Instinctively, we knew what it was and from then on all hell broke loose! They bombed the ships in the harbor. They bombed the planes. They bombed the hangers. They bombed the barracks and they would bomb and then they would come in and strafe. So anything that was moving they would fire on. Having the planes lined up nice and pretty, which was the military style...it doesn't look good to have a plane over here and over there. When they're lined up they look pretty, so out the door...right down there...pull the trigger and get 'em all! We made it very convenient for them. I tried to take cover. There was no place to take cover. We came running out of the barracks. A bomb hit in front of me that killed dozens and knocked me up against the wall and kind of held me there. And then I went outside and they were dropping bombs and I got hit here, in my wrist. Then they came in a strafe...three of us dove, dove under a so-called command car which is something like a Hum-vee. Two of my friends were killed and I got a bullet in my right leg.

This was the beginning of the war adventure of Frank G. Chaplick, the future pilot of Her Did B17G bomber, at that time stationed in Hawaii.



Nikon D300 camera with the Nikkor 10-24 f/3.5-4.5 lens. Hugyfot housing 6" dome port. Manual settings, 1/40 sec., f/7.1, ISO 200.

On 14 February 1944 Her Did ditched off the coast of Corsica, directly in front of the Calvi citadel. However, before Frank took off on this fatal (and his last battle) flight, he still had six weeks of recuperation before him at the Tripler General Hospital in Honolulu followed by over 2 years of training and battle missions over the Nazi-occupied Germany. After the pilot training in California and New Mexico (already on his last plane type, the B17 bomber), the newly formed crew set out on the journey to Africa where the 97th Bombardment Group was then stationed. Naturally, the journey itself was full of adventures...

I called the tower in Bangor and he told me

to land runway two-four, so I landed and he said, "Okay, take a left." Have to go down that way. I put the brakes on...the left brake held, the right brake did not. There was a hydraulic leak that they supposedly fixed in Grand Island, Nebraska. They didn't fix it. When I pulled the gear up, it cracked a fitting and I told my co-pilot to pump the hand brake, which he did. It was pumping hydraulic fluid out and we were doing all kinds of maneuvers. There was a fellow standing on guard duty at the intersection of the two runways and I'm heading for him. He threw his rifle away and headed for the woods. Bulldozer operators were working down there and they were all looking as if to say, "Where



Nikon D300 camera with the Nikkor 10-24 f/3.5-4.5 lens. Hugyfot housing w/ 6" dome port. Ikelite DS160 strobe. Manual settings, 1/100 sec., f/5, ISO 400.

in hell did he get his flying lessons?"

Continuing its flight, the Her Did crew also did stopovers at Gander (New Foundland), Belfast and London until it reached Marrakesh in Morocco.

I was there for two or three days. They stole my wheels and tires because they needed them 'up front' so I had to be there for two or three days until they flew some more tires in so I could get going

and then we went to, ah, further, further east to North Africa and then we finally moved up to, ah, southern Italy, called, to a place called Taranto.

That was where 10 pilots led by Frank G. Chaplick started their battle flight tour. They flew over France, Italy, Greece and certainly Germany. The morning of 14 February 1944 found them at yet another base in Foggia from where the bombers



Nikon D300 camera with the Nikkor 10-24 f/3.5-4.5 lens. Hugyfot housing w/ 6" dome port. Ikelite DS160 strobe. Manual settings, 1/80 sec., f/6.3, ISO 200.

were to go on the bombardment of the Verona railway station.

While approaching our target, the group had to make a marked left turn to correct our attack angle envisaged on the flight road. Our plane being on

the right wing of the formation, I was shifted and almost isolated to prevent a risk of collision. That was fatal for us, because our B-17 was taking enemy shooting.

