
Tales From The Internet

Subject: Another Lady Be Good Story

By Everett Frank, Internet Service

No one will ever know how close we came to "buying the farm." The members of our crew never really knew how close we were to being another "Lady be Good". Our crew was ferrying a new plane to Italy as hundreds of new crews did. Our trip from Topeka, to West Palm Beach, Trinidad, to Belem, to Natal to Dakar to Marrakech was rather uneventful.

When the alarm clock sounded at four a.m., I was still awake and though I had not slept I was too excited to be tired. I jumped out of bed anxious to be off.

We were held up two days in Marrakech due to weather. Finally operations said it was O.K. to fly on to Tunis and we took off. As we approached Oran the weather really looked lousy ahead and the pilot called in to Oran and they said go ahead, the ceiling was 4000 ft, visibility 2 miles at Tunis and we went on ahead. The navigator finally said we should be over Tunis and we let down to about 3000 ft and were flying through extremely broken clouds. We crossed the marker beacon 3 times and never saw the ground. There were mountains in the area higher than the altitude we were flying. Finally, our pilot said "enough of this, we are getting out of this stuff," and started to climb to the southwest.

We couldn't climb any higher than 13,000 ft because we had no oxygen and had to transfer fuel. We had crossed the marker beacon at Tunis sometime around noon.

We ran into a snow storm as bad as I have ever seen and I lived in Iowa for 31 years. Remember this was about June 20 1944. The pilot was on instruments maybe an hour and a half, plus or minus, The weather was so violent the compass was swinging so badly the navigator couldn't even do any DR (dead reckoning) navigation.

The whole crew was freezing their butts off and the pilot was ringing wet with sweat running off his chin. He had to use the deicer boots to clear snow from the leading edge of the wings a number of times. Finally after 1 1/2 or 2 hours we broke out in the clear sunshine. What did we see??? We saw sand, and, sand, and more sand as far as you could see.

The pilot told the Radio operator to send out a QRM (emergency call) and ask for a heading. Finally the radio operator got a CW contact on the Liason Set and they gave us a heading to Bone which would have headed us right back into the middle of the storm. The pilot said, "no were not going back into that stuff". We had a conference and decided to head east because we knew the Mediterranean was in that direction. They only gave the navigator a 200 mile strip map along our route but fortunately he had picked up a French map of Africa from the briefing room in Natal

Brazil. We flew due east and after a couple more hours we could see water. We saw an abandoned landing strip on the coast that didn't look too good. We knew we were north of Tripoli from the French map and headed in that direction. It was now late in the afternoon and after flying in the direction of Tripoli for 15 minutes or so, the pilot made a decision. He said we don't know if they have lights at Tripoli and it may be dark before we get there. We're going back to land on that strip.

We turned around and went back to that abandoned strip and drug it and dropped a flare to see which way the wind was blowing. The pilot circled and made the most beautiful landing I ever saw, stradling ruts in the dirt runway. He taxied back to the end of the runway and parked the plane. We didn't have any idea where we were. A couple of Arabs walked toward us and we stayed in a bunch with our 45's in our shoulder holsters.

This strip was kind of on a bluff right on the edge of the sea. Pretty soon we heard a boat engine and walked over the edge of the bluff and saw a barge-like boat approaching. It turned out to be a bunch of our British friends.

They had a base on an island in the bay and they serviced Sunderland Flying boats traveling from England to Egypt or somewhere. The strip on which we landed was a dirt strip that was used in the invasion of Malta.

The Brits put guards on our plane and took us over to the island and fed us and put us up for the night. They got on the radio and we finally contacted Tunis and told them where we were.

Tunis asked if we wanted them to send a pilot down to fly us out and our pilot said "Hell no, I flew her in here and I can fly her out." The next morning they hauled 55 gallon drums over to our plane and hand pumped 1000 gallons of petrol into our plane. We had to sign a chit at 50c per gallon.

The next morning he set the brakes and revved her up and let go. I forgot to mention there was a wrecked C-47 laying on the end of the runway we had to clear. He pulled it off and actually settled below ground level after we cleared the bluff to gain more airspeed. Bear in mind this was a 22 year old man with probably total flying time of 2 or 3 hundred hours. God rest his soul. He went on the big mission last year. He was the coolest cucumber I ever met. He set an example for all of us.

With a pilot like this, a little luck and a smile from God, all of our crew except our navigator finished our missions and returned home. Our navigator was killed on his first mission to Ploesti, flying with a different crew on June 24, 1944. Our co-pilot got shot through the guts with flak on about his 20th mission but recovered and returned home. They cleared one other plane through after us, to Tunis. They let down over the Mediterranean and tried to land on a beach.