

# AIR CLASSICS

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SEPTEMBER/1976  
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FRONT COVER: Grumman F7F  
Tigercat in full firefighting rig.

INSIDE BACK COVER: Bristol  
Braemar Mk.II is hauled sideways  
out of its hangar.

**F**OR TWELVE YEARS California's beautiful, serene Huntington Lake held a secret. At the bottom of the man-made Sierra lake, the bodies of six young men were entombed in the broken fuselage of their B-24 bomber.

The flyers and their plane had disappeared on a cold December afternoon in 1943. The flight of the bomber had come to a sudden, shattering end. The B-24 had smashed through the ice covered lake during a crash landing, and rapidly sunk out of sight.

The journey of the B-24 Liberator terminated three hours after it took off from Hammer Field, east of Fresno, California.

On Monday, 6 December 1943, eight crew members from the 461st Bombardment Group sat through a routine briefing prior to their flight on a training mission. The crewmen were Capt. William H. Darden, pilot, Ports, Virginia; 2nd Lt. Marion C. Settle, co-pilot, Wilkesboro, North Carolina; 2nd Lt. Samuel J. Schlosser, navigator, Brooklyn, New York; Staff Sgt. Franklin C. Nyswonger, flight engineer, Green Bay, Wisconsin; Sgt. George J. Barulic, radio operator, Newark, New Jersey; Sgt. Richard Spangler, gunner, Weed, California; Sgt. Donald V.

# "ANOTHER ONE OF OUR B-24s IS MISSING!"

The true story of a B-24 Liberator that returned many years after its last mission.

By S. Samuel Boghosian





Vander Plasch, gunner, Wauwatoss, Wisconsin, and Sgt. Richard E. Mayo, assistant gunner, Prestonburg, Kentucky.

Although the mission was to be routine, Capt. Darden and his crew were filled with anxiety and apprehension. Less than 24 hours earlier, another of the bomb group's B-24s with a six-man crew, had disappeared during the last leg of its flight.

The crew of the 6 December flight speculated over the fate of the missing aircraft and airmen as they walked to their high-winged B-24. Ground and service crews had finished readying the bomber.

Sgt. Nyswonger, the flight engineer, walked around the Consolidated B-24 for a visual check, while the other members climbed aboard. The pilot and copilot began their pre-flight check.

Capt. Darden started #3 engine, then #4, then #2, and then #1. He taxied the big squat deep-bellied bomber toward the run-up area. He turned the aircraft, parked into the wind, and called for a run-up check.

As soon as the tower cleared the Liberator for takeoff, the pilot released the brakes and swung onto the active runway. He set the bomber's fuel mixture at auto rich. He opened the throttles and the B-24 began its takeoff run.

The four Pratt & Whitney R-1830s,

housed in unique elliptical engine cowlings, functioned faultlessly. The bomber lifted easily from the 7,200-foot-long runway, and began a gradual climb. The main gear folded outward and up, to lie flat in the wings. The aircraft was clean and graceful, as it entered the overcast sky.

Darden gently banked the plane, and set course due east for the cloud covered Sierra Nevada (mountains). He reached the desired altitude, re-

windows because of the heavy snowfall. The pilot then instructed the flight engineer to open the bomb bay doors, so they could look straight down, hoping to get a better view of the terrain. And if the pilot gave the order to bail out, crew members could jump through the open bomb bay.

The engineer manually cranked open the roller-shutter doors up along the sides of the commodious bomb bay.

While the Liberator circled over the lake, the copilot and radio operator bailed out through the bomb bay.

By now the snow storm had begun to subside. Looking down, the crew saw nothing but heavy stands of virgin pines, and snow capped, treeless, rocky mountain crests. They suddenly spotted a smooth, clear area, wide and long enough to land a B-24. They apparently mistook the area to be a large snow covered meadow. But it was beautiful Huntington Lake; snow covered and completely frozen over.

Capt. Darden decided to circle the lake again. He came in from the east end, to land against the strong winds that blow over the lake every afternoon.

The pilot had plenty of area, and made a slow, gentle approach, with a minimum rate of descent. He was going to make a wheels-up landing.

As soon as the bomber touched down in the center of the lake, it broke through the thin ice.

Hitting the water with the bomb bay

**"... Fifteen minutes later,  
the crew became hopelessly  
lost in a blinding snow storm  
as the B-24 headed  
southward . . ."**

duced power, and trimmed the aircraft for level flight.

