B25C MITCHELL BOMBER PISTOFF

Don Silcock

B25 in New Guinea.

Like the ghost from the past that she is, the wreck of the Mitchell Bomber lays in about 17m of water, some 200m off the beach near Wanigela in Collingwood Bay.

Sediment from the nearby river mouth gives the surrounding water a grey-green cast that greatly reduces the visibility, but it also creates a mist-like impression that adds to the overall ethereal atmosphere.

The plane is the "Pistoff", a B25C Mitchell bomber. Why its crew of seven christened it with such an unusual name is not recorded, and will probably never actually be known after all these years, but I think we can all make a reasonably accurate guess…

The bomber was one of 12 US aircraft taking part in a coordinated attack on shipping in the Lae area on the 8th of January 1943 when five Japanese Zero fighters arrived to defend the naval vessels.

In the ensuing air battle, Pistoff's right engine was hit and badly damaged but her pilot, 1st Lt. William R Lett, managed to escape from the attacking Japanese Zeros and head south down the coast.

Below: B25 Mitchell assembly.

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Above: B25 crew pose.

Lett tried to get the plane back to base, but the damaged engine was leaking fuel badly and he was forced to look for a place to land, eventually settling on Collingwood Bay just south of Cape Nelson. The shallower waters and beaches of the bay must have looked a much better option than the deep waters and densely forested fiords of Cape Nelson.

Lett managed to put Pistoff down safely with only one crewmember slightly injured in the ditching, and local villagers paddled out to help the crew get to the shore.

Diving the Pistoff

Pistoff lies on a flat sandy seabed and is remarkably intact apart from the front nose cone with its twin machine guns, and the cockpit canopy, which are both missing.

Both engines are still attached to the wings, albeit with propellers that are

PISTOFF'S HISTORY

B25C – Mitchell

Built by North American Aviation, constructor's number 82-5462.

Assigned to the 38th Bombardment Group, 71st Bombardment Squadron.

Nicknamed *"Pistoff"* in white lettering on the left and right side of the nose. On the right side below the cockpit was *"Butch"*.

Construction #: 41-12830

Pilot:
1st Lt. William R Lett

Co-Pilot:
1st Lt. Mortie M Marks

Navigator
1st Lt. John B Johnson

Bombardier:
2nd Lt. Gustava R Rau

Engineer:
S/Sgt, Joe G Maupin

Radio Operator:
T/Sgt, Theodore J Bokoles

Gunner:
S/Sgt, William W Holmes

B25 Mitchell Bomber History

The B25 Mitchell Bomber was designed & built by North American Aviation at its Kansas City & Inglewood, California factories. Named after General Billy Mitchell, a pioneer of U.S. military aviation, the B25 was a great success and nearly 10,000 of them were built, with versions of the plane seeing duty in every theater of WWII with most of the Allied air forces and many planes continuing in service for nearly 40 years.

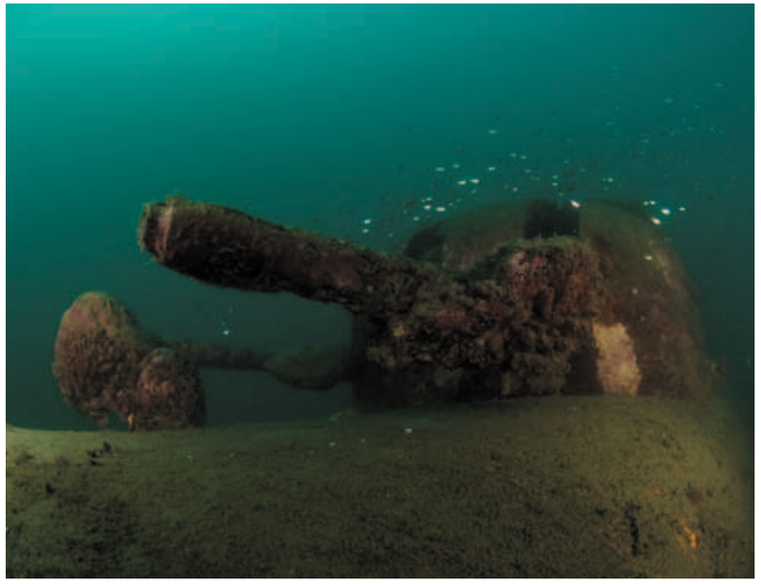
The B-25 first gained fame as the bomber used in the April 1942 Doolittle Raid on Japan, which was the first attack on the Japanese islands and just four months after Pearl Harbor. Lead by the legendary Lieutenant Colonel Jimmy Doolittle, sixteen B-25's were launched from the U.S. Hornet aircraft carrier and successfully bombed Tokyo and four other Japanese cities,

