

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

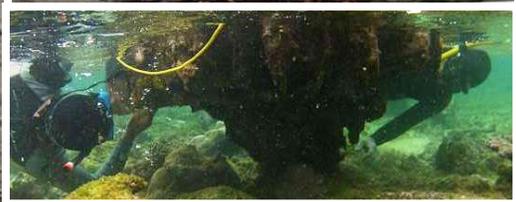
Above left is the satellite image on page 176 – the island at the red arrow was circled. Above middle is the image from JP Mugnier of the area in the white box. The top left of his red box is above right and shows the locations of: a small part of the plane (“reste”); the second engine (at right); and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