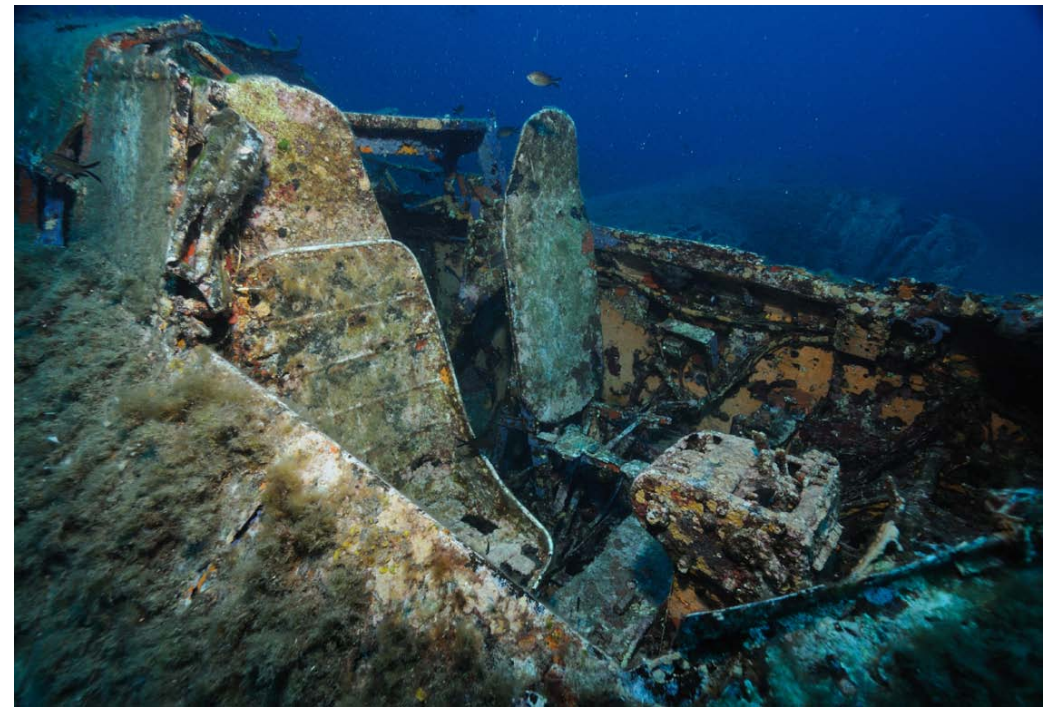
When the formation of Flying Fortresses turning to the battle course was attacked by Messerschmitts Me-109 flying out of the sun, their pilots focused on the dispersed planes on the right side of the group. Two out of four Her Did's engines immediately caught fire. Robert F. Householder, the radio operator, and George J. Murphy, the waist gunner, were killed on the spot, with Tony Duca, the tail gunner, getting heavily wounded. However, the remaining gunners and the navigator who stood in for his killed teammate continued to fire at the enemy fighters. They were saved literally at the last moment by P-47 Thunderbolt fighters which ended the battle in one speedy swipe.

Under their cover, the badly damaged plane took a course to Corsica. This was not an optimum decision; when the height-losing bomber approached the Calvi airport, a flight controller informed the crew that the landing strip was too short for such a large plane to touch down. Frank G. Chaplick then stopped the approach manoeuvre and turned towards the sea; after making a full circle he intended to try emergency landing next to the landing strip.

Again on the sea, I was on our final approach when the third damaged engine stopped. Not having enough power at this time and losing altitude, I only had but one choice: to make a water landing. That's the way I landed the B-17 on the water, very close in front of the Calvi's citadel. The plane didn't break during the operation, and floated a few minutes, which enabled us to evacuate it, except the 3 machine gunners killed during the attack and whose bodies sank with the wreck.

A British air/sea rescue boat picked us up and one of the first things they asked us was if we had any internal injuries. If we said no, they gave us a shot of rum.

I have been planning a diving trip to Calvi for years. Once, about three years ago, I almost went there. But something always got in my way and Frank G. Chaplick's B17 patiently waited for me in the depths of the Mediterranean. And so it would have kept waiting, had it not been for the cancelled seal-watching trip to the Bristol Channel which forced me to find something to do instead. Out of the several available options the offer of the newly opened Diving Calvi centre seemed the most interesting. Moreover, it was high time; following Internet information on Her Did I knew that the wreck was getting in an increasingly bad condition.



