

Association Fortunes de Mer Calédoniennes Found the PBY Engines near the Lana T

In August 2012 Jean-Paul Mugnier, a resident of New Caledonia, bought the Thirsty 13th book. He emailed me that he was an aviation enthusiast; his father earned his pilot license in 1926, and Jean-Paul was a private pilot, recently retired from French Civil Aviation as head of aviation safety in New Caledonia. He liked living in New Caledonia because he loved diving.

Jean-Paul noted that he was a member of the Association Fortunes de Mer Calédoniennes (“FDMC”), founded in 1984, to search for wrecks around New Caledonia, both vessels and aircraft, to keep alive the regional maritime history. FDMC had discovered, or re-discovered, many US wrecks in the lagoon: a B-17, P-39, C-47, PBY, SBD, a P-40, and more. In 1994 they found the remains of pilot H. Hulbert, who crashed in a P-39K on a practice dive bombing mission near New Caledonia in 1942. His remains now lie in Arlington Cemetery thanks to FDMC.

In the book, Jean-Paul read on page 172 about the squadron’s first airplane crash – pilots Petty and Ecklund landing the Lana T on a coral reef, below, far north of New Caledonia. As noted on the book’s page vi, Ewan Stephenson of Archaeohistoria in Auckland, New Zealand, provided the account on page 770 by the Commander of the USS Barton, that provided the exact location, on page 176, of the Lana T, and a PBY seaplane sent to pick them up, that instead ran onto the coral. This PBY is also pictured below.

Last August 11, Jean Paul emailed me “For Petty's C-47, an FDMC search mission is already planned in the far north end of New Caledonia for the beginning of 2014 for shipwrecks, and **with all the details in your book we will find the Catalina and the C-47 surely!**” This was an exciting possibility, and noted on page 16 of the November 2013 update.





FDMC 30th Anniversary Exploration

To celebrate its 30th Anniversary, FDMC organized a cruise May 1-26, with 18 members, on the monohull and two catamarans shown above. They had two search areas: the atolls of Huon and Surprise [page 176] to find seven sailboats lost from 1851 to 1908; and French Reef to search for four ships lost between 1870 and 1914, a B-17, **and...the Thirsty 13th's Lana T and nearby PBY**. This was “the first time the association undertook to travel so far and so long without the assistance of the Navy.”

On May 24, 2014, I was stunned to receive the following email from Jean-Paul Mugnier:

JP Mugnier: “I am glad to inform you we found on May the third **two engines of the PBY-5 beached on French reef to rescue Petty's C-47 Lana T occupants**. As it was shelled [i.e. purposely destroyed by shots from the ship or a bomber], there were little remains.

“As excellent weather conditions prevailed, it was possible to search from the outer reef, but we got there too late in the afternoon to find the Lana T not far from the wrecked engines, and we had to depart for an anchorage further north near Huon Island. We expected to find the plane when returning to Nouméa at the end of this month, but the sea was very rough and diving was not allowed.

“We all enjoy at the Fortunes de Mer Caledoniennes association this operation dealing with an outstanding event in New Caledonia waters in WW2. This was possible only with your help and all data in your book, “The Thirsty 13th,” dealing with this crash and rescue operations. We just arrived in Nouméa after 4 weeks of wrecks search.

“Thank you again for your assistance and I think you would have fully appreciated our cruise and operations in this savage and beautiful part of the Pacific.

“I send you pictures of PBY-5 engines found on French reef.

“We will come back to find the LANA T as soon as possible.”



Incredible

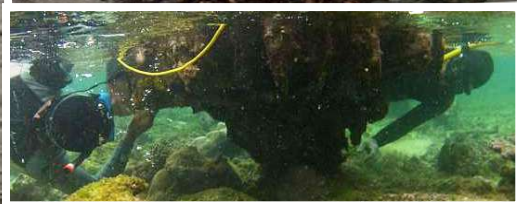
Above left is the satellite image on page 176 – the island at the red arrow was circled. Above middle is the image from JP Mugnier of the area in the white box. The top left of his red box is above right and shows the locations of: a small part of the plane (“reste”); the second engine (at right); and the engine below.

The engine at right has two exhausts, also sticking out of the water below right and inset, so was from the PBY-5, not the C-47.

The engine below also has two exhausts, and is near the other engine, so is the other PBY engine. It was balanced on its nose. Jean-Paul Mugnier himself, inset below, swam in to explore this.



View looking east.



