

Hudson's last run

By Andrew Stackpool

A MISSIONARY'S passion for military history has helped resolve the mystery of a missing RAAF Hudson bomber.

The Hudson, A16-126, was one of three aircraft tasked to attack Japanese shipping in Gasmata harbour on the island of New Britain on February 11, 1942. During the attack, the three Hudsons were in turn attacked by Japanese fighters scrambled to intercept them and two, A16-126 and A16-91, were lost.

Its crew was FLGOFF Graham Gibson, PLTOFF Frank Thorn and SGTs Barton Coutie and Arthur Quail.

On May 5, the wreckage of a Hudson bomber was found by American missionary Mark Reichmann and his son Jared who live on New Britain.

The Reichmanns are World War II enthusiasts whose hobby is finding wrecks and other sites of significance. Mr Reichmann said that they hear stories [of possible wrecks] and go out to look for them.

"So far, we have found eight Japanese aircraft, an American P-38 fighter and two sunken Japanese warships," he said.

"We have also found grave sites and caves with rations and equipment in them."

The family had first heard of A16-126 approximately a year ago, but several searches had proved unsuccessful.

For their final search, they were helped by the local area chairman, David Kovi, and local villagers who led them to the site in the mountains above the town of Gasmata after a 90-minute drive, a 30-minute ride on a bulldozer and a two-hour trek in the rugged mountains.

They contacted Australian authorities and on June 28, an Air Force reconnaissance team flew to the site.

It comprised SQNLDR John Cotterell and FLTLT Mark French from Air Force Headquarters, FSGT Gavin Willmett from the Australian High Commission in Port Moresby and FSGT Shaun Cranfield from No. 1 Airfield Operations Support Squadron Explosive Ordnance Disposal Operations Section, and a PNG government official.

They confirmed it was A16-126. They found the aircraft was in several large pieces with the cockpit upside down and buried in mud, and several bullet holes seen in the tail section.

Ammunition from the aircraft was



WARBIRD: Restored Hudson bomber A16-112 of the same type as A16-126. This aircraft flew with 32SQN and then 6SQN at Milne Bay, and is now with the Temora Aviation Museum. Photo: Keith Webb

also found, but the bombs were not seen.

"The reality for those flying in Papua New Guinea during the war is that if you lost your aircraft, the likelihood of recovery was extremely remote. Even today, these jungles are dense and unforgiving," SQNLDR Cotterell said.

FLTLT French said the reconnaissance operation was a culmination of three months preparation and investigation into the circumstances involving the crash of Lockheed Hudson A16-126.

"[The operation] involved liaising with family members, the Australian War Memorial, National Archives of

Australia, PNG Government and the staff at our High Commission," he said.

"The success of the operation was in part due to the support and assistance of Mr Reichman, Mr Kovi and a large number of local villagers who guided the Reichmanns to the aircraft.

"Being part of a team that was about to discover a significant part of Air Force history, and knowing that our team was about to provide closure for the family of the crew was a highlight of my 15-year career.

"The various cultural, geographical and logistical issues were significant to the success of the operation, and were quickly overcome through the training

the Air Force has provided me over the years."

With the aircraft's identity confirmed, a recovery team including forensics experts will conduct a more thorough search in early October for human remains. The timing of the search and recovery operation coincides with the start of the dry season in New Britain.

Following the discovery, Air Force contacted relatives of the men.

Air Force's missing aircraft register has approximately 1100 entries, most of which were lost during WWII. Approximately another 100 were lost in Australia.



ON SITE: From left, FSGT Shaun Cranfield, FLTLT Mark French and Air Niugini pilot Colin Greenwood inspect the Hudson's inverted fuselage. Photo: FSGT Gavin Willmett

BULLETIN BOARD

Air Force Band

July 24: The Jazz Ensemble will support the AOSG 5th anniversary cocktail party at the RAAF Base Edinburgh Officers' Mess.

July 28: Force 10 will perform two concerts, at 11am and 1.30pm, at the Arts Centre in Melbourne as part of the 'morning melodies' series.

July 30: The Ceremonial Band will support the 1RTU graduation parade at RAAF Base Wagga from 11am.

July 31: The Ceremonial Band will support the RAAFSFS graduation parade at RAAF Base Amberley.

July 31: The Ceremonial Band and Williams clarinet quartet will perform to music students at Casurina Primary School in Darwin.

August 1: The Ceremonial Band will march in the "Freedom of the City" ceremony at Katherine, NT.

August 1: The Williams clarinet quartet will perform at the Tindal Officers' Mess cocktail party.

August 2: The Parade Band will perform at the RAAF Base Tindal Family Open Day.

August 3: The Ceremonial Band will support the 3WG AAFC annual memorial parade at Ashfield, NSW.

Call for members

The National Malaya and Borneo Veterans' Association of Australia welcomes eligible ex-Servicemen to join. They should contact the association for more information. Visit www.nmbvaa.com.au to find a complete list of committee members in each state and their contact details.

Military Expo

Newcastle and Hunter Region ex-service organisations are organising an "All things military" expo in Newcastle for October 18, involving recruiting for cadets, ADF personnel and service providers for ex-Service personnel.

For more information, contact the chairman, Stephen W. Finney, at email: stephenwf@bigpond.com, mobile 0408 434025 or (02) 4952 2335.

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