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# The crash of the *Milady*

January 17, 1945



70 years on – 2015



Proudly sponsored by  
 Northern Territory  
Government

*Compiled by Jack Ellis, Lorraine Gardner and Jill Mumme*

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*The Milady "nose art" – picture courtesy 580th Bomb Group Assoc.*



# The Flying Circus

380th Bomb Group Association  
World War II Veterans Group



## History

*From the 380<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Association's Barbara J Gotham*

### THE 380TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (Heavy)

Activated by the United States Army Air Corp on 21 November 1942, the 380th Bombardment Group (H) flew B-24 Liberator bombers in the south-west and western Pacific areas in World War II. They were part of the 5th Air Force, and were known as the FLYING CIRCUS and as the KING OF THE HEAVIES.

The group obtained its "Flying Circus" nickname in March 1943 while training at Lowry Field, Denver, Colorado. Apparently a majority of the personnel assigned to the 380th had never been through basic training and knew little or nothing about close order drill. Some of these men were volunteered to form an honour guard for an inspection of the unit's progress by Brigadier General Eugene Eubank. The General subsequently decided to inspect the guard and when the command "Open ranks, march," was given, the members of the guard departed the field. This and other incidents that day prompted the General to mutter, "My God, it's a flying circus."

The 380th went overseas in April 1943 to become the second B-24 unit in the Fifth Air Force at that time; the 90th Bomb Group being the first.

It was placed under the control of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and assigned to the Australian North West Area Command operating out of Darwin, Northern Territory. The group was thus the only heavy bomber unit available to cover the whole of the Dutch East Indies (2,600,000 square kilometres) from July 1943 until late in 1944. At that time the successes in the New Guinea campaign had brought the other 5th Air Force units close enough to the East Indies to join in that task.

The 380th Group's B-24s made the longest bombing missions of WWII, to the oil refineries at Balikpapan, Borneo (320 kilometres further than the Ploesti mission in Europe) and to those at Surabaya, Java (as long as

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Ploesti). The group did both these missions several times during its stay in Australia.

In addition to attacks on the Japanese oil supply, the 380th was heavily engaged in crippling the enemy's shipping fleet to reduce the Japanese capability of supplying their far-flung forces. They also heavily bombed the numerous Japanese airfields in the East Indies to reduce the Japanese threat to Australia and our New Guinea forces.

In its service with the Australians, the 380th served longer under the operational control of an Allied country than any other Air Force unit (from June 1943 until February 1945).

As part of its duties in Australia, the 380th carried out the operational training of 52 Australian crews and their associated ground staffs so that the Australians could take over the East Indian campaign activities of the 380th when they were assigned to The Philippines in February 1945.

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*Editor's note: The 380th Bomb Group Veterans Association remains active almost 70 years from the end of the war. Many families of crew members and ground staff, including second and third generations, maintain the tradition forged by those who flew and maintained the aircraft far from their homeland all those years ago.*

*One of the Milady's crews – picture from the 380th Group internet site*





*The remains of the tail section of the B-24 – picture from the 380th Group internet site attributed to Henning.*

## **The crash**

What actually happened on January 17, 1945, to the US Army Air Force (USAAF) 380th Bombardment Group's B-24J-15-CO Liberator bomber aircraft nicknamed *Milady*. from the group's 531st Bombardment Squadron, will never be known for certain.

The four-engine bomber with a crew of six on board, captained by Lieutenant Bobby Neal, left the Darwin RAAF base for a training bombing mission at Quail Island, a regular training target south-west of Darwin. It was Lt Neal's first mission in this aircraft as pilot-in-command and the nature of the flight meant there were only six on board instead of the usual nine.

There are conflicting reports but most indicate the aircraft completed its mission and was returning to Darwin when it crashed south of Two-Fella Creek, killing all on board. At least one reputable account talks of a fire on board before the crash, although there are no reports of a distress call, or the bomber having been sighted on fire by the many military personnel based on the Cox Peninsula before it crashed.



*USAAF B-24 Liberator bombers of 531 Squadron on the Darwin RAAF base flight line in 1944. Milady is the aircraft at the extreme right of the line.*

*Pic – 380<sup>th</sup> BG Assoc.*

Had there been a fire or other damage, it would seem logical Lt Neal would have declared an emergency and followed the coast to the Darwin RAAF base, an almost direct line. This would have provided the opportunity for an emergency landing on the beach or in the shallows rather than overflying the heavily timbered area further inland.

380th Bomber Group records show low level attacks on Japanese shipping and airfields were regular operational requirements for the 531 squadron's crews. One of the dangers associated with low level bombing is the potential for aircraft damage from its own exploding bombs. It is possible shrapnel from the ground hit the low-flying B-24 during the training exercise, leading to mechanical failure or fire. But again, there was no distress call recorded from the bomber.

