

# Kroombit Tops State Forest

*An informative guide for visitors to the area.*

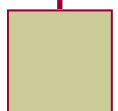
Kroombit Tops is situated 85km southwest of Gladstone at the junction of the Dawes, Calliope and Milton Ranges. Kroombit Tops State Forest is 34,400 Ha of forest adjoining Kroombit Tops National Park. Together the State Forest and National Park make up the bulk of the 800m high Kroombit Tops Plateau, a densely forested temperate island in the subtropics.

The western section of the plateau is dissected by the Dry, Kroombit and Annie Creek systems. Dry Creek and Dry Gully Gorge are within the State Forest, while Kroombit and Annie Gorges are within the Kroombit Tops National Park. Dense forests, wonderful views and magnificent stands of Hoop Pine are key features of Kroombit Tops State Forest.

The region surrounding Kroombit Tops was taken up for sheep grazing between 1854 and 1860. Cattle replaced sheep in the region during the 1880's and many escaped or were released in the rough country. Much of the State Forest is now under special leases for grazing cattle, and feral cattle and horses are now common throughout Kroombit Tops.

In 1944, an American Liberator Bomber (the "Beautiful Betsy"), en route from Darwin to Sydney to ferry an airman to his wedding, crashed into the side of Kroombit Tops with the loss of eight American Servicemen. The crash site is beside Annie Gorge within the boundaries of the current National Park, but the wreckage was not discovered until late 1994 following extensive bushfires in the area.

The "Beautiful Betsy" site has cultural and historic values as a poignant reminder of World War II tragedy, and is now managed as a heritage site. The surrounding region contains a number of historic buildings and sites associated with early settlement; particularly mining.



For almost 50 years, the fate of a US Army Air Force Liberator named "Beautiful Betsy" remained a mystery. Betsy disappeared on a flight from Darwin to Brisbane in February 1945. Bob Livingstone is the author/owner of this article, and it has been reproduced by Calliope Shire Council for the sole purpose of this presentation. Following is the story of the Liberator and an end to the mystery...

## A Mystery No More...

"It's a goddam flying circus," he thought in despair, and then aloud: "You men are a shambles! Nothing but a flying circus!" The speaker was Brigadier General Eugene L. Eubank, Director of Bombardment of the United States Army Air Force, the place was Lowry Field, Colorado, and the date was March 1943; from that time the 380th Bombardment Group (Heavy) would be known affectionately as *The Flying Circus*.

The 380th were at the end of the final phase of their training prior to travelling overseas. Their destination, unknown to them at the time, was Australia. The four squadrons of the group had been selected for assignment to the 5th Air Force as replacements for the 90th Bomb Group which had been operating from Australia since November 1942.

*The Flying Circus* flew the Pacific with their B-24D Liberators in April 1943 and, after combat orientation in New Guinea with the 43rd and 90th Bomb Groups, flew their first solo mission, to Gasmata, New Britain on May 21. Their base was the relatively newly-built Fenton Field about 80 miles south of Darwin.

One of the Liberators which flew the Pacific was B-24D-53-CO, Army Air Force serial 42-40387, assigned to the 528th Squadron. The aircraft commander, 1st Lieutenant Joe Roth, had named the aircraft *Beautiful Betsy* after his wife. The name was painted in an attractive running script in yellow, shaded in red, on the olive drab of the camouflage. Some of the group were diverted to Charters Towers on their arrival, to have a Liberator tail turret grafted onto the nose to replace the 'greenhouse' of the B-24D; but *Betsy* did not have time for this, entering combat almost immediately.

In August 1943 the group mounted one of their most famous raids from Australia - to the oil refineries of Balikpapan in Borneo. The refineries were going full blast, producing 60 per cent of Japanese aviation fuel needs, safe in the knowledge that they were out of range of Allied bombing raids. The nearest heavy bomber base was at Darwin, 2700 miles away.

Twelve 380th BG Liberators were selected for the attack, flying to Darwin for briefing, loading of bombs and ammunition and topping up with fuel. Roth, flying *Betsy*, took off from Fenton at 0800 and on arrival at Darwin made a heavy landing, smashing the tail skid into the fuselage. The damage had to be repaired before the aircraft could be considered operational again, and *Betsy* was unable to go on the raid.

After repair, *Betsy* flew a number of missions, but in November 1943, during a mission to Rabaul, *Betsy* came close to colliding with another aircraft of the same formation as they passed through a storm. In the process of avoiding the collision, *Betsy* spun out of the formation, still loaded with bombs and nearly full fuel. The forces imposed on the airframe in the recovery were so severe that it was retired from combat. The plane had accumulated over 1300 hours and 25 missions by that time.

In December 1943, *Betsy* was selected for a special task. Services Reconnaissance Department of the Allied Intelligence Bureau was having difficulties with submarine transport. In order to insert operatives and their stores deep into Japanese held territory, it was decided, in addition to *Snake* boats (Krait, Sea Snake, Grass Snake), to test an operational long range aircraft capable of carrying a heavy load. The Liberator was the only type available in Australia with the capacity. The RAAF did not have its own Liberators, so the AIF turned to the USAAF and *Betsy* was the aircraft supplied for parachute dropping tests.