Nikon D300 camera with the Nikkor 10-24 f/3.5-4.5 lens. Hugyfot housing w/ 6" dome port. Ikelite DS160 strobe. Manual settings, 1/160 sec., f/7.1, ISO 400.

The parking lot at the Chez Marie restaurant was full of cars. After all, it was already 12.30 p.m., a holy hour for every Frenchmen, unavoidably connected with the concept of a small lunch of barely three or four courses. One whole table was taken up by uniformed policemen; their three cars were parked in the square in front of the building. At another, there were local workmen and farmers in chequered flannel shirts and dirty trousers. They were all analysing the board with chalked-on afternoon menu.

They exchanged careful opinions, estimating the quality of the dishes, and then placed their orders with the black-dressed waitress circling between the tables. In the meantime, the hugely-built host placed water beakers, house wine bottles and baskets with baguettes on oilcloth-covered tables. The feast time was approaching as a perfect filler of the spare time between the dives.

Right after the lunch at Chez Marie we were to dive down to the B17. It was a great idea, provided we shortened our afternoon siesta a little



Nikon D300 camera with the Nikkor 10-24 f/3.5-4.5 lens. Hugyfot housing w/ 6" dome port. Ikelite DS160 strobe. Manual settings, 1/60 sec., f/9, ISO 200.

so as to avoid the presence of other divers at the wreck. Therefore it was with great impatience that I waited at the RIB for Sarah, Christopher and the others to come to the boat with their equipment so we could finally cast off. Our journey to the wreck was to take around 2 minutes.

One swift backflip and I was in the water. Together with Christopher, we started off immediately towards the plane. The rocky bottom was slowly falling away. Swimming about three minutes above it I used that time to check the settings on my camera.

After a moment I was ready and impatiently started to search for the plane. And there it was. We were at its left side (looking from the front). In the foreground, I could see a long wing with two huge engine gondolas and further on, already less visible, the front side of the fuselage.

I swam above the first engine (external right) and stopped over the next one. Twisted propeller blades were the best evidence with the force of the plane's impact on the water surface. I glanced to the right, at the fuselage going up. The front glazing

was gone; so was the cockpit cover although it had still been there a couple of years back. I approached the cockpit. As it was not covered, the majority of equipment was missing from the control panel. Pity. The sticks were also missing but both pilot's seats were still there. I went around the fuselage which ended right behind the wings and moved towards the left wing, but before I managed to take another photo I saw divers on the horizon, coming in a wide line.

I had to focus on the details since in moments the majority of the wreck was enveloped in the mud from the sea bottom. I was getting ready to get back when my attention was caught by two divers with huge state-of-the-art SeaCam housings, massive flashes and 8- or 9-inch dome ports. They had just arrived and were staring in disbelief at the amount of mud which can be raised by only a couple of divers. Well, they were late. This time I was the lucky one with some photos on my memory card.

The next day was our last diving day at Calvi and I accepted Christopher's offer to pay another visit to Her Did with great pleasure. I changed my lens from macro to a wide-angle, replaced the flat port by the dome and I was ready.

This time there were only four of us going down. A quick journey to our position and within minutes we

were all in the water. Sarah led us to the wreck by the shortest route and I could start shooting. I started with a wide take from the front, trying to get all four engines in the frame but not getting too far from the plane so as not to lose the contrast. I made it, but the wing tips did not. Now that I knew the place, I could take my time and go to selected places to make further shots. I started with the cockpit where our guide was hanging, posing for me. Pity there was no upper turret with two M2 Browning large-calibre machine guns. I moved towards the left wing and photographed engine no. 2, then moved again around the fuselage, peeping inside it through the dilapidated plating. I made my last stop at the right wing and, finally, I started towards our RIB, glancing over my shoulder every couple of metres. It was time to go back.

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