Approximately 100 miles northeast of Fresno, the bomber suffered complete hydraulic failure. The pilot immediately elected to return to his home base. Fifteen minutes later, the crew became hopelessly lost in a blinding snow storm, as the B-24 headed southward.

In the late afternoon, the bomber began to fly in large circles in the general area of Huntington Lake, 50 air miles northeast of Fresno. The crew was unable to see out of the



Huntington Lake was drained in 1955. The B-24's large twin fins were the first to appear. Area residents examine the strange objects which were discovered one morning. It was first reported in the press as the twin-finned tail assembly of a B-25. (L. D. Martin)



Both the front of the fuselage and the tail are visible in this photograph. The trees in the water stymied all dragging operations in December 1943. The lake was first filled in 1913, and the trees were topped from boats when the lake was partially filled. (L. D. Martin)

doors open, was like hitting a stone wall. The Liberator snapped in two along the rear of the bomb bay. The force of the impact caused the tail to shear off and go hurtling through the air, landing in front of the plane. The forward part of the aircraft nosed over and sank. The rear fuselage also quickly filled with water and disappeared.

The six crew members aboard the aircraft—pilot, navigator, engineer, and three gunners—were either knocked unconscious, killed outright, or were trapped and unable to surface as the heavy bomber sank rapidly to the bottom.

Hammer Field, which had launched an air search for the first B-24 missing since 5 December, now had to also concern itself with a second missing Liberator.

The Fresno bomber/night-fighter training base immediately flashed word to its higher headquarters, that "another of our B-24s is missing!" (Darden's was the third Fresno based B-24 to be lost in two weeks. On 22 November, another Liberator from Hammer Field crashed near Tonopah, Nevada, killing the copilot, 2nd Lt. Edward J. Drucker of Richmond Hills, New York, and injuring the pilot and two enlisted men. Seven other crew members bailed out before the bomber crashed. Tonopah was one of Hammer Field's satellite bases.)

The 461st was in the midst of an accelerated training program, for in a few months it would join the 15th Air Force in Italy for combat operations over Southern Europe. But with two B-24s and two crews missing in two days, the training programs were disrupted as planes and personnel from Hammer were pressed into air search operations.

Army Air Force aircraft from Hammer, Muroc (Edwards Air Force Base),

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**"... While the Liberator circled over the lake, the copilot and radio operator bailed out through the bomb bay . . ."**

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and March Fields flew search missions from sunrise to sunset, weather permitting. Their searches extended over the Sierra, with planes from Muroc and March concentrating their efforts between Independence, California, and Las Vegas, Nevada. Hammer Field officials believed one of the bombers was down in the Huntington Lake region, and focused their main efforts in that area.

The intensive searches failed repeatedly to turn up any traces of the missing Liberators. Time and again, snow and adverse weather conditions

forced postponement of the searches.

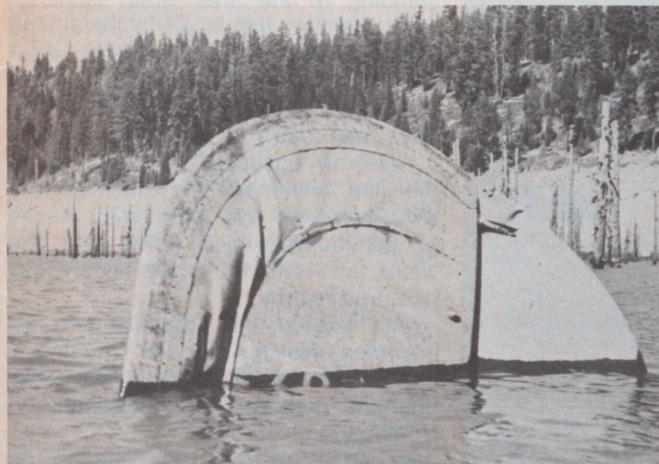
Hammer Field authorities expressed apprehension over the failure to receive even distorted signals which might have been emanated from the B-24s. Both planes were fully equipped with then-modern signaling devices (IFF), and some word should have been received, if either the equipment or the crew were in sufficiently good condition to make the attempt.

The two crew members who bailed out over Huntington Lake, area, hiked through a snowstorm to Big Creek, a nearby mountain hamlet. They were picked up by military authorities on 8 December, and returned to their home base.

A board of officers at Hammer Field immediately began an investigation into the crash of the bomber.

