

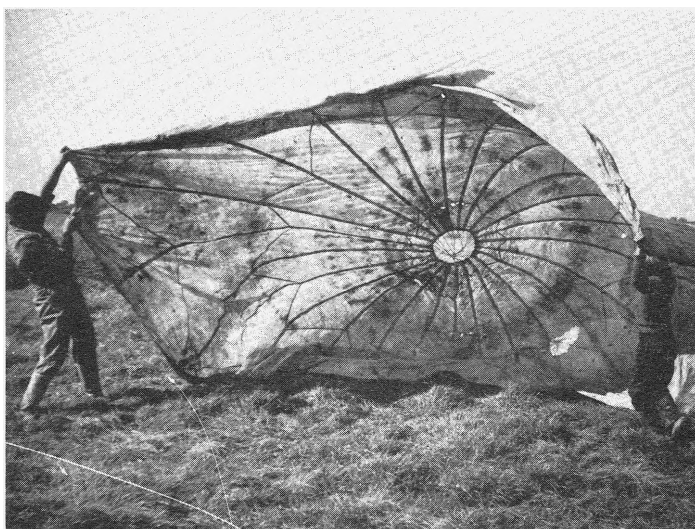
AN HISTORIC PARACHUTE

By IAN McLACHLAN



The author (right) gives Capt. Garry Burns, USAF, Information Officer of the 81st Tactical Fighter Wing, the nylon parachute to forward to the Air Force Museum, Dayton, Ohio. It is one of the first of the nylon parachutes made during the war when the supply of silk became acutely short. (Photo - U.S. Air Force, 15 Nov. 1968)

After drying a short time the parachute was ready to billow out, dirty but intact after twenty years in an English marsh.



INTRODUCTION: One of the first parachutes to be made of nylon lay for twenty years in an English marsh in the wreckage of an American bomber.

Then it was recovered by Mr. Ian McLachlan, A.A.H.S. Member and British aviation historian, and he has presented it to the U. S. Air Force Museum in Ohio.

Mr. McLachlan writes this account of how the parachute was found, and how he traced the history of the bomber from which it came.

In 1964, I decided to try and compile a record of all the aircraft which crashed in this area (East Anglia) during the Second World War. Local records pay scant attention to this aspect of East Anglian history, probably because of the secrecy surrounding wartime events.

One of the crash sites that some friends and I decided to investigate was that of a German aircraft rumoured to have crashed on marshland near the small village of Reedham in Norfolk. Local inhabitants knew nothing of any German aircraft but recounted the tale of two American bombers which had collided and crashed one afternoon in 1944. Because of the nature of the marshes and the passing of time, it was difficult to find anyone who could remember exactly where the aircraft had come down, but we were eventually fortunate enough to be guided to the proximity of the site by the late Mr. Bob Burgess, an old marshman, who had lived in the area for many years. The site itself, a water-filled crater surrounded by pieces of wreckage, was soon located and marked to enable us to find it when we returned to start excavating.

At first it seemed as though the aircraft were most likely to have been B-24 Liberators, as the crash site was only a few minutes' flying time from Seething Airbase, wartime home of the 448th Bomb Group who flew Liberators. This theory was soon discounted, however, by the unearthing of some de-icing equipment as fitted to the model B-17, the Flying Fortress. Local police records produced the date of the crash: 21st February, 1944. Slowly the evidence, both documental and from the wreckage itself, was pieced together until, by May 1965, I had narrowed the possibilities down from any one of the thousands of Fortresses produced to four aircraft with serial numbers ending in "370."

(Continued next page)

THE UNKNOWN ACE

(Continued from page opposite)

Left, Major Preddy in his CRIPES A'MIGHTY 3rd, code PE-P. He was then C.O. of the 328th F.S., October 1944. (Photo — Courtesy of Joseph W. Noah)



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks to Mr. Joseph W. Noah whose unpublished manuscript of George E. Preddy's biography provided much of the source material for this article, and to Mssrs. Samuel L. Sox, Jr. and William J. Moore of the Greensboro Historical Museum. Their efforts in behalf of Preddy were recently rewarded with the dedication of Preddy Boulevard in Greensboro, named in honor of George and his brother William R. Preddy.

That month, we had two remarkable strokes of luck at the crash site. First, we found a parachute about a foot beneath the surface of the marsh, minus pack, but neatly furled in a bed of clay. Its state of preservation was extremely good; after drying we even had to weight it down to prevent it from billowing up and blowing away across the marshes. The drogue 'chute was slightly the worse for wear but the manufacturer's name, serial number, and date of manufacture were legible.

