

# The United States Air Force Museum

The [United States Air Force Museum](#) is located on Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, and is haunted by a number of ghosts who are linked to the planes on display there, many of which were the sites of fatalities.

According to Chris Woodyard, "The place is full of death. There are dead guys looking over my shoulder whenever I stop to look at something. I have to tell them, 'Go away, you're dead!'"

Interesting stuff. It makes you wonder if the Smithsonian is haunted. Or maybe the Holocaust Museum. I've been to both, and you have to figure the Holocaust Museum is a better candidate for haunting than an Air Force museum, but all I felt was an understandable depression. Below are the specific hauntings of the Air Force museum, taken mostly from Chris Woodyard's *Haunted Ohio II*.

## POW Exhibit

Known as the "worst place" in the museum, this area is said to cause a kind of sick dread in whoever visits it.

## Hop-along

The *Hop-along* is a Korean/Vietnam War-era helicopter whose seat is still stained with the blood of a pilot who died in it. Janitors see him sometimes, flipping switches, trying to get home.

## Black Maria

The *Black Maria* flew secret missions in the Vietnam War and rescued injured soldiers. Its body is riddled with patched bullet holes. It is rumored to be haunted by those who died in it.

## Bockscar

Named after its original pilot, Frederick Bock, *Bockscar* dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki at the end of World War Two. It is said to be haunted by a little Asian boy who runs by it at night.

## Strawberry Bitch

The *Strawberry Bitch* is a World War Two-era B-24 which is haunted by an unknown someone--perhaps a former gunner, since the belly guns sometimes rattle. This ghost once hit a custodian in the face, so be careful.

## Lady Be Good

Another World War Two B-24, the *Lady Be Good* went down in the Libyan Desert in 1943. Seven of the nine-man crew died near the plane, but one managed to walk 38 more miles through the desert before dying--a total of more than 120 miles. Now the crew roams the museum, and their exhibit is considered one of the "worst places."

The tragic story of the *Lady Be Good* is told in Edward E. Leslie's *Desperate Journeys, Abandoned Souls* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988) in Chapter 21, "Risk and Recreation: A Chronology." What follows appears on pages 455-459.

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## The Fate of the *Lady Be Good* from *Desperate Journeys, Abandoned Souls*

At approximately 1:45 P.M. on April 4, 1943, the B-24 took off during a sandstorm from a base in Soluch, Libya. It was one of twenty-five aircraft making the Naples bombing run that day. Mechanical failures, many of which were caused by the sandstorm, forced some of the planes to turn back, but the *Lady Be Good* was one of those that proceeded to the target. Darkness had fallen by the time the bombers arrived, however, and so the mission was aborted. The aircraft broke formation, and each set off alone for Libya. The *Lady* did not return.

A routine search was made at the time of the disappearance, and after the war more thorough searches were conducted along the Mediterranean coast, where it was presumed the bomber had gone down. When no traces were found, authorities concluded that the plane had crashed into the ocean.

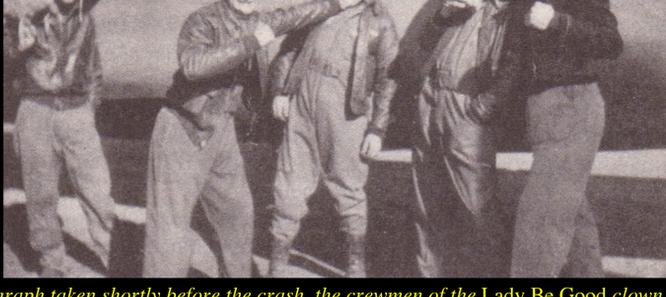
In May of 1959, a British oil prospector came upon the *Lady*, crashed deep in the desert and eerily preserved by the dry air. The fuselage contained edible rations, canteens of potable water, and a Thermos of drinkable coffee. Fatigue uniforms and flight gear hung in their proper places, and guns and ammunition were carefully stowed. But there was no sign of the servicemen who had been on board. Further examination showed that the compass and one engine still worked. (American military technicians visited the crash site and removed the plane's instruments for further study.)



*The fuselage of the Lady Be Good, found in the desert seventeen years after the crash.*

Air force search teams combed the area and found arrows made from rocks and parachutes, indicating that the crew had walked in a northwesterly direction. Desert experts had doubted that the men could have traveled more than thirty-five miles on foot, but the trail ran for some fifty-five miles before petering out.

The following February another oil man, American James W. Backhaus, discovered the bones of five of the fliers. Along with the bodies were, among other things, a khaki sweater, a flight jacket, shoes, pieces of parachutes and harnesses, an empty canteen, and a diary that had been kept by one of the victims, Second Lieutenant Robert F. Toner. With it and the evidence in the fuselage, investigators were able to piece together the last days of the doomed men.



*In a souvenir photograph taken shortly before the crash, the crewmen of the Lady Be Good clown for the camera. From left: Staff Sergeant Vernon L. Moore, Second Lieutenant Hays, Second Lieutenant John S. Woravka, Staff Sergeant Guy E. Shelley, and Technical Sergeant Harold J. Ripslinger.*

The pilot, First Lieutenant William J. Hatton, was inexperienced (as were the other crew members) and in the bad weather had overshot his base by some five hundred miles. He was probably misled as the result of a tail wind that pushed his aircraft to much higher speeds than his indicator showed. Running low on fuel, Hatton had shut down three of the four engines to conserve gasoline, but in the end the fliers were forced to bail out. They did not try to land the *Lady* with its radio and precious supply of food and water because they thought they were over the sea. Instead they jumped; once on the ground they assumed that they were near the coast. "This tragic mistake," observed the editors of *Life* magazine, "created a false hope which was to haunt them to the very end."

