

B-17s go to war - the Lakanuki story

(by Robert G Pelley 2015)

Below is a photo of two B-17 Flying Fortress bombers on the ramp across from the old Administration Building in Gander in the early 1940s. This photo can be seen on a number of websites, notably that of the Aviation Museum.

Doesn't seem like much, does it, another photo of bombers in Gander? But having Gander as an unsinkable aircraft carrier jutting out into the Atlantic was a major factor in getting bombers to Europe and these bombers were a major factor in winning the war.

So I decided to take the time necessary to find what real life might have been for these planes and their crews. Two things help a lot, namely that all these planes have serial numbers and the bombers have "nose art" with a name.

In this case I decided to discover the history of the first plane in the photo, the "Lakanuki". And for those dirty minds, it means what you think it means. In Hawaiian, it apparently can be translated as "singles disease" !



This airplane had the serial number 42-3235 and was a part of the 545 Bomber Squadron of the 384th Bomber Group. The Lakanuki was delivered on 07 April 1943. The 384 BG was activated 01 December 1942 at Gowen Field, Idaho. The aircraft left Sioux City for Kearney, Nebraska on the 3rd of May 1943 to start their move through Gander. The first squadron aircraft arrived into England on the 25th May. It wasn't long, a mere six weeks, before the Lakanuki met its fate.

The 384th was sent on a mission on 04 July to attack targets, in particular the train station, in the area of Le Mans. The Lakanuki, piloted by Lt Larry Meyer, was shot down by Uffz Wolfgang Ortlepp in a German Fw 190-A5 fighter of JG 2/Stabwas Squadron at 28000 ft. Wolfgang Ortlepp did not have a free ride though, because he himself was wounded in this action and had to make a forced landing, though nothing could be found about whether or not he survived the war.

The Lakanuki literally exploded in mid-air. Sgt. David Butcher was the tail gunner on this aircraft and, without warning, he found himself falling to earth over enemy occupied France. It was a day in his life that came close to being his last, and would have been if he had been anything but the tail gunner. He was the only survivor of that plane after the tail was torn away and he was thrown out. He regained consciousness while falling and quickly opened his parachute, above the village of Poille sur Vegre. Two villagers rapidly helped him away. Clandestinely employed as a "deaf and mute" gardener and later in the local Resistance network, he took part notably in receiving the arms parachuted by planes supplying the Maquis. His adventurous journey in French territory lasted seven months.

This should end the Lakanuki story except for one twist - it looks like another crew had the same "Hawaiian Disease"! A rare occurrence - two bombers of the same type with the same name.



In January 5, 1944, a B-17 bomber with a different serial number 42-5827 and but same name "Lakanuki" was part of a raid against the port facilities at Kiel, Germany. This aircraft was damaged and forced to land in Sweden.

Some 88 flyable B-17s and B-24s were interned in Sweden during the war. Some of the B-17s were converted to a 14-passenger configuration by SAAB and used by the Swedish airline ABA. Lakanuki was used as spares in this operation.

So when we look at those 'ordinary photos' of World War Two airplanes in Gander, one can look a bit farther. In our minds eye, perhaps we can see crew members on the American side walking along Washington Ave towards the base hospital or the transient officers quarters, in what became the Airlines Hotel. Maybe they went east on Roosevelt towards the transient mess or the gym which became the Roman Catholic school and church. Or maybe they stopped at the base chapel, for a quiet moment in the shadows before putting on a brave face in the sunlight.

The human drama of those who flew these machines makes a much more interesting story than just the planes themselves.