Later investigation showed this to be one of the earliest man-made fibre parachutes produced by the Pioneer Parachute Company, Inc., Connecticut. In a subsequent letter Mr. William Bell, the Company President, stated that, just prior to the date that this particular parachute was made (19 July, 1943), supplies of silk had been exhausted and all manufacturing switched over to the use of nylon.

While the 'chute was drying we carried on with the digging and eventually hauled out a large battered piece of aluminum alloy which was put through the usual cleaning process. This was the second stroke of luck for, when the mud was washed off, the following information was found stencilled on the inside of what we know knew was an engine cowling panel:

A.F. 42-31370
UPPER R.H.
NACELLE NO. 3

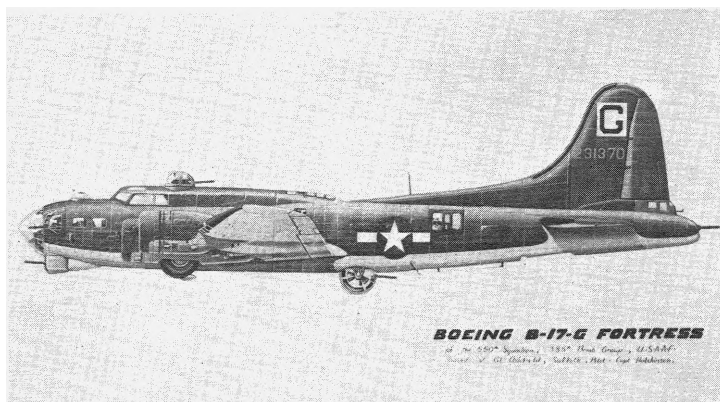
This coincided with one of the four serial numbers and we were then able to trace this aircraft through official records.

This airplane was a B-17-G-15-BO and came from the Seattle plant in late 1943. After due post-production modifications, it was ferried over as a replacement aircraft to the 550th Bombardment Squadron, 385th Bomb. Group, 3rd. Air Division, then based at Great Ashfield near Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk. "370" was assigned to Captain John N. Hutchinson, Jr. and his crew, who had already completed the majority of their 25-mission tour of operations. Their final mission, which fell on the 21st of February, was to be a diversionary raid on the Diepholz aircraft depot in Northwest Germany, while the main force would penetrate through to Brunswick. Providing they saw this mission through, the future looked bright — a tour of duty Stateside and, with luck, the war would be over before they were due to return.

BIG WEEK

Both the Diepholz and the Brunswick missions were connected with a much larger plan — the famous BIG WEEK operations when the R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F. combined in a series of concerted, round-the-clock bombing operations against the German aircraft industry. It was intended that these attacks would so reduce the Luftwaffe's strength that it would present no serious threat to Operation OVERLORD — the invasion of Europe,

On the 21st of February, thirty-four of the 385th Bomb



Capt. Hutchinson's B-17G was in the usual olive drab upper/light grey lower surface scheme and probably had, in common with others of the 385th B.G., red propeller hubs. In February 1944 the dark blue "G" was in a white square, with yellow serial number underneath. (Painting by M. J. Bailey, courtesy of author)

Group airplanes participated in the raid on Diepholz and, in spite of adverse weather conditions, inflicted severe damage on the aircraft park. During the return journey, the thickened clouds completely blanketed Southern England, forcing the bombers north of their planned return route.

At 1537 hours, the B-17's of "A" Section, 385th B.G., were approaching the East Anglian coastline at 8,000 feet. Two minutes later they crossed the coast at 52-43N, 01-41E, just north of Yarmouth, and began descending in preparation for landing. Weather conditions were poor — a report for the Reedham area indicates 5/8 cloud at 4,000 feet. At 1541 hours, just as the leading airplanes were emerging from the clouds, two of the B-17s collided.

Understandably, there is a certain amount of confusion as to what actually happened. There are available extracts from two official combat reports and an eye-witness account from Mr. R. W. Mace, a marshman who lives near the scene of the crash. Taking into consideration this and all the other evidence, I have come to the following conclusions.

When the aircraft of "C" Flight entered cloud, Captain Hutchinson would have been leading the formation as Flight Leader, and the B-17 (42-37963) piloted by Lt. Pease, from the 549th Squadron, was on his starboard side as his Number Two.

