



# Bomber Mountain

The final resting place of the *Scharazad*

BY JEFF SKILES

**JUNE 28, 1943.** The United States is immersed in the greatest struggle of its existence, a war so immense that it spans the globe and is being fought in every remote outpost. The United States Army Air Forces have been on station in Europe since 1942 bombing continental Europe, but D-Day and the nascent beginnings of liberation are still a year in the future. At this early juncture of the war the Allied losses have been heavy in the skies over Europe, both in men and materiel, and replacements are necessary for both.

## PENDLETON, OREGON

Sundown is only moments away as 2nd Lts. William Ronaghan and Anthony Tilotta warm the four engines of their B-17F. Designated as serial number 42-3399 by the Army Air Forces it has been nicknamed the *Scharazad* by its crew. The Flying Fortress' moniker is most likely a misspelling of Scheherazade, the queen of "A Thousand and One Nights" from ancient Arabian myth. Unfortunately, the blessing of Scheherazade's long life will

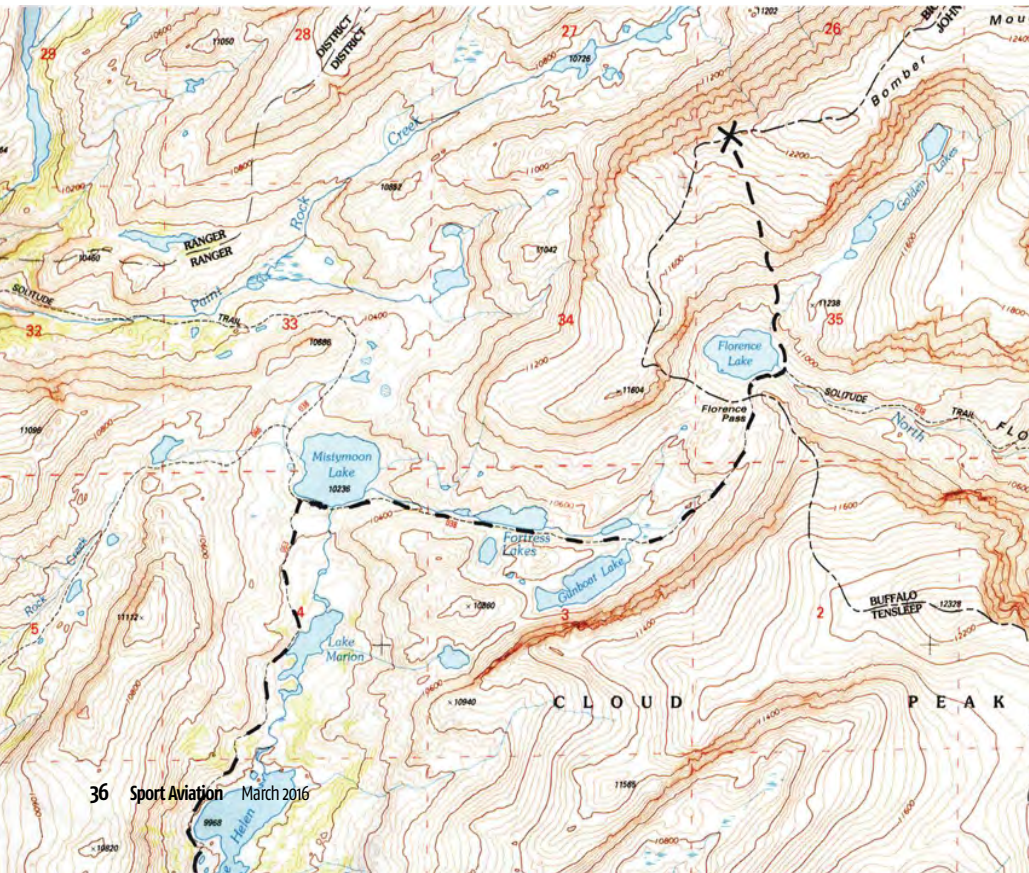
not be cast upon this crew as they struggle through the night to come.

The *Scharazad* and her 10 men have only just completed training and have been released for overseas duty. They were initially attached to the 318th Bomber Squadron in Walla Walla, Washington, but have now been re-assigned to the Plummer Provisional Group to be sent immediately to England and the war. The Plummer Group has been training at nearby Pendleton, Oregon, and requires a full complement of 30 aircraft for its deployment. One aircraft, however, cannot make the journey, and the 318th is ordered to supply one bomber complete with crew as a replacement—the *Scharazad*. This is a simple enough bureaucratic command that will nevertheless seal the fate of 10 men for eternity.

The *Scharazad*'s new orders require the crew to fly the short distance from Walla Walla to Pendleton where they will first load the organizational and crew records for the Plummer Group. They will then make the 940 nm flight to Grand Island, Nebraska, the Plummer Group's home base, and join the rest of the B-17s that had departed earlier.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF AN END

At 8:52 p.m. the vast orange orb of the sun is just dipping below the edge of the Earth as the heavy bomber lumbers down the runway at Pendleton. After the wheels thud solidly in the wells Ronaghan and Tilotta set course for Nebraska, and the crew settles in for a long overnight flight that will touch five states and cross the Continental Divide. Trained as warriors they have little to occupy themselves while still in the relatively peaceful skies of America. On this quiet Monday evening, however, the warm glow of the sunset







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would be the last these men would ever know as the gathering gloom portended a dark and and moonless night.

