

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

Lady Be Good

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KEY WORDS: Lady Be Good Astaire Gershwin Broadway Movie B-24 Soluch
Libya William Hatton Rod Serling King Nine Sol

This story began on Broadway, December 1, 1924. It includes some fancy singing and dancing, a movie, a B-24, a tragic story, Rod Serling, CBS' first-ever made-for-TV movie, and the largest annual program at the National Air and Space Museum.

Fancy Singing and Dancing: The “Roaring ‘20s” was a time of transition for entertainment, from vaudeville to movies (the first talkie was released in 1927). Shows that were particularly good made it to Broadway, and smaller, less-good shows still could make money “on the circuit.”

Fred and Adele Astaire were a brother/sister dance team just starting out. They’d had some success in the small venues, and were just starting to move up to the big time with small parts in successful Broadway productions. Noel Coward had seen one of their earlier performances, and suggested they take their current show to England, where they received rave reviews and appearances before “the crowned heads of Europe.” Their big break came after their return to the U.S. in 1924, when they signed on as the leads in a musical production written by Bolton and Thompson, with music by George Gershwin and lyrics by his brother, Ira, the first of their many major collaborations.

The musical was called *Lady Be Good*.

The plot was simple and familiar to the period. It was successful, with an initial 9+ months run with 330 performances at the Liberty Theater. After a short break, the Astaires took the musical back to London, and it enjoyed a run of 326 shows at the Empire Theater.

The Astaires’ career prospered after that, and they found success in Hollywood, long after *Lady*.

A Movie: MGM bought the rights to *Lady Be Good* and produced a film by that name in 1941, three months before Pearl Harbor. The only things they used from the original show was the title, and two of the songs, *Oh, Lady Be Good* and *Fascinating Rhythm*. Gone, too, were the Astaires. It still has some dancing (Eleanor Powell), and some singing, but the movie was primarily a vehicle for Ann Sothern and Robert Young, with some Lionel Barrymore on the side, and a bit of Red Skelton thrown in for comic relief.

Ann Sothern was just starting her movie career, and was quite a popular star with the young men of that time.

A B-24: During WWII, there were two primary strategic bombers the U.S. could use, until the B-29 came into service later in the war. The B-17 (“Flying Fortress”) got the most press. It looked like a fightin’ plane and had a cool nickname. The other was the B-24 (“Liberator”), the 17’s less-handsome but hard-working brother. The Liberator had a longer range and could carry a heavier bombload than the Fortress. It just needed a better press agent. And perhaps better low-speed handling and more durability.

Consolidated Aircraft built the initial B-24s, and the plans were used by others to build them, too. A cumulative total of ~18,500 rolled off the various assembly lines, making it the most-produced military aircraft of all time. That many planes meant that many, many trained crews were needed.

One of the B-24s built in 1943 was slated for duty in the 514th Bombardment Squadron, Heavy, stationed in Soluch, Libya, not far from Benghazi. Her pilot was 1Lt. William J. Hatton, and his crew, like many, came from all over America. They were eager to make their first real bombing mission. Inspired by the MGM movie (and perhaps more likely by Ms. Sothern), they named their bomber the “Lady Be Good.”

They got their chance on **April 4, 1943, sixty-eight years ago this week**. Twenty-five B-24s took off that afternoon, heading for Naples to bomb harbor facilities in advance of the Allied invasion of Italy.

Soluch was on the edge of the Sahara Desert, a miserable place to fight, and especially to fly heavy aircraft. There was a lot of heat, sand, and wind. Air-borne silt particles played havoc with aircraft engines, particularly (sorry) when the engines were running at take-off speeds. And it was very windy that day. *Lady Be Good* was one of the last to take off.

Eight of the attackers had ingested enough silt into their engines that they had to abort the mission. The weather over Naples prevented bombing. Two planes struck a secondary target, two others salvoed their bombs over the ocean to give them a better chance of finding their way home. Apparently, so did *Lady*.

What a tough mission for an inexperienced crew! A dust storm, colleagues aborting right and left, bad weather over the target, and now a return trip at night, alone, with very few navigational aids. And, worst of all and unknown to them, a very strong tailwind.

As the *Lady* made its way south, the crew took stock of their situation. They knew they were headed in more-or-less the right direction, and below them they could see (what they thought were) waves in the dim moonlight. They called ahead to their base asking for help. The base either didn’t have radar or couldn’t pick them up, but they did have a “Huff/Duff” (High-Frequency Direction Finder), that could home in on the radio signals from *Lady*. They could tell what azimuth the plane was relative to base, and encouraged Hatton to keep on coming the direction he was.

Two problems now arose. The first was due to the nature of the HF/DF antenna. It was an open loop. When a radio source lay on the axis of the loop, the received signal was at a maximum; turning the loop would diminish the received signal strength. Alas, they HF/DF

system could not tell if the source was in front of the antenna, or *180° behind* it. The second problem was that tailwind. The *Lady* was already past Soluch and moving away when they made initial contact. The steer from the ground would have been correct had *Lady* been approaching. The crew was slow to catch on because they could still see “waves” below them, but now they were sand dunes south of Soluch.