Other reports hint at low flying on the return flight to the airfield, with the aircraft coming to grief after possibly clipping a tree. While this may seem unlikely with an experienced and well-trained crew, the possibility of some low-level treetop practice after a relatively easy mission cannot be dismissed. This could also explain why none of the crew bailed out, an obvious escape if the aircraft had been on fire as reported by *ozatwar.com*.



*Part of the B-24's tail section where it came to rest in the bush –*

*Pic: Bob Alford*

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Bombardier Eric Lukeman, then 22, was a gunner with M Battery at the West Point and Wagait coastal artillery defences. During a visit to Wagait Beach in 1992, he was taken to the wreck site by Jill and John Mumme as part of a tour of his former war-time home. Eric remembered hearing the crash and seeing a pall of black smoke as he pulled away from the shore in a barge. He said the wreck of the *Milady* was found by an army search party with a doctor from the Wagait (then known as Waugite) shore battery.

There were no survivors. There had been a fire after the crash, although the bodies of all six crew members:

2nd Lt Bobby T Neal (O823712),  
2nd Lt Walter E Scanlon Jr (O711027),  
2nd Lt William G Ward Jr (O2064690),  
2nd Lt Richard W Walsh (O777385),  
Sgt Francisco Caballero (38553915) and  
Sgt Gerald D Sacre (17122357),

were recovered from the wreck. They were initially buried at the Adelaide River War Cemetery but later relocated to Rookwood US Military Cemetery near Sydney. After the war, their bodies were exhumed and returned to the United States.

Mechanically, *Milady* had a near trouble-free record after arriving at the Fenton base in December 1943. Prior to the ill-fated training flight, only twice in its 56-recorded missions while based in the Northern Territory were there problems sufficiently serious to cause the crew to abandon the flight. – *380th BG records*.

## **The crash site**

For many years, the remains of the *Milady* lay forgotten in the bush, slowly disappearing as a result of fires and souvenir hunters. This changed when the Northern Territory Government declared the site a heritage area in 2002. In a project involving the Cox Peninsula (now Wagait Shire) Council and the Historical Society, the undergrowth was cleared, new pathways built and area was fenced. Interpretive signage was installed at key points along the pathway and a maintenance program initiated to prevent fires damaging the wreck further. Some of the souvenir takers responded by returning items to the site. While occasional visitors find it necessary to leave their marks, most treat the area with the respect that it deserves.



*Milady in profile as part of the official squadron records. Note the olive drab camouflage paint used in the Pacific theatre until 1944. – 580th BG Assoc.*

## **Background**

The *Milady* was built by Consolidated in San Diego. Work on the aircraft started on September 3, 1943 and was completed just seven days later. It flew for the first time on September 14 and accepted for service two days after that – 13 days from start to a fully operational military aircraft. Total cost was \$241,924.00. – *380 BG record*

The 380<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group arrived at Fenton Airfield in April-May 1943 for the purpose of destroying Japanese strongholds in the Pacific. Later moving to RAAF Base Darwin, the group was placed under Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) command (Australian North West Area Command operating out of Darwin) and was the only B-24 Liberator unit attached to the RAAF.

The 380th's key role was to counter a threatened Japanese invasion along its northern coast. It also was charged with training RAAF personnel on the B-24 for the Australian squadrons being re-equipped with this aircraft. On its arrival in Australia, the 380th immediately began combat operations. It was the only heavy bomber unit available to cover the whole of the Dutch East Indies (2,600,000 square kilometres) from July 1943 until late in 1944. At that time, successes in New Guinea brought the other units close enough to the East Indies to join the 380th in that task.

During April and May 1944, the 380th engaged in the most intensive and sustained operations since its arrival in Australia, neutralising the rear bases through which the Japanese might reinforce their air force in the Wakde-Hollandia area of the Dutch East Indies. From the end of May 1944 until it moved to Murtha Field at Mindoro, Philippines in February 1945, the 380th concentrated on destroying enemy bases, installations and industrial compounds in the southern and central East Indies. – *Wikipedia*

8 – *The crash of the Milady*



*Part of the Milady's data sheet dating back to when the B-24  
was built at San Diego. – 380 BG records.*

**DATA SHEET  
380TH BOMB GROUP AIRCRAFT**

No. 092

SERIAL NO.: 42-73134 MOST POPULAR  
NOSE ART NAME: "MILADY"