Fresno now concentrated all its air search operations over the Huntington Lake area. At the same time, a 30-man search party under 2nd Lt. Douglas D. Rappley, arrived from Hammer Field. They established a camp at the lake and began dragging operations. Foot patrols covered the area around the lake.

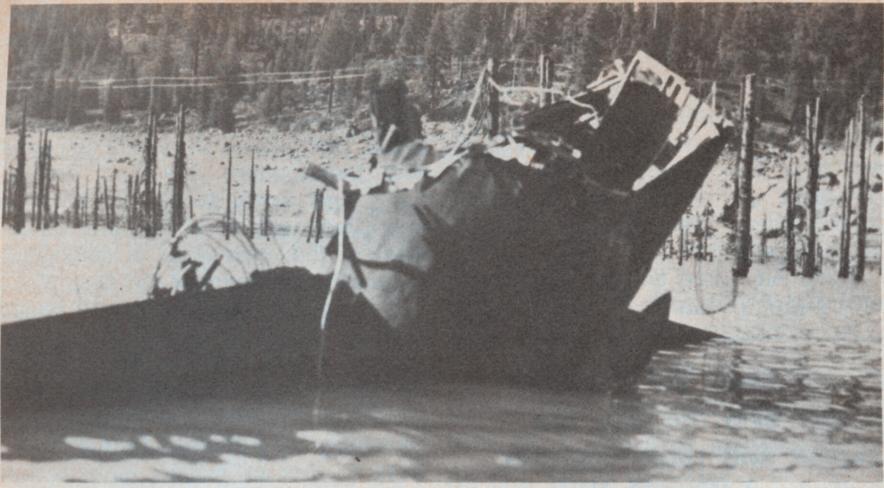
On 8 December, one of the planes spotted wreckage in a pocket in which they believed the bomber was trapped. The wreckage was found along the lake shore, near a road leading to a former power company construction camp. The discovery led officers di-



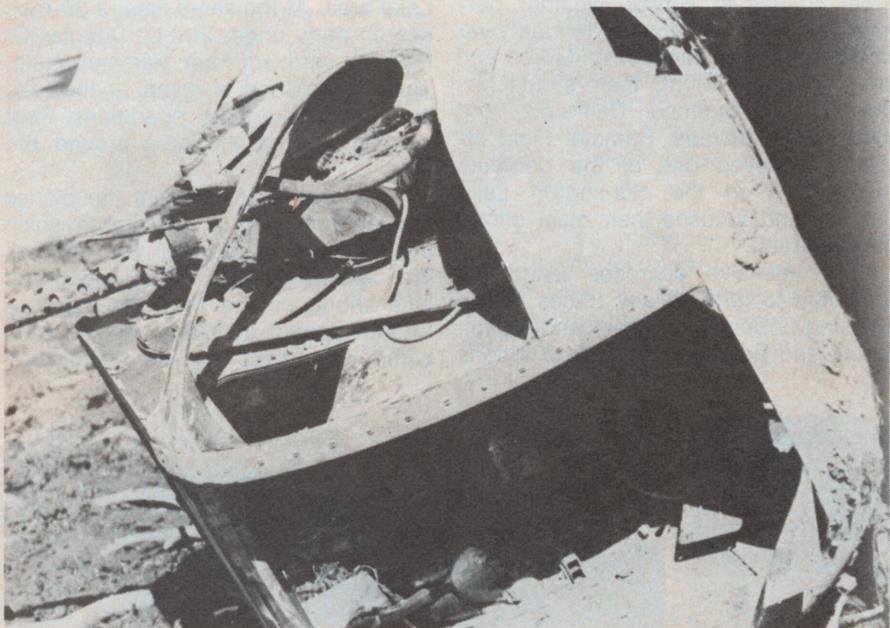
A close-up view of one of the Liberator's huge fins. Only part of the aircraft's serial number is visible. (L. D. Martin)



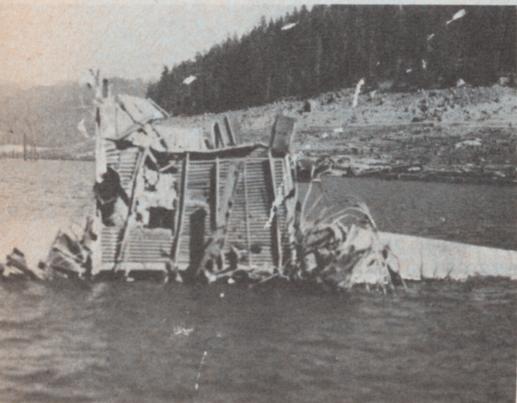
The B-24 broke into three pieces on impact. This is the forward part of the bomber. It broke off at the rear of the bomb bay. In this photo, the nose of the aircraft is buried in the mud. (L. D. Martin)