Although only limited damage was done, the raid was a huge morale booster for the U.S. forces and a big surprise for the Japanese, who had believed that their homeland was completely safe from attack, and were then forced to divert troops for the home defense for the remainder of the war.

Although originally designed to bomb from medium altitudes in level flight the B25 was the first bomber to attack and destroy Japanese ships using a technique developed by the United States 5th Army Air Force called "skip bombing".

The technique required considerable skill and involved the aircraft flying at very low altitudes of around 60m above sea level and at speeds from 200–250 mph to release a "stick" of two to four bombs, with four- to five-second time delay fuses. The release had to be made very close to the target so that the bombs would "skip" over the surface before hitting the target.

The Mitchell Bomber proved to be a very sturdy & reliable aircraft that could withstand tremendous punishment. One well-known B-25C of the 321st Bomb Group was nicknamed "Patches" because its crew chief painted all the aircraft's flak hole patches with high-visibility zinc chromate paint. By the end of the war, this aircraft had completed over 300 missions, was belly-landed six times and sported over 400-patched holes. Today, many B-25s are kept in airworthy condition by air museums and collectors.



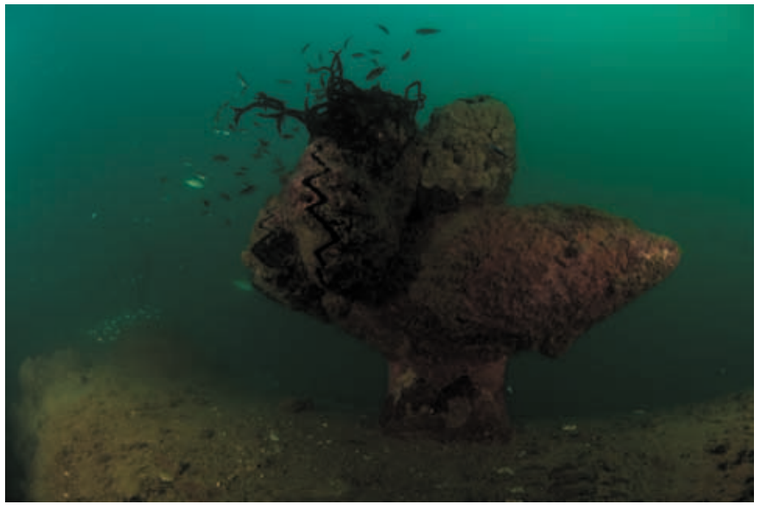
badly bent from the crash landing, while the distinctive rear tailfins continue to stand proud – although both are now heavily encrusted with marine growth.

The best way to dive the wreck is to start at the blunt front end left by the sheared off nose cone, which is now home to a small school of glassfish that wrap it in a silvery mantle. The missing cockpit canopy means that the pilot & co-pilot area and the plane's controls are clearly visible.

A little further down the top of the fuselage, the rugby ball shaped radio pod has been colonised by two large clams, a sponge, and a small school of fish. Down near the tail, the large rear gun turret remains complete with its twin heavy caliber machine guns.

None of the side doors are open. It appears the crew must have kept them closed to keep the plane afloat for as long as possible and made their exit through the open cockpit canopy.

Clockwise from top left:Clockwise from top left: Rear tail fin of Pistoff; Rear gun turret of Pistoff; Rear gun turret of Pistoff, Pistoff's right-hand engine; North American B25 Mitchell; B25 Mitchell "Sarinah".



Above left: Pistoff's cockpit. Above: Radio pod.

Because of the low visibility in the general area near the river mouth, there is very little chance of spotting the wreck from the surface, but Tufi Dive has the GPS coordinates, which makes locating the plane significantly easier.

All wrecks are interesting and aircraft ones particularly so, but Pistoff and its ghostly environment makes for quite a unique experience – so if you get the chance to dive it, take it… ■

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