The *Lady* droned on, getting progressively-lower on fuel. Hatton by then knew that they weren't going to make base, and he faced the dilemma of how best to save his crew. Should he risk a ditching in (what he thought was) the Med at night, or should they bail out with their large life-raft while they still had enough fuel to control the plane. He chose the latter and, tragically, killed them all.

Out they jumped, along with the life raft. Imagine the crew's surprise when they landed on a gravelly desert plain rather than the sea!

The crew had bailed out more-or-less together, so it didn't take long for them to find one another. All but one was accounted for. Unbeknownst to them, their bombardier, 2Lt John Woravka, died when his parachute failed to open. Since the others' parachutes caused them to drift a bit from the path *Lady* was taking, they didn't find his impact site.

By now they had figured out that they had overflown their base and were somewhere to its south. But what should they do? They had limited resources, and standing pat while they were searched for was not a reasonable approach; they knew how difficult getting together the planes and crews needed to make a thorough search of their possible locations would be. One choice would be to walk in the direction *Lady* had been set to fly, in the hope of finding her. If she were relatively undamaged, they might buy some time with the water, food, and the radio they left behind. The alternative was to try to hike out along the way they came. If they hadn't overflown their base too much, they would have a better chance at being seen and rescued if they could get near Soluch.

No such soluch. And they only had one canteen of water between them, and springtime is hot in the Sahara. And Soluch was hundreds of miles away....

If they had only known where they were, they would have known that they could hike in the direction of Lady's flightpath a walkable distance and reach a major oasis and safety. Had they found Lady (which had gently crash-landed and while unflyable, was still in pretty good shape), they would have found enough food and water, along with a Gibson Girl radio and a balloon-mounted antenna, and would have been safe back at base within a day or two.

But then didn't know that, and rather than giving up and doing nothing, they opted to try to walk to Soluch. It was tough going, and the men faded quickly (although they did much better than anyone would have thought possible). The eight survivors managed to travel *~150 miles* from their starting point. Five of them were in no shape to continue. Hatton, his co-pilot (who kept a crude diary that was recovered), and three others had to stop; the other three continued on in hope of rescue. None made it. Eventually, the bodies of two of them were found; one

had walked an additional 26 miles north and the other made it 24 miles further yet. The final crash survivor, the assistant radio operator/gunner Vernon L. Moore, was never found.

The *Lady Be Good* had gone out, but did not return. A fruitless search was flown, but north of Soluch, since the base thought they went down in the Med. Like so many others, she was lost without a trace, her crew MIA.

The Libyan Desert is very hostile to most forms of life, and people of that region live only in oases, where there is a reliable water source. The Kurfra District, where *Lady* went down is away from established transportation routes, so the wreck wasn't found for years.

Libya does have oil resources, however. On November 8, 1958, an aerial reconnaissance team from British Petroleum overflew the *Lady*. They didn't land, but they did contact Wheelus Air Force Base, one of our military legacies in pre-Qaddafi Libya. They initially discounted the sighting, because no aircraft still missing had been reported to have gone down anywhere near the alleged crash site. BP made a note of the crash site's location on their company maps, however.

Other reports of a downed plane were now coming in from geological survey flights and ground teams. The Wheelus folks were now convinced that some sort of plane was out there, and sent an investigation team that arrived at the *Lady's* resting place on May 26, 1959.

The team was faced with an amazing scene, and a mystery. The *Lady* had hit the ground in level flight, with one engine generating some power at impact. The plane slid along the ground, suffering severe damage, but less than you would think. The fuselage had broken in two aft of the large, high-mounted wing, a common point of failure in B-24 crashes, but the aircraft and a lot of its equipment was still in good shape. The plane's machine guns were still in place, proof that the locals had not found the *Lady*, because the guns were the first things scavenged. The radio still worked, and the coffee in one of the thermoses they found was still drinkable. Of course, they knew they had found the missing *Lady Be Good*, the name was painted on the nose of the aircraft. They found the flight notes kept by the navigator, so they had a pretty good idea of the fate of the plane, at least while it was still aloft.

The odd thing was, there was no sign of the crew, their parachutes, or their big life raft. The missing parachutes were readily explained by the crew bailing out, but why would they have taken their life raft when they were hundreds of miles from the ocean?

The investigation team searched the area around the wreck and found the body of bombardier Woravka, with his unopened parachute. But there was no evidence anywhere near the plane of the crew.

The story of the *Lady Be Good* and its mysteriously-missing crew created quite a news sensation, an interest that was fanned by the findings of subsequent investigative trips. The bodies of the five crewmen were found, along with the diary kept by the co-pilot. The five had suffered greatly, and could go no further. Their bodies were recovered, as had Woravka's earlier. Three men were unaccounted for. Searches nearby were fruitless; it seemed that the shifting desert sands had claimed them.

Another burst of interest in the fate of *Lady's* crew came on May 12, 1960, when a BP reconnaissance team found the body of *Lady's* assistant engineer/radio operator, a full a full 24 miles from the place where the five crewmembers were found. That find triggered further searches by the AAF. A U.S. helicopter crew found yet another body, of *Lady's* engineer, 50 miles from the site of the five, on May 17.