Far below on the marshes, Mr. Mace and his work-mates were cleaning a dyke near Reedham Rectory when they heard the approaching bombers and stopped to peer skywards. Although the noise was reverberating across the marshes, the aircraft were still hidden by the murky, grey confines of the clouds. What occurred within those clouds will never be known, but, as the Fortresses cleared cloud base, Lt. Pease's aircraft was below the main formation and pulling up into its path. A collision was inevitable. The starboard wing of Hutchinson's aircraft tore through the fuselage of his Number Two, completely severing the other



The marshland near Reedham, in Norfolk, where the crashes occurred. '370 crashed in the foreground and that of Lt. Pease, 42-37963, crashed near the trees at the right. (Photo — Ian McLachlan)

B-17's tail section which tumbled earthwards with the gunner trapped inside. Captain Hutchinson and his crew stood no chance of survival either; centrifugal forces pinned them in their places as their aircraft, its starboard wing shredded, whipped into a vicious spin. Moments later, it exploded on impact with the marshes. Miraculously, the tailless B-17 of Lt. Pease was still airborne but, inexplicably, no parachutes emerged as it descended, apparently under some form of control, in a right-hand turn. To Mr. Mace it appeared as though the pilot was trying to put the airplane down on a large, sloping field adjacent to Reedham Hall. It was approaching this field when it disappeared behind some trees and erupted in a towering pillar of smoke and flames less than half a mile from the blazing wreckage of the Flight Leader. All twenty-one personnel involved in the tragedy were killed. No crew list for aircraft "963" is available, but the crew of "370" were as follows:

Capt. J. N. Hutchinson, Jr.	Sgt F. L. Creegan
2 Lt. E. J. Gamble	S/Sgt. P. J. Bobulsky
2 Lt. C. G. Curtis	T/Sgt. R. C. Kitner
1 Lt. J. E. Epps	S/Sgt. J. H. Erhardt
T/Sgt. E. M. Corgnatti	T/Sgt. W. J. Dukes
	T/Sgt. J. J. Carpinetti

Recovery crews met with limited success at the time and, after removing the dead, left a considerable amount of the aircraft in the marshland. According to local sources the wreckage of "963," near the edge of the marshes, was removed a few years ago; but "370" had lain unknown and undisturbed until our arrival.

Among the items recovered were a parachute made from silk, the azimuth mechanism, range adjuster from the top turret, a Type 62 navigation indicator, antenna and reel, and the gyro flux gate compass remote caging motor. The parachute, recovered before the one made from nylon, disintegrated almost on touch. The azimuth mechanism was our first indication that the airplane was a "G" model. The Type 62 Indicator was a British Air Ministry issue fitted to U.K.-based airplanes to enable them to use our navigational aids. The remote caging motor for the compass was generally fitted in the left wing and this one was restored to working order by Mr. Paul Clegg.

Because of difficulty in gaining access to the immediate site only hand tools could be used in the digging. A survey

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Ian McLachlan moved from Scotland to East Anglia after WWII, and right into the environment so productive of material for his unique interest in aviation history, where a number of USAAF airplanes crashed during the War. Discovery of B-17 42-31370 led to his delving into the background story of the airplane, the crew, and its ultimate destiny, an approach now being applied to other crashed airplanes in the area. When not at his position in a TV manufacturing firm he is away interviewing local inhabitants for eyewitness accounts, a job that he says must be done now before it is too late. Members with knowledge of other crashes in need of research are invited to write.

P-47 PILOT MEMORIAL

At right is a photo of the memorial erected by Lord Somerly on his estate to the two P-47 pilots who collided on 8 April 1945 and for which more information is desired. The two airplanes collided over Fritton Lake, near Lowestoft, Suffolk and both pilots were killed. They were based at Halesworth (Holton) and were part of the 5th E.R.S. More information is available on the crew of the B-17, which was of the 100th Bomb Group but further details will be welcomed to enable completion of research into the memorial and its erection in 1945. Researchers are invited to write to Ian McLachlan, 51 Northgate, Beeches Estate, Lowestoft, Suffolk, England, in regard to Research Project 6919.

WINTER - 1969



Some of the wreckage recovered included the turbo-supercharger (right), an engine cylinder and cowling. Since then, much of the debris has disappeared with souvenir hunters. (Photo - McLachlan)

of the surrounding area with a mine detector indicates there is much wreckage remaining, undoubtedly to the great joy of future archaeologists.

Because we had found one of the earliest man-made fibre parachutes, and the tragic circumstances surrounding the last mission of Captain Hutchinson and his crew, I decided to see if the parachute could be permanently preserved. After careful consideration it was deemed fitting for the parachute to go on display in an American aviation museum so I wrote to the United States Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio offering the parachute. Within a few days I received a reply from Royal D. Frey, Chief, Research Division, wherein he stated that, "Considering what you have written to us, we of the U.S. Air Force Museum believe that the historic parachute you located in the wreckage of 42-31370 should be on exhibit in this institution."

After being buried for over twenty years in a Norfolk marsh, this parachute is to go on display in the largest military aviation museum in the world, a place visited by nearly 200,000 people annually. It is hoped that the men who died on that desolate stretch of English marshland are remembered along with the reasons for their sacrifice.