Additional Information

Jean-Paul emailed me that:



- “There were very few remains near the engines; no wing and only small parts of the engines.”
- “The other engine separated in two rows of cylinders, one with the 3 propeller blades (above).”
- They visited at “Low tide, and on the outer reef by chance we spotted this outside the very low water.”
- “We got also a small part of the plane's stucture where our dinghy was anchored to the sailing boat, far outside the reef [the point marked “reste” at the top of the prior page].”
- The explorers reached the reef after 2 days of sailing, and spotted the engine with binoculars – what an exciting moment that must have been. They then launched a dinghy to investigate.
- They hope to return, and wrote “The Lana T will be easy with good conditions.”
- On June 20 their discovery made the front page of Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes, on the following pages.

Fortunes de Mer Calédoniennes

Pictured below are 7 of the 18 explorers, with on the left Jean-Paul Mugnier.

The Thirsty 13th offers a HUGE THANK YOU to FDMC for their incredible skill, dedication, and perseverance that resulted in this incredible find!



Cover Story in The New Caledonian, June 20, 2014
(Translated into English)

Cover (right): **Fishing for the Past.** The passion of salvors Fortunes de Mer is an inventory of historical relics. Such as the anchor of a ship sunk in 1874, or an American aircraft which landed in 1942 north of Bélep.

Article (below right): **In search of Lana T.** Expedition in the north for nearly a month, the “salvors” Association Fortunes de Mer located the remains of an American aircraft of the Second World War. The story of a discovery that already shines in the United States.

Photo caption: The C-47 Lana T, in tribute to actress Lana Turner, and its twenty-five occupants, after nine days of waiting on French Reef. These two pictures are from the book *The Thirsty 13th* by Seth Washburne.

It all began with a reading. In August 2012, Jean-Paul Mugnier, former Caledonian Civil Aviation bought a book by American Seth Washburne. Its title: *The Thirsty 13th*, the nickname of a U.S. Air Force troop transport squadron active during the Second World War. The unit, which had a base at the Plaine des Gaiacs, was an integral part of the history of New Caledonia, as of the United States: it was distinguished with the greatest military honors for its work in the South Pacific. There has been excitement about 13th in its home country, so when the author received an email from Jean-Paul, he did not hide his excitement. Jean-Paul Mugnier and friends of the Association Fortunes de Mer, seasoned salvors, intended to go in search for an aircraft that, according to the book, crashed at the north end of the Caledonian lagoon: *the Lana T.*

Crash. The book by Seth Washburne, son of a navigator in the squadron, accurately describes the conditions of the crash. On October 20, 1942, the C-47 Skytrain aircraft, twenty meters long, and widely used by the U.S. military, flew toward the base of Santo, Vanuatu. The Lana T departed Guadalcanal, where the battle raged between the Pacific Allies and Japanese, with its 18 Marine wounded and seven crew members. During departure from the Solomon Islands, the aircraft was hit by shellfire. The damage was slight, but the navigational equipment had deteriorated. At night, Captain Petty and co-pilot Ecklund struggled to find their destination. Bad weather did not help.



La passion des chasseurs d'épaves de Fortunes de mer est d'inventorier des vestiges historiques. Comme cette ancre d'un navire coulé en 1874 ou un hydravion américain tombé en 1942 au nord de Bélep.

LE FAIT DU JOUR Les Nouvelles calédoniennes www.lnc.nc

A la recherche du Lana T

En expédition dans le Grand Nord pendant près d'un mois, les « chasseurs d'épaves » de l'association Fortunes de Mer ont localisé les restes d'un hydravion américain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Récit d'une découverte qui rayonne déjà aux Etats-Unis.



Une équipe « sur la route des épaves »

Le premier d'entre nous vient d'arriver dans la zone de recherche. C'est un homme de guerre, Jean-Paul Mugnier, fondateur de l'association Fortunes de Mer. Il est accompagné de ses amis de l'association. Ils ont pour mission de rechercher les restes de l'hydravion américain. La recherche est difficile car les fonds sont très peu profonds et les conditions sont difficiles. Les plongeurs doivent être très expérimentés et les plongées sont très longues. Les plongeurs ont déjà découvert des objets de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, mais ils ne sont pas encore parvenus à retrouver les restes de l'hydravion américain.

Les orages sauvent les soldats de la soif, et le platier, sur lequel les pilotes « pêchent au requiem », fournit un minimum de vivres.

