

The Mystery of the Saline Valley Liberator

What started out as a routine air-to-air gunnery mission ended up as a survival story with a tragic conclusion.
by R. W. Koch



For me this story goes back to 1947 when I was living in Southern California. I had heard a number of rumors about an abandoned Consolidated B-24 Liberator bomber sitting right in the middle of a dry lake bed in a remote area of California's desert. Each time the rumor would pop up I would try to obtain specific facts about it by asking numerous questions but was never able to find out the "when and where" of the rumored incident. I just couldn't imagine the U.S. Army Air Forces leaving a complete B-24 to the mercy of souvenir hunters, especially when a B-24 in those days cost around \$300,000. Whenever I heard about this "mysterious" B-24 I would file the piece of information away hoping it would eventually lead to some substantial evidence that such a B-24 did indeed exist.

Then one day, quite unexpectedly, while thumbing through a civilian flying magazine I noticed a story written by a pilot who was telling about certain desert flying conditions over California. The story contained a very brief reference to a B-24 bomber he had seen sitting in the middle of the Saline Valley while he was on his way to Bishop on a VFR flight.

Aha! My first clue. The Saline Valley! Not losing a moment, I got out my maps of the various areas in California and, sure enough, the Saline Valley was listed. It was situated approximately 24 miles due east of Independence, California. But a closer look at the map told me it was one of those "you can't get there from here" locations. Like a huge protective wall the Inyo Mountains stood majestically between Independence and the Saline Valley. If one was to get to the rumored site of the mystery B-24 it certainly couldn't be accomplished by driving east from Independence.

As I said, this was in 1947 and several things came up and I had to postpone my adventure into the Saline valley. One of these things was the Korean War and I went into the Air Force. The B-24 quest would have to be shelved for an indefinite period. Years later, with the Air Force and many flying hours behind me, I started thinking once more of that elusive B-24 story and the nether regions of the Saline Valley.

Finally, on a sunny morning in May 1976, I departed the Los Angeles area with my adventurous friend, Jesse Flaherty, who also had quite a few hours in the air and whose curiosity was also piqued by the B-24 story. Well-armed with maps, binoculars and the standard items one usually takes along when venturing into a wild desert region, we drove north on highway 395. About four hours later we came to the small town of Olancho and after consulting the map, turned right onto Highway 190. The map indicated that an unpaved primitive road would intersect 190 after about 20 miles of driving. The surrounding area was wild indeed and we hadn't yet reached the side road we were looking for. Then, in the distance, we saw a sign point north. It indicated that the Saline Valley was 37 miles north from this point. With much satisfaction we turned left and started down this unpaved road wondering what we would find at our final destination.

Well, the road became rougher and dustier the farther we drove but we weren't about to be stopped. As we turned one curve five burros darted across the road and gave us a blank stare as we passed. After ten miles the canyon walls closed in and we were driving almost on the edge of a canyon wall which plunged downward about 1,000 feet to the desert floor. Then, after rounding one more curve, we could look down in the Saline Valley.

So that is what it looks like, I thought to myself. I just had to see that B-24 so I got out my binoculars and "zeroed in" on the white-appearing desert floor below. I could see sand dunes, brush, rocks and the huge lake bed . . . but no B-24. Could it have been a rumor after all? Putting the binoculars back in the case we started down the narrow lane as it wound its dusty way into the Saline Valley. Our map indicated the valley was 25 miles long north-to-south and about 15 miles wide west-to-east. Two hours later we were driving along a sandy road, level with the dry lake bed and the temperature was nearing 100 degrees F.

The heat waves were dancing across the lake bed in true mirage fashion and even the binoculars didn't seem to help in bringing in distant objects. We found a small dirt road that turned off the large road so we decided to follow it. After less than a mile it stopped at the edge of the enormous salt-coated lake bed. The B-24 had to be here because this was the only lake bed in the whole valley.

We parked the car and, after several big swallows of water from the canteens, again began to squint out across the lake bed. After all these years I really wanted to see that mysterious B-24. Suddenly, while peering through the binoculars, there appeared to be some kind of object or objects sticking straight up from the floor of the lake bed. I couldn't make it out but it certainly didn't appear to be a B-24 bomber; at least not like any B-24 I had seen. The only way to see what it might be was to hike there. I think Jesse wondered if it were possible for a man to be so driven and possessed to want to hike across a salt-encrusted lake bed to a distant object in 100 degree temperatures. We strapped on our canteens, picked up our waling sticks and started out across the solid-appearing lake bed. At first the lake bed was hard and definitely salt-encrusted to the point where each footstep would bring forth a loud, crunching sound. This wasn't too bad but soon the salty surface started to sink as we stepped on it, exposing the dark colored ooze beneath. And with each step it didn't get any better.

With only one-quarter mile to go to the unknown objects we really started sinking into the mud beneath the salt crust. This was a very deceptive appearing lake bed. Several times Jesse's boot stayed in the mud and he stepped right out of it. Nowhere was there any solid ground but I didn't care at this point because the objects were nearing began to take on the shape of aircraft parts. Only 100 more feet to go and we'd be there! We were now sinking 12 to 18 inches in the ooze with each step. I could now see some form of aircraft taking shape but it certainly wasn't what I had envisaged.

