

on the USS *Lexington* as it headed for Rabaul. The unit was commandeered and assembled from Hawaii's Seventh Air Force at short notice, with its fundamental objective reverting to the protection of Australia's shipping supply lines.

Despite inflated claims, in reality the Fortress' record against shipping from higher altitudes was lacklustre, for the Japanese learned quickly to alter course as soon as bombs were released. As an alternative, Major William Benn, commanding the 63<sup>rd</sup> BS, was tasked to develop a low-level skip-bombing technique for the four-engine bomber. Training was finessed against shipwreck SS *Pruth* off Port Moresby. Despite optimism the tactic proved far more difficult to execute in practice than anticipated, and practical opportunities to sink ships were limited.

Neither were field modifications lacking on the type. In the SOPAC theatre the 11<sup>th</sup> BG fitted several B-17Es with SCR-521 long-wave Air to Surface Vessel (ASV) search radar. This initiative also incurred limitations, not the least being the degree to which tropical heat and humidity played havoc with valves and circuitry. Engineers at Espiritu Santo replaced the early Sperry turret system in December 1942 by installing twin 0.50-inch calibre machine guns on a flexible mount facing downwards through the circular fuselage opening. Engineers in Hawaii later fitted twin 0.50-inch guns in the nose to deter frontal attacks.

The SOPAC Fortresses carved a separate niche in history when they frequently battled it out with Mavis flying boats, such encounters being more frequent than acknowledged. Then, from mid-1943 onwards B-17s battled it out with J1N1 night-fighters, both over Rabaul and Bougainville. Pacific Fortresses performed hundreds of long-range reconnaissance and photographic flights too, in addition to hauling disassembled artillery pieces over the Owen Stanley mountains and dropping water, supplies and medicines to exhausted American troops on Guadalcanal. The bombers also flew VIP flights and rotated personnel on leave.

By the end of 1943 the Fortress had all but been replaced by the B-24 Liberator, however, workshops stripped and converted many into transport work horses, a far cry from the original concept of a "Mobile Force".

There is no better way to illustrate the extended service of the type in the Pacific than by the legacy of B-17E 41-2464 *Queenie*, the last Fortress lost in the theatre (see Profile 107). It served numerous units in differing capacities before seeing out its final days as a transport. Finally on 8 July 1944, the veteran disappeared between Nadzab and Tadjji, costing the lives of nineteen aboard.

In New Guinea even today the Fortress story continues. As recently as 2023, the wreckage of B-17F 41-24427 was located in a mountainous part of New Britain. It was lost with Captain Robert Williams' crew on 15 September 1942 when heading to Rabaul at night.

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Canberra August 2024