Crash. L'ouvrage de Seth Washburne, fils d'un navigateur de l'expédition, décrit avec précision les conditions du crash. Le 20 octobre 1942, le C-47 « Skytrain », avion de ligne transportant vingt-cinq soldats américains, vole vers la base de Santo, au Vanuatu. Le Lana T a décollé de Guadalcanal, où la bataille de l'île de l'Espérance s'est déroulée. L'hydravion est touché par des tirs japonais, avec à son bord dix-huit hommes blessés et sept membres d'équipage. À 20 heures, l'hydravion s'écrase sur le littoral de la plaine de Santo. Les plongeurs de l'association Fortunes de Mer ont découvert les restes de l'hydravion américain. Les plongeurs ont déjà découvert des objets de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, mais ils ne sont pas encore parvenus à retrouver les restes de l'hydravion américain.



Above left: Yann Beauvais, a diver from the Association Fortunes de Mer examines a Catalina engine found on French Reef.

After nine hours of flight, only a few minutes of fuel were left. The pilots descended below the clouds, and with the first light of dawn landed on a coral reef nearby. This is the north end of French Reef, located between the islands and the reef Bélep d'Entrecasteaux, 130 km off the mainland.

Location. On 1 May 2014 the Nouméa fleet of Fortunes de Mer took care to cross-check Washburne's information with period documents to facilitate localization. Two days later, in the late afternoon, a metallic mass was identified with binoculars, and a dinghy immediately launched to identify the wreck. "We are jubilant" noted Jean-Pierre Larue in his logbook. It was actually two engines, with a three-bladed propeller from a Catalina PBV-5. Eight days after the emergency landing, the Lana T was finally spotted by rescuers, thanks to deploying a helium balloon antenna. Sheltered from the swell by the reef, the twenty-five passengers stayed alive. To keep the wounded above the water, they were constantly moved between the interior and the roof of the damaged aircraft. Thunderstorms saved the soldiers' thirst, and the reef fish provided a minimum of food. When three Catalina seaplanes arrived on site, the health of the shipwrecked was critical.

Cannon. The first PBV purposely landed between the breakers to allow the establishment of a bridge evacuation. Two other PBVs landed outside the reef, and later drifted due to bad weather. A warship between Guadalcanal and New Caledonia, the USS Barton, finalized the rescue Oct. 30, leaving behind four aircraft wrecks, some of which were destroyed by cannon to protect their technology from Japan. Seventy-two years later, and after authentication on technical comparisons, Fortunes de Mer can say the team found, resting on their blades, both engines of the Catalina sent to the rescue of the Lana T. The C-47 should not be far away, but due to heavy swells during a second pass, it could not be located on this trip. "We'll find the Lana T as soon as possible" John Paul Mugnier promised Seth Washburne upon his return. Washburne will circulate the news to his network in the U.S. of veterans. "Thank you for having sought and found," wrote the author, "It brings a lot to the history of the squadron. I hope to be on the next expedition and participate in the search for the Lana T."

A team "on the road for wrecks"

The journey to the Far North of New Caledonia is the first journey for which Fortunes de Mer went so far and so long without the assistance of the Navy. Yet this is not the association's first attempt, having set a target inventory of maritime heritage, and having located many historic shipwrecks, airplanes or boats. She even celebrated, during this journey its thirty years of existence.

The C-47 and T Lana Catalina were not the only goals of the expedition north. For four weeks in May, the team of eighteen was a passionate party seeking fifteen wrecks dating from the nineteenth and twentieth century. Some were already discovered, while others remained to be found. Among them, the whaler Onward, converted to transport guano, and shipwrecked in 1878 near the island Huon. On 10 May a flotilla of Wake, the Beijaflor and Teo [the three Fortunes de Mer ships] sailed west and north of the d'Entrecasteaux reef atoll, and a team went diving. The Association discovered what, under Authentication reserve could be a trace of the famous three-masted ship Onward: a bronze coin and numerous copper rivets signaled by a professional fisherman site. The team is already preparing its next expedition: exploring the wreck of La Seine, lost in 1846 in the Pass Pouébo.

Letter signed in 2013 by Activist Paul Watson

[The explorers found] a Perrier bottle which had been buried at the top of a sand dome on Huon Island last September. Inside was a piece of paper signed by Paul Watson, founder of the NGO [Non-Government Organization] "Sea Shepherd," and commander of their ship the Brigitte Bardot, flagship of the organization. Watson wrote in his best pen: "The captain and his crew landed on this island. We removed all the plastic debris we found."

