

The Ongoing Mystery of Sgt Willard Beatty, USAAF

Sergeant Willard Beatty served with the 17th Pursuit Squadron, USAAF, in early 1942. Along with hundreds of others, he was evacuated by air from Java to Broome as the Japanese invaded the former location. His story as given in *Zero Hour in Broome* is consistent with that which has appeared in several other sources. However other information has since come to light, received from US researchers Arvon Staats and Charles "Greg" Jarrells (see below).

On the morning of 3rd March 1942 Beatty was loaded aboard a B-24A transport at Broome which was carrying a USAAF doctor and his patients south. Soon after take-off the Zero fighters arrived over Broome, and one of these went after the B-24A and shot it down.

A Dutch refugee (Apeldoorn) was aboard a Lockheed Lodestar which arrived over Broome soon after the attack. Apeldoorn gives a good description of seeing the B-24A fuselage floating in the water with several survivors visible in the water. The location of the crash was just over the horizon from Broome itself, literally just a few miles out to sea. Despite this sighting, for unknown reasons no search would be launched for almost 48 hours ... clearly a critical lapse, something which might have created motive for a cover-up.

An aerial evacuation of Broome was soon in full swing when a naked and exhausted Sergeant Melvin Donoho, USAAF, stumbled onto Broome airfield during the evening of 4th March, some 36 hours after being shot down in the same B-24A. He had survived a desperate ordeal and spent perhaps 30 hours in the water battling the incredible Broome tides. For much of this time he had supported another survivor, Sergeant Beatty. However with both weakening and unable to drag Beatty ashore, Donoho made the decision to swim on alone to get help. With great difficulty he made landfall only to find the area deserted. By following a rough bush track for some miles he soon saw the light of runway flares and walked in that direction.

After giving his story, Donoho was quickly flown out. Apparently a search party found Beatty on a beach at dawn the following morning, in very bad condition. He soon lapsed into a coma from which he would never recover. He was reportedly flown to a southern hospital; some sources mention Hollywood Hospital in Perth, where he died later. To this day he is still listed as "MIA" in US official records because his body went missing and was never found.

Meanwhile as a result of Donoho's report, a motor launch set out from Broome at first light to search the B-24A crash site as well as nearby beaches (an air search being deemed impractical and even dangerous for large aircraft remaining close to Broome). Among the crew were Captain Lester Brain (local Qantas manager) and an RAAF doctor, Lt Hamilton-Smith. Despite the launch almost foundering in the open ocean, the crash site was reached, confirmed by the sighting of various pieces of debris. However no bodies were seen either at sea or on nearby beaches. The launch was back in Broome by lunchtime. This search must have been fairly brief, although admittedly the crash site was known and close by. With the strong tides in the region it was probably assumed that bodies would have been quickly washed out to sea if not becoming lost in mangroves and tidal swamps.

A peculiar thing is that Brain kept a detailed diary of his time at Broome which included a record of the search above. But Brain's diary makes no mention of Beatty. Neither do the reports submitted by Lt Hamilton-Smith, who had arrived the previous night and was the only doctor to remain in Broome over coming days. It is possible that Beatty was found by Americans and quickly put aboard an aircraft while

Brain and Hamilton-Smith were still at sea (indeed aircraft did not want to linger at Broome near the middle of the day when attack was most likely). Then he could have been flown to a hospital in Perth or even Melbourne (which was the ultimate destination for the USAAF men and aircraft – some of the long range Liberators could fly there direct from Broome).

Even more strangely, the diaries of Lt-Col Legg, the USAAF commander and the most senior officer in Broome at the time, do not mention Beatty. Neither do archival records held by the Broome Museum, such as reports by the local police inspector. Thus the lack of corresponding evidence suggests that he was never found. However there is a chance he was recovered and quickly bundled aboard a USAAF transport (Legg had a motive not to mention him because of the lateness in ordering the search). This may have by-passed local witnesses such as Brain, especially if it was a USAAF search party that recovered him and also flew out on the flight. All sorts of scenarios can be conjured up, perhaps the most likely being that he was deposited at an Australian civilian hospital where he died. Amid the confusion of the time, and without identification and possibly in unusual clothing, he may have quickly become a “John Doe”, and not identified as American. However, searches of relevant records fail to find anyone matching this description.

The crucial fact about the Beatty story is that it has been traced back to a single report. This is a 1943 article in the Chicago Daily News written by Pulitzer Prize winning journalist George Weller, who quotes Donoho directly. A detailed description of Donoho’s survival story follows, ending with him being bundled aboard a flight south “as the search for Beatty began”. Weller notes that Beatty was found on the beach, and after strong treatment they “found signs of life, but he remained completely delirious. Flown the same day to Perth, he died there in hospital in 24 hours without regaining consciousness”. It appears that Weller got this information from somebody other than Donoho. Further, there is enough detail to give the story some credibility. However despite the most intensive research, including contacting Weller’s relatives, this source has not been identified. (NB while Weller’s article appeared a year after the incident, the reason appears to be the lifting of censorship restrictions regarding the Broome raid. Thus it was probably written soon after the raid).

Thus the fate of Beatty remains a true mystery, perhaps coloured by the failure of those present to launch an immediate search. However, the most likely fate is that Beatty drowned at sea and his body was never recovered. Intriguingly, a 1944 interview given with the then Wing Commander F.V. Sharpe, RAAF, gives a very detailed description of the events at Broome. He was there during the attack while en route from Perth to Darwin. Among his comments is the statement that Donoho mentioned that Beatty drowned about 12 hours before he was rescued.

Arvon Staats is the nephew of Sergeant Samuel Foster, who was lost onboard the B-24A shot down off Broome. Both Arvon and his associate, **Charles Jarrells**, were in contact with Glenn Beatty, the brother of Willard, as far back as 1998. For many years they have done a quite extraordinary amount of research trying to determine the fate of Willard Beatty. This has involved every conceivable source, including hospital archives and death registers throughout Australia. Charles Jarrells had an article published in the May 2003 edition of the journal *Military* titled *The Unknown Fate of Sgt. Willard J. Beatty*.

Anyone with any interest or information regarding this matter can contact them via astaats@ionet.net and cgandsheiljarrells@msn.com Please note however that every conceivable avenue has been explored. Sadly Glenn Beatty went to his grave in recent years without knowing the fate of his brother.