Eight of the nine men came down about fifteen miles from the crash site but did not search for the plane, presumably assuming it had been smashed to pieces or burned. A spent ammo clip indicates that they fired off rounds to rally together. (The ninth man, bombardier Second Lieutenant John S. Woravka, failed to join the others and was never seen again.) They then hiked northwest toward Benghazi, an impossible 450 miles away. The desert through which they walked was so arid and unresponsive of life that not even Bedouins visited the area.

They marched on, leaving in their wake markers, empty canteens, and shoes. By day they hid under parachutes to escape the sun and the 130-degree heat, and by night they walked. They rationed their water supply and took regular rest breaks. They crossed seventy miles of desert in a week.

The editors of *Life* magazine noted that

*If there had been a way out this heroic effort would have saved them. There was none. The perverse fate which had made them miss their airbase held them to the end. For, unknowingly, they and the Lady Be Good had come down on a broad plateau in the midst of a vast expanse of desert which the Arabs know--and do not even enter on camel back--as the Sand Sea of Calanscio. They did, unbelievably, reach the dunes of the plateau's edge. Because the dunes there resemble those they had seen along the Mediterranean, they probably thought they had made it. The three strongest, Sergeants Moore, Shelley, and Ripslinger, went ahead for help. The rest, now too weak to walk, waited. They died, probably on April 12 when Toner made [the] last entry, eight days after the Lady had set out. The three men who went for help never returned. Their bones, like the wreck of the Lady Be Good herself, will probably lie forever in the desert.*

The entries in Toner's diary are laconic; yet, written with a thick pencil, they tell with a simple eloquence the story of the airmen's last days:

*Sunday, Apr. 4, 1943*

Naples--28 places--things pretty well mixed up--got lost returning,--out of gas, jumped, landed in desert at 2:00 in morning, no one badly hurt, cant find John, all others present.

*Monday 5*

Start walking N.W., still no John. a few rations, 1/2 canteen of water, 1 cap full per day. Sun fairly warm. Good breeze from N.W. Nite very cold. no sleep. Rested & walked.

*Tuesday 6*

Rested at 11:30, sun very warm. no breeze, spent P.M. in hell, no planes, etc. rested until 5:00 P.M. Walked & rested all nite. 15 min on, 5 off.

*Wednesday, Apr. 7, 1943*

Same routine, everyone getting weak, cant get very far, prayers all the time, again P.M. very warm, hell. Can't sleep. everyone sore from ground.

*Thursday 8*

Hit Sand Dunes, very miserable, good wind but continuous blowing of sand, every[one] now very weak, thought Sam & Moore were all done. La Motte eyes are gone, everyone else's eyes are bad. Still going N.W.

*Friday 9*

Shelly [*sic*], Rip, Moore separate & try to go for help, rest of us all very weak, eyes bad, not any travel, all want to die. still very little water. nites are about 35, good n wind, no shelter, 1 parachute left.

*Saturday, Apr. 10, 1943*

Still having prayer meetings for help. No sign of *anything*, a couple of birds; good wind from N. --Really weak now, cant walk. pains all over, still all want to die. Nites very cold. no sleep.

*Sunday 11*

Still waiting for help. still praying. eyes bad, lost all our wgt. aching all over, could make it if we had water; just enough left to put our tongues to, have hope for help very soon, no rest, still same place.

*Monday 12*

No help yet, very cold nite

On May 15, 1960, two British oil prospectors found a sixth body. The identity of the dead man was not clear because two sets of papers were in the pockets of his uniform. One of these belonged to Technical Segeant Harold J. Ripslinger, the other to Staff Sergeant Guy E. Shelley. Whoever he was, he had walked thirty-eight miles after leaving Toner and the others, still on a northwesterly course toward the Mediterranean, and he died alone in the arid Sand Sea of Calanscio.

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A reader of the website sent me this story, about her brother's experiences as a night-shift janitor at the Wright-Patterson museum:

My brother, who is a fairly large man and fears nothing, once got a job at USAF museum as a third shift janitor. He was all excited about the job; it was good pay and fairly easy work.

He went for his first night on the job. He met his supervisor there who explained to him that they have had a hard time keeping people on that shift, but my brother thought, "piece of cake." The first hour went by and everything had been fine. It was eerie already with the mannequins and old airplanes and all, but as he began to sweep he started seeing things out of the corner of his eye. He ignored them at first--or at least tried to!

After half an hour of that he couldn't ignore it anymore, as ghostly figures began manifesting all around him: Pilots in their old flight suits, noises and voices, and even sounds of airplane engines.

My brother, who isn't afraid of anything, walked out of the best paying job that he's had in a long time in the middle of his shift. And vows never to step foot in that museum ever again. When I asked what he had seen in there, he just simply replied that it's true when they say that a pilot never really leaves his plane!

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## Sources

Leslie, Edward E. *Desperate Journeys, Abandoned Souls*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988. pp. 455-459.

Woodyard, Chris. *Haunted Ohio II*. Beavercreek, OH: Kestrel Publications, 1992.