The water has receded low enough to show the B-24's low frequency automatic radio finder (ADF) antenna. This view shows how the force of the impact with the water snapped the bomber into pieces as though it was a wooden match. (L. D. Martin)



The tail gunner's body was found draped over his guns. The tail turret is a Consolidated power turret with two Browning .50 caliber machine guns. The gunner was protected by three-eighth-inch thick armor plating. (L. D. Martin)



A view of the belly of the Liberator and what remains of the bomb bay. Also visible are the trailing edges of the wings, broken and twisted metal, and severed control cables and hydraulic lines. (L. D. Martin)

recting the search to believe that the rest of the aircraft was submerged in the lake.

On 10 December, the dragging operations were held up to await the arrival of special Naval equipment from the San Francisco Bay region. Officers at Hammer Field reported that mine and metal detectors, and other devices were needed in the so far unsuccessful dragging operations.

But even with the special detectors and devices, the operations were futile. There was so much metal left in the

**"... Hitting the water with the bomb bay doors open was like hitting a stone wall. The Liberator snapped in two along the rear of the bomb bay . . ."**

lake bed from construction days, that mine and metal detectors were picking up the old metal. The dragging operations were also constantly being stymied, by getting tangled up in the tall tree stumps.

(Today before an area is filled with water, such as for a reservoir or a lake, the area is first cleared of all trees. In years past, the trees were only topped.)

The tall trees were part of the forest standing in the area when Huntington Lake was first filled in 1913. The tree tops were cut off from boats after the lake was partially filled. Thus the dragging operations were limited as to depth and area.

After an unsuccessful dragging of the lake, Hammer Field officials were virtually certain that only small pieces of the bomber had fallen into the water, and that the crash must have occurred nearby.

The fate of the Liberator and six crewmen missing since 6 December, remained a mystery for nearly 12 years, until the discovery of the bomber in Huntington Lake.

In 1955, Southern California Edison Company announced that it would drain the lake in order to repair cracks in the dam. As soon as the power company announcement was made a rumor began to circulate at Huntington Lake that a bomber would be found at the bottom of the lake. All summer

speculation was rife among the area residents and vacationers.

The lake was drained down 93 feet in order to bolt steel plates into place on the faces of the dam. The plates were to protect the faces from further weathering.

As the water receded, the tall trees were first to appear. One morning a resident of the area spotted two strange objects protruding out of the water in the center of the lake. As parts of an aircraft became visible, it was at first reported as the twin-finned tail

## "... Army Air Force aircraft from Hammer, Muroc, and March Field flew search missions from sunrise to sunset, weather permitting . . ."

assembly of a B-25 Mitchell. And as the water level of the lake dropped further, a wing and four engines appeared. It was then positively identified as a B-24.

Within days following the discovery of the Liberator, the Sixth Army Headquarters at the Presidio of San Francisco sent a team from the Army Graves Registration Service and the Provost Marshal's office. The team began a systematic search to recover any possible bodies, and to help in the identification of the victims.

The bodies of six crewmen were found in the broken fuselage of the bomber. The body of the tail gunner was found draped over his guns. All the bodies were perfectly preserved in the icy waters at the bottom of the lake. At that depth and altitude (7,000 feet), the water temperature remains around 30 degrees F. all year.

A civilian doctor, who had been an Army Air Force flight surgeon in the China-Burma-India theater of operations, examined the bodies as soon as they were brought out of the water. He was amazed at the remarkable preservation of the victims. "I had to see it to believe, especially after 12 years," the doctor said. "That water's normally ice cold at the bottom."

The Army and civilian authorities tried to remove the wreckage, but the fuselage sections kept getting caught

DURING THE 1950s this writer covered central California as a newsreel correspondent for Fox Movietone News.

On the day he arrived at Huntington Lake to film the B-24 wreckage and the recovery of the six bodies, he was met by a major from the U.S. Army Graves Registration Service. The officer politely informed the writer that no cameras would be allowed in the area during the recovery of the bodies. The reason was the military's fear that the news media would "break the story" before the military had a chance to make positive identification of each body, and to locate and notify the nearest surviving relative.