MODEL: B-24J-15-CO MFR: Consolidated-San Diego

CONTRACTOR'S NO.: 2704

INITIAL MFG DATE: 09/03/1943 MFG COMPLETION DATE: 09/10/1943

FIRST FLIGHT DATE: 09/14/1943 MOD CENTER DATE: 09/21/1943

MOD CENTER PLACE: Tucson

USAAF ACCEPTANCE DATE: 09/16/1943

TO STAGING AREA DATE: 09/29/1943 STAGING PLACE: Topeka

OVERSEAS FLIGHT DATE: 10/29/1945 DEPARTURE PLACE: Fairfield, CA

OVERSEAS ARRIVAL DATE: 11/03/1945 DESTINATION: Townsville

MOD COMPLETED  
OVERSEAS: \_\_\_\_\_ OVERSEAS MOD PLACE: \_\_\_\_\_

ASSIGNMENT: 380/531 ASSIGNMENT  
DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

STATION: Long Strip

FIRST MISSION: 12/17/1943 WHERE (1<sup>ST</sup> MISSION): Selaru, Utoram

NO. OF MISSIONS: 56 AU TERMINATION DATE: 01/17/1945

WHY TERMINATED: Crash

WHERE TERMINATED: Charles Point, Darwin, NT, Australia

STRICKEN OFF CHARGE: 04/03/1945 WHERE REMOVED: UCIP

NOTES:

# The Milady's missions between 1943 and 1945 – 380 BG Assn records

## MISSION RECORD

SN 42-73134 NOSE ART "MILADY" MODEL J-10-CO  
 SQDN ASSGD 531 MFR Consolidated-San Diego M# 134  
 LOCATION: Australia  
 NOTES: \_\_\_\_\_

NO.	DATE (M/D/Y)	MISSION #	MISSION TYPE	TARGET	CREW #	ACFT CMDR	SQDN	RESULTS/NOTES
1	12/17/1943	FEN III-39	Rece	Selaru, Utoram	87	Baptist	531	
2	12/21/1943	FEN III-40	Strike	Amahai, Ceram Island	78	Deaton	531	
3	12/23/1943	FEN III-41	Rece	Shipping, Nabire	89	Bates	531	
4	12/27/1943	FEN III-42	Strike	Shipping, Pomelaa	91	Magee	531	
5	01/02/1944	FEN III-44	Strike	Pomelaa	89	Bates	531	
6	01/04/1944	FEN III-47	Rece	Shipping, Tenauo	90	Nunan	531	
7	01/07/1944	FEN III-49	Rece	Shipping, Manokwari, Boela	53	F. Miller	531	
8	01/13/1944	FEN IV-6	Rece	Shipping, North of Ceram	88	Zagroski	531	
9	01/24/1944	FEN IV-15	Rece	Sorong	88	Zagroski	531	
10	02/11/1944	FEN IV-28	Strike	Kendari	77	Lurty	531	First Mission for this Crew
11	02/15/1944	FEN IV-30	Rece	Halmahera	88	Zagroski	531	

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 SQDN ASSGD 531 MFR Consolidated-San Diego M# 134  
 LOCATION: Australia  
 NOTES: \_\_\_\_\_

NO.	DATE (M/D/Y)	MISSION #	MISSION TYPE	TARGET	CREW #	ACFT CMDR	SQDN	RESULTS/NOTES
12	02/26/1944	FEN IV-38	Rece	Waigeo Island	93	Moody	531	
13	03/11/1944	FEN V-8	Rece	Tri-Met, Geelvink Bay	88	Zagroski	531	
14	03/18/1944	FEN V-29	Strike	Babo	79	Grover	531	
15	03/28/1944	FEN VI-7	Strike	Penfoei A/D, Timor	88	Hahn	531	Abort, Engine; Swartz Crew
16	03/30/1944	FEN VI-8	Strike	Kai Islands	92	Henderson	531	
17	04/01/1944	FEN VI-9	Rece	Shipping	88	Swartz	531	
18	04/03/1944	FEN VI-11	Strike	Langgoer A/D, Kai Islands	92	Henderson	531	
19	04/21/1944	FEN VI-30	Strike	Noemfoor Island	92	Henderson	531	
20	04/22/1944	FEN VI-31	Strike	Noemfoor Island	88	Swartz	531	
21	04/24/1944	FEN VI-36	Strike	Kamiri A/D, Noemfoor Island	89	Stutt (RAAF)	531	

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 SQDN ASSGD 531 MFR Consolidated-San Diego M# 134  
 LOCATION: Australia  
 NOTES: \_\_\_\_\_