#### A BOY'S REMEMBRANCES

I was 13 years old when my family and I set out from the trailhead at the peculiarly named West Tensleep Lake, Wyoming. High mountains were an exotic thrill for a lad from the flatlands, and the drive through the Powder River Pass this morning had been stunning. The hard-beaten trail ahead wound up through the forest and open grasslands to Lake Helen. This is where we camped the first night, and I remember catching trout in the waters of the lake.

The next morning we continued up the trail along the shores of Lake Marion, our path ever increasing in altitude. As we made our way farther into the Bighorn Mountains, the geography changed markedly. Forest was replaced by stunted trees and low shrubs. Passing Misty Moon Lake the trees ended entirely and the landscape became one of boulders and shard fields interspersed with grasses and lichens. Weaving by Fortress Lakes our climb took us well above 10,000 feet of altitude before we stopped at Florence Lake, the base camp for the final climb to the ridge. Here the trail disappears, but the climb begins.

The ridge is quite steep and consists mostly of boulders piled on top of one another. A careful path must be chosen to the top. The air is thin, over 12,000 feet now, bringing belabored breathing and weariness during the climb. As we neared the ridge small shiny pieces of aluminum could be seen scattered about on the rocks. These bits and pieces gradually increased in size as we climbed farther until the larger assemblies of engines, propellers, and landing gear became apparent.

It looked as if something had exploded atop this boulder ridge with debris scattered everywhere. I remember a serviceman's boot sitting on a rock, a mangled and twisted rudder pedal, and the roof of the main control cabin now stripped bare of paint by the harsh sun and demanding climate. What was left of the tail section remained on the west side of the ridge, while the engines and propellers lay to the east, displaying the negligible gap

separating life from death. If the aircraft had only been 50 feet higher or a couple of hundred yards farther southwest, it would have cleared the ridge easily, but that was not to be. Here atop this lonely ridge in the Bighorn Mountains we had come across the final resting place of the *Scharazad*.

#### A MOONLESS NIGHT

The final position report from the bomber placed it 40 miles northwest of Casper, Wyoming, near the present day Powder River, but then nothing more was heard from the crew. The Army Air Forces launched a search mission with no result.

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It expanded the search area, and still no trace was found. The next year the search area was expanded again—but the *Scharazad* had simply vanished. The fate of the plane became a mystery, and the names of its 10 crew joined those of the almost 15,000 WWII airmen killed in accidents in this country during the war years.

#### COMING HOME

Three days before the Japanese capitulation and more than two years after the plane went missing a couple of cowboys walked into the Tyrrell Ranger Station and reported a crashed airplane high up near Cloud Peak. They had seen a flash of the sun reflecting off bare aluminum on the ridge above Florence Lake and had climbed up to discover the horrifying site. The Army launched a mission to recover the airmen's remains and sensitive military equipment, but the rest of the scene was left as it was found.

#### MYSTERY

A few theories have been advanced to explain the accident. It was a moonless night, which couldn't have helped the crew in seeing the

ridgeline, but doesn't explain why they were flying so low in an area of high peaks. The few residents in the southern Bighorn Mountain region reported a freak June high-altitude snowstorm that night that could have obscured the ridge in cloud and snow. The last position report from the crew placed the bomber in lower terrain more than 70 miles southeast of the crash site, suggesting a navigational failure or error on the part of the navigator. Some believe the position of one of the propellers indicates that it was in a feathered position denoting an engine failure. Perhaps some combination of all these factors led to the Flying Fortress' demise.

#### REQUIEM FOR THE DEAD

After the war the Wyoming War Dads and Auxiliary petitioned the Forest Service to name the highest point of the ridge Bomber Mountain in memory of the crew. The veterans group also placed a plaque on the shores of nearby Florence Lake recognizing the sacrifices of the servicemen.

I was at the site only 30 years after the crash, but three decades can seem like ancient history to a 13-year-old mind. My thoughts then were of the novelty of finding the wreckage, not on the sacrifice that led to its presence. Now some 42 years have passed since that day, and the ghosts of 10 young men, the same age as my sons today, is all too present in my remembrances of the day.

The bomber is still up there, too large and too remote to be picked apart entirely by passing hikers. The wind and rain of almost 75 years is slowly distributing the smaller parts of the *Scharazad* down the steep incline as the passage of time restores the bomber to the earth from whence it came. The once thundering engines, massive propellers, and life-giving wings will likely stand watch over this bare and desolate mountain ridge forever. Perhaps no grander monument can be placed to the crew of the *Scharazad* than the name of this high summit in the Cloud Peak Wilderness—Bomber Mountain. **EAA**

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