The request was a reasonable one, so every one respected the major's wish. All, except a civilian worker who persisted in taking photographs despite the officer's pleas. The worker was immediately fired by his employer.

The writer spent the afternoon watching the recovery of the tail section of the bomber. Large cables were attached around the empennage, and a winch began to slowly pull the wreckage toward the shore.

The tail section got caught between two large stumps, causing the steel cables to tear through the tail assembly. Suddenly, one of the bodies fell out of the

wreckage. It was a very unnerving sight, and emotionally affected everyone present.

An inspection of the exterior of the fuselage showed no evidence of any corrosion or rust. Within 30 minutes after the empennage was pulled out of the water, steel rivet heads on the horizontal stabilizer began to oxidize.

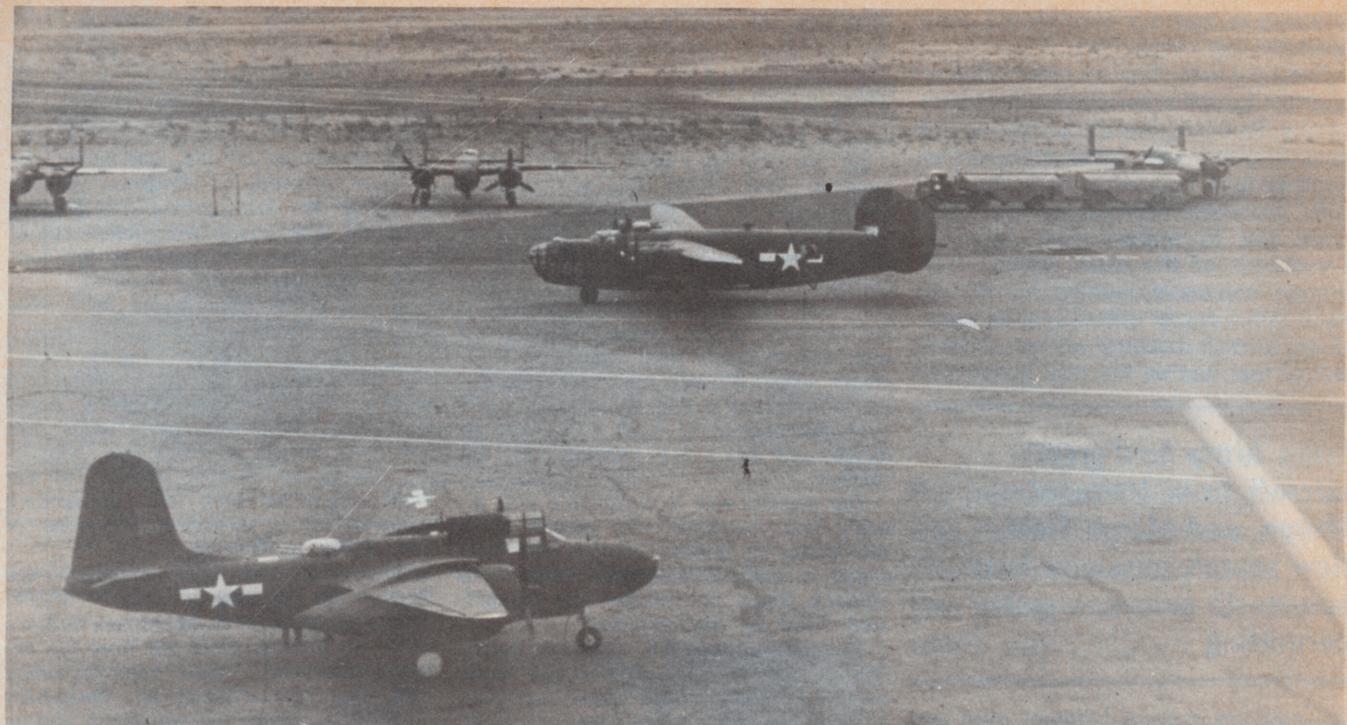
All the instruments in the B-24 were in mint condition.

It was the sight of the bodies being removed from their "watery grave" which started the writer wondering as to how had the bomber become the tomb of the six young airmen; where had the flight originated from, etc. Subsequent research led to the story, "Another of Our B-24s Is Missing."