On Boxing Day 1943 *Betsy* took off for the Adelaide River drop zone, near Batchelor in the Northern Territory, with five men of Z Force and 'ACW Wood', a test dummy which would make the first exit. After tests, other B-24s were provided by the 380th BG to insert operatives into the field; when 200 Special Duties Flight (RAAF) was formed in February 1945 it took over the role, also with Liberators.

On completion of the parachute trials a decision had to be made on *Betsy's* future. Instead of being flown to the depot for salvage, it was decided that the aircraft would remain with 528 as a hack. She was stripped of her camouflage, guns and armour plate, but *Beautiful Betsy* was repainted on her nose in black.

USAAF units in Australia used to supplement their rations by buying produce with mess funds. Each member of the squadron paid a levy and when a kitty was established, an aircraft would be flown to an Australian city on what was described as a 'fat cat' flight, loaded up with food and alcohol and flown home. Over the next year *Betsy* roamed far and wide throughout Australia collecting fresh fruit, vegetables, alcohol, ice cream and even live poultry to relieve the monotonous diet. Group personnel travelling on leave were also carried.

In February 1945 the 380th Group were in the process of moving from Australia to Murtha Field on Mindoro Island in the Philippines. The 528th Squadron was the only group squadron which continued with operations, the other squadrons acting as transports, shuttling personnel and equipment from Darwin to the new base.

The 528th Squadron mess had raised 600 pounds and *Beautiful Betsy* was being sent on one last fat cat mission, this time to Brisbane, before being salvaged. She had accumulated over 1500 airframe hours and could justifiably be considered war weary. At 2200 on 26 February 1945 *Betsy* lifted off from Darwin with Lieutenant William E. McDaniel at the controls.

Also aboard were crew members Lieutenants Eugene A. Kilcheski (co-pilot), Hilary E. Routt (navigator), Jack W. Owens (navigator / bombardier), Sergeants Raymond S. Tucker (engineer), Harold J. Lemons (radio operator) and two passengers: Spitfire pilots from 54 Squadron RAF, also based in Darwin, Flying Officer Roy Cannon and Flt-Lt T.J. Cook. Cannon, 23 years old, was due to marry Daphne Studdards in Brisbane on March 2, and Cook was his best man.

McDaniel planned to set course on a heading of 125 degrees after departure and, estimating that the trip would take nine hours, expected to arrive at Eagle Farm in the early hours of the morning. Apart from a report of a four engined aircraft heard over Claraville Station, near Croydon, nothing was heard of the aircraft or its eight occupants for over 49 years. There were no radio messages from the aircraft after departure.

When *Betsy* failed to arrive, Major H.C. Williams, in charge of the search, sent two Liberators 15 to 20 miles apart on the same route *Betsy* expected to fly. On the return flight, both aircraft searched the area around Claraville, but nothing was found.

In 1967 parts of a Liberator were found near Eley Station in the Roper River area south east of Darwin. The parts included a bomb bay fuel tank and a new supercharger which had been in a wooden box, long ago eaten by the Territory's white ants. These items were possibly jettisoned from a Liberator - but from *Betsy*?





Aboriginal stockmen directed police and RAAF personnel to a dried up waterhole nearby, where eating utensils, a cigarette lighter, assorted US and other coins, US Army buttons, carbine ammunition and other items were unearthed. It was obvious that US Servicemen had camped there at some stage, but nothing conclusive could be deduced. In October 1982 three aborigines reported to police at Roper River that they had seen a bomber and sighted human remains. Despite an extensive ground and helicopter search, the find could not be relocated. All of these discoveries were false trails.

Late in July 1994, Queensland National Park Ranger, Mark Roe was monitoring the progress of a back burn south-south east of Rockhampton, near Biloela. The fire had cleared the undergrowth and suddenly Roe realised that what he was seeing amongst the broken rock and trees was the wreckage of an aircraft. It was the shattered remains of *Beautiful Betsy*, found after 49 years of mystery.

It would appear that Lt McDaniel was close to planned track (a great circle route Darwin-Brisbane passes close to the crash site), but had commenced a descent a fraction too early. It was in pre-dawn darkness, probably around 0430, that *Betsy* was sliding down an invisible 500 feet per minute slope, engines throttled back, the majority of men aboard still asleep. The pilots, believing that they had crossed the ranges and were over the coastal lowlands, were unaware that they had just missed the top of a ridge - and never saw the next one either.

At 320mph *Betsy* slammed into the ridge face and exploded. The silence of the dark bush was shattered by the huge bang as the Liberator disintegrated. When the fire had burnt itself out and the stillness returned, all that was left of the bomber were the outer wing panels, torn off outboard of the engines, the four Pratt & Whitney radials, shorn of their propellers, and a short portion of the rear fuselage lying inverted on the ground.

The remains of *Beautiful Betsy* and her crew were to lie in the Australian bush, undisturbed for the next 49 years, until the mystery of the disappearance was to be solved by a chance discovery.

*The author's comprehensive history of the B-24 Liberator in the South Pacific - Under the Southern Cross was published by Banner Books in December, 1994.*



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