NO.	DATE (M/D/Y)	MISSION #	MISSION TYPE	TARGET	CREW #	ACFT CMDR	SQDN	RESULTS/NOTES
22	04/26/1944	FEN VI-39	Strike	Jefman A/D	83	Buia	531	
23	05/07/1944	FEN VII-6	Strike	Utoram A/D, Dutch NG	88	Swartz	531	
24	05/11/1944	FEN VII-12	Strike	Ambon, Amboimia Island	82	Parsons (RAAF)	531	
25	05/21/1944	FEN VII-21	Strike	Manokwari	87	Williams	531	Baptist Crew
26	05/25/1944	FEN VII-22	Rece	Shipping, Halmahera	88	Swartz	531	
27	06/08/1944	FEN VII-32	Strike	Shipping, Jefman	88	Swartz	531	Abort, Fuel Pressure, #2
28	06/22/1944	FEN VII-38	Strike	Liang	88	Swartz	531	
29	06/27/1944	FEN VII-43	Strike	Babo	94	Gillespie (RAAF)	531	First Mission for this Crew
30	06/29/1944	FEN VII-45	Strike	Babo	88	Swartz	531	
31	07/01/1944	FEN VII-49	Strike	Namlea	94	Gillespie (RAAF)	531	

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 SQDN ASSGD 531 MFR Consolidated-San Diego M# 134  
 LOCATION: Australia  
 NOTES: \_\_\_\_\_

NO.	DATE (M/D/Y)	MISSION #	MISSION TYPE	TARGET	CREW #	ACFT CMDR	SQDN	RESULTS/NOTES
32	07/04/1944	FEN VIII-6	Strike	Namlea	77	Eriksen (RAAF)	531	
33	07/07/1944	FEN VIII-14	Rece	Shipping, Flores	33	Boyle	529	
34	07/09/1944	FEN VIII-16	Strike	Namlea	77	Eriksen (RAAF)	531	
35	07/15/1944	FEN VIII-25	Strike	Namlea	82	Parker (RAAF)	531	
36	08/02/1944	FEN IX-14	Strike	Laha	81	Lenihan	531	
37	08/10/1944	FEN IX-24	Strike	Laha	77	Prest	531	
38	08/12/1944	FEN IX-27	Strike	Amahai	86	Brasfield	531	First Mission for this Crew
39	08/22/1944	FEN IX-45	Strike	Amahai	82	Finlayson (RAAF)	531	First Mission for this Crew
40	09/16/1944	FEN X-35	Strike	Kendari	86	Brasfield	531	

## MISSION RECORD

**SN** 42-73134      **NOSE ART** "MILADY"      **MODEL** J-10-CO  
**SQDN ASSGD** 531      **MFR** Consolidated-San Diego      **M#** 134  
**LOCATION:** Australia  
**NOTES:** \_\_\_\_\_

NO.	DATE (M/D/Y)	MISSION #	MISSION TYPE	TARGET	CREW #	ACFT CMDR	SQDN	RESULTS/NOTES
41	09/20/1944	FEN X-46	Search I	Banda Sea	87	Stephens	531	Baptist Crew
42	09/26/1944	FEN XI-14	Search H-2	Molucca Sea	96	Bowman (RAAF)	531	
43	10/02/1944	DAR I-1	Search H-2	Molucca Sea	91	Moore (RAAF)	531	
44	10/06/1944	DAR I-12	Search I	Banda Sea	80	Hamilton	531	
45	10/12/1944	DAR I-30	Strike	Ambesia	85	Sears	531	
46	10/16/1944	DAR I-41	Strike	Macassar	88	Halliday (RAAF)	531	
47	10/19/1944	DAR I-48	Strike	Pare Pare	86	Brasfield	531	
48	10/23/1944	DAR II-12	Search G-2-Green	Banda Sea	85	Sears	531	
49	10/25/1944	DAR II-22	Strike	Ambesia	86	Brasfield	531	

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**SQDN ASSGD** 531      **MFR** Consolidated-San Diego      **M#** 134  
**LOCATION:** Australia  
**NOTES:** \_\_\_\_\_

NO.	DATE (M/D/Y)	MISSION #	MISSION TYPE	TARGET	CREW #	ACFT CMDR	SQDN	RESULTS/NOTES
50	11/23/1944	DAR IV-3/4	Search I-1-Red	Banda and Molucca Seas	76	Boyd	531	
51	12/02/1944	DAR IV-25	Strike	Boro Boro	93	Law (RAAF)	531	
52	12/19/1944	DAR V-24	Search H-1-Red	Banda Sea	93	Law (RAAF)	531	
53	12/30/1944	DAR VI-9	Strike	Limboeng A/D, Celebes	93	Law (RAAF)	531	
54	12/31/1944	DAR VI-15	Strike	Ambesia	82	Hulsey	531	
55	01/05/1945	DAR VI-31	Strike	Pomelaa	93	Law (RAAF)	531	
56	01/07/1945	DAR VI-37	Search I-2-Green	Banda and Molucca Seas	93	Law (RAAF)	531	
	01/17/1945							Lost in Crash, Training Mission