The final unaccounted crewman, the tail gunner, has never been found.

If only they had walked the other way....

Rod Serling: The ever-unfolding story of the *Lady Be Good* and its crew continued to attract worldwide news coverage. It also caught the attention of Rod Serling, the creator and writer for the wildly-popular *Twilight Zone* TV series. He took the *Lady's* story, made a slew of changes, and ran it as the "King Nine Will Not Return" episode on September 30, 1960. It was the show's season 2 opener, and starred Robert Montgomery.

CBS' First Made-for-TV Movie: Fast-forward ten years from *King Nine*. TV networks are expanding their programming menus, and were in need of good shows. They had been showing movies originally made for theatrical release for years, but there was a growing need for even more programs. CBS decided that, in addition to regular-run movies, they would commission movies that were specifically "made-for-TV." Their first foray into the new programming field was "Sole Survivor," based on the story of the *Lady Be Good*.

CBS turned to an outfit called Cinema Center 100 Productions to make *Sole Survivor*. It was directed by TV veteran Paul Stanley, very much in the action/adventure style of Quinn Martin. They saved some money on casting by making the lost plane a B-25, rather than the larger B-24, and used a crashed B-25 on El Mirage Dry Lake in the Mojave as their filming site.

Vince Edwards got top billing, but TV audiences were also attracted by the presence of Richard Basehart (fresh from *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*), and William Shatner. *Star Trek* (original series) had just ended its three-year run, so Shatner was available, along with two other *STOS* actors, Lou Antonio (who was Frank Gorshin's sworn enemy in the "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield" episode), and John Winston (*ST* fans will remember him as Transporter Chief Kyle who appeared in 11 episodes, and in *The Wrath of Khan*).

It was 1970, so the movie has a rather anti-military tone. And of course, Shatner got to appear shirtless a time or two and rip off his sunglasses overly-theatrically.

I won't reveal any more about the *Sole Survivor* story. If you saw this movie back in the day, you haven't forgotten it, and if you haven't seen it, **you should find it**. It was very creepy, and was based on a historical event.

NASM's Biggest Annual Event: When I first joined the National Air and Space Museum's staff, the management allowed, even encouraged, innovative programming without a lot of administrative constraints. As Halloween, 2002, approached, three of its curator/scientist team decided to put on an evening event where they would discuss three "mysteries" of the day in an entertaining vein. Space History's Roger Launius would discuss the "Apollo was a Hoax" hoax, Aeronautics' Dorothy Cochrane would talk about the various hypotheses concerning the

disappearance and fate of Amelia Earhart, and the Center for Earth and Planetary Studies' Jim Zimbelman would debunk the "Face on Mars."

The program was a big success. In the post-event discussion that followed, the lecture manager stated her support for some sort of Halloween program for 2003. A few ideas were floated, but gained little traction in the meeting. Until I popped up with, "Well, there was this movie I saw years ago, about a WWII bomber crashed in the Sahara, whose crew were...." Immediately another person around the table piped up with a "I remember that movie, too. I haven't thought about it for years, but it really freaked me out at the time." After a third person in the room said something similar, the lecture manager was convinced. We would build a Halloween program around the *Lady's* story, and show *Sole Survivor* to the public.

The telling of the story of the real *Lady Be Good* part would be easy. Dik Daso, the WWII military aviation curator at the time, got real gung ho when he heard about the idea, and he did a really good job with it in the program that resulted.

But getting our hands on a good copy of *Sole Survivor* (we were going to show it on a very large screen), and the permission to use it, proved to be difficult. Much more difficult.

Cinema Center 100 Productions made three TV movies, then went belly-up. Tracking down the owner of the copyright over thirty years later occupied a lot of staff time. But the Smithsonian/NASM research team was then, as now, extremely effective in their task. It took a while, but they not only secured permission for us to use the film, the copyright holder even ran a new digital copy for us from the original master film.

NASM publicized the event with the title "Air and Scare," to be held just before Halloween. We had a nearly-full house (in the large NASM IMAX theater). I stood at the foot of the escalator used by visitors leaving the theater, readily identified by my tie and badge as a staff member. A couple of dozen folks stopped on their way out to tell me the same thing that arose in that first planning meeting – they had seen the movie when they were young, it freaked them out then, they recognized it from the event advertisement, and just had to bring their kids and/or friends along to see.

One reviewer stated that, "(*Sole Survivor*) is absolutely unique and an experience that tends to stay with you long after the closing credits roll." Indeed.

The Udvar-Hazy Center part of NASM opened a couple of months later, and the now-annual Air and Scare event was moved out there for 2004 (we did a show built around the *Amazing Stories* episode where a ball gunner got trapped in a plane that would kill him when it landed. We pulled a training version of that type of ball turret from storage and had it on display for the program).

A safe and educational Halloween program at a location by two of the largest school districts in the country was bound to be popular, and it was. Air and Scare became the largest program of the year up until COVID.

I think you might see why the *Lady's* story is so important to me, on so many levels. I hope you found it interesting and inspirational, too.

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