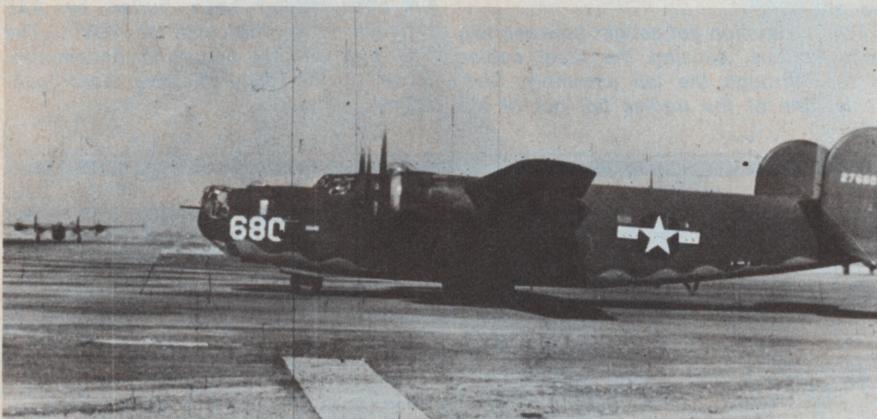
Photos of the B-24 wreckage are through the courtesy of Loran D. Martin. Photos of the 461st Bombardment Group's B-24s at Hammer Field are from the author's collection. These were reclaimed with great care, expense and time, from highly inflammable nitrate 35mm motion picture film footage. The film was dug up after having been buried by AAF officials near the end of WWII. The film had already begun to decompose. None of the pictures have been published before.



The tail assembly (in the center of the photograph) lies in front of the bomber. The force of the B-24 impacting with the water, caused the tail to shear off and go hurtling through the air, landing in front of the Liberator. In the foreground are vehicles and personnel from the U.S. Army Graves Registration Service and the coroner's office. The men on the main part of the fuselage are divers searching for the bodies of the crew. The lake is at the lowest point. (L. D. Martin)



**Hammer Field, Fresno, California.**  
It was on cold, overcast winter days such as this, that the base lost three B-24s in two weeks. A Liberator taxis past three B-25 Mitchells while a P-70 is being readied for a night flight. Fresno was a bomber and night fighter training base during WWII. (L. D. Martin)



The pilot is looking toward the camera, while the nose gunner, sitting in his turret with twin .50s, watches another B-24 on its take off run from Hammer Field.

in the stumps, defeating all attempts to drag the wreckage ashore.

The B-24 is still at the bottom of the lake, however it now lies flat on its wings, and the props are all that appear when the lake is at its lowest. Small parts from the wreckage were buried at the bottom of the lake.

With the discovery of the B-24, some of the mystery surrounding the disappearance of one of the missing Liberators was solved. But many questions still remain unanswered.

. It has never been clear why only the copilot and radio operator bailed out. If the pilot had instructed the crew to bail out, why did only two leave the aircraft, while the others remained aboard to ride the bomber to their deaths?

Next to the pilot, the copilot is the most important member of a four-engined bomber. The man in the right hand seat is always a fully trained, rated pilot. He holds the vital post of second in command, the chief as-

sistant, and at all times, the pilot's good right arm, especially during emergencies. This, then raises another question.

If Capt. Darden did order the copilot to bail out, why would he order the second in command to leave the aircraft before the navigator, engineer, and three gunners? The copilot is supposed to be next to the last man to leave a disabled plane.

And the radio operator! It is always his duty during emergencies to remain at his station, to switch the radio to liaison transmitter, to send "May Days" (SOS), their position, remain on the intercom and transmit all information given by the navigator. On the pilot's order, he clamps down the key, and only then leaves his station to take his ditching or crash landing position, or to bail out.

Because of the Liberator's high wing, during ditching the entire fuselage would hit the water, break, and submerge, whereas as the low-winged

B-17's fuselage would be supported by its wings. The B-24 also had the tendency to squash during ditching, and crews had only one-tenth the time of B-17 crewmen to evacuate their aircraft.

Once Capt. Darden spotted ice covered Huntington Lake and decided upon a forced landing, why weren't the bomb bay doors closed? Did they forget the open bay doors in the excitement of the moment? Or did they believe the lake was a snow covered meadow? It was the open bomb bay doors which caused the bomber to snap into three pieces, sink immediately, and lead to the death of the crew.

The final chapter in the tragic story of the two B-24s was written five years later. In the summer of 1960, the wreckage of the second Liberator was accidentally discovered in Kings Canyon National Park, in a remote area rarely visited by man. (But that is another story.)