When we finally got thee I knew that this was the B-24 I had wondered about for these many years. Jesse plodded by me uttering some oaths about the mud, temperature and things in general and then sat down on the nose wheel strut. So this was the B-24! Or rather what remained of one. Someone had cut the entire fuselage away with a torch leaving only the floor of the aircraft. The wings were gone as well as the engines and tail section. Scattered about the B-24, which still carried part of its olive-drab World War Two paint job, were the self-sealing rubber gasoline tanks, the main landing gear struts and two vertical pieces of the fuselage where the pilot would have been sitting.

As I stood on the floor of the B-24 I turned around to see where we had parked the car and it was then I noticed the landing track of the B-24. There wee deep and wide and quite visible, even after 30 years. Still attached to the nose section of the B-24 was a stainless steel .50 caliber ammo container as well as a section of stainless steel ammunition guide which was used to guide the belted ammo from the containers to the machine guns. Both items looked in almost perfect condition despite their years in the salty environment.

Well, here I am, I thought to myself. After all these years you've at last reached the mysterious B-24. But now I wondered about the story behind it. What cause it to be here and what of the crew? When did this incident take place? We gave the wreckage a pretty thorough going over but failed to find any identifying numbers or placards that could be used for later identification. Jesse and I took one more swig from our canteens and decided it was time to make our way back to the car knowing full well that almost one mile of salt and muddy ooze faced us. With the temperature now climbing over the 100 degree mark we departed the Saline Valley. I was quite satisfied that we had completed what we had set out to do with regards to finding that long elusive B-24 and the story behind it.

Several weeks after that trip I started to inquire about the bomber, contacting several people who had lived in that area during World War Two. Once source gave me a date of approximately October 1944 was the date it went down. Armed with that information I queried the USAF Inspection and Safety Center at Norton Air Force Base in San Bernardino, California. I gave them the type of aircraft in question and the possible date it went down. Less than a week passed before I received a reply. They furnished quite a bit of information as well as the aircraft number. Now that I had the identification number of the aircraft I sent a letter to the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., requesting the log sheet for this particular B-24. It might be of interest to all aviation buffs to know that among other types of aircraft, the Smithsonian has the World War Two microfilmed log sheets on most military aircraft that belonged to the United States. Shortly after writing I received the requested log sheet from the National Air and Space Museum. The puzzle was now complete and the following story unfolded.

The B-24J, serial number 42-51444 was built at the Ford Motor Company B-24 aircraft plant at Willow Run, Michigan, in early summer of 1944 and accepted by the Army Air Forces on 17 June 1944. After acceptance it was delivered to Muroc Army Air Base in the Mojave Desert on 20 June 1944. On 1 July 1944 it was converted to a TB-24J to be used for training aerial gunners. This training continued almost daily into late October. On the morning of 22 October 1944, TB-24J 51444 would take off on its last mission, never to fly again. After the usual briefing the crew and the student gunner climbed aboard and were shortly airborne, heading for the desolate desert regions north of the Panamint Valley where air-to-air gunnery practice could be safely carried on without fear of firing down on a populated area. The target tow ship, an Air Force A-24, better known as the Douglas Dauntless dive bomber flew by at about 12,000 feet towing the typical sleeve target of that era. The waist gunners, as well as the turret gunners, would laze away at the white-colored sleeve, learning the techniques of leading their targets and the deceptive distances associated with air-to-air gunnery. The pilot

was a young lieutenant who had been assigned to fly these gunnery missions. Nothing too exciting. Just fly straight line tracks for so many miles and then change directions and do it all over again. The A-24 would zip by, simulating an enemy aircraft, and the gunners would blaze away at the sleeve target. This went on for several hours and the A-24 finally went away to harass another B-24.

Without warning, as is usually the case in mid-air emergencies, the number two and number three engines began to malfunction and, not responding to the various remedial techniques, were feathered. This loss of two engines caused an immediate descent of the TB-24J. Power was applied to the two remaining out-board engines but it was not enough to give the aircraft the ability to climb. Surrounded by desert peaks to the east and the high Inyo mountains to the west the pilot had no alternative but to quickly pick a suitable landing site in this wild, rugged area. Descending at about 500 feet per minute the crew was told that an emergency landing was imminent and to fasten down all loose equipment in the aircraft and standby for a possible crash landing.

Jockeying the underpowered B-24 with the throttles, the pilot saw the vast expanse of what appeared to be a large, flat, dry lake bed several thousand feet beneath the aircraft and made the decision to land on it. The flaps and gear were lowered and a long curing descent was established. The two waist gunners in the rear of the aircraft had already opened the side gunnery hatches and had taken their .50 caliber machine guns from the mounts. At about 1,000 feet, the TB-24 turned on final for the approach to the lake bed. Lifting the heavy machine guns, the waist gunners threw them out through the open hatches where they fell to the desert floor below. The TB-24 came lower and lower over the lake bed gradually settling on its tricycle landing gear.

No sooner had it touched down when the main gear broke through the salt encrusted surface of the lake bed throwing mud and ooze in all directions. With this rapid unexpected deceleration the bomber was thrown forward on its nose gear, which also broke through the surface of the lake bed and scooped up the mud, salt and thick ooze and propelled it up into the flight deck, covering everything and everyone with mud. The TB-24 came to rapid halt and before the engines could be shut down, the other crew members were jumping out of the hatches to get away from the aircraft and a possible explosion. In all of this sudden mud covered confusion one of the crew members was heard to cry out. The engines were quickly stopped and when the other crew members went around to the right side of the aircraft they saw the engineer laying in the mud in front of the engines. His right leg had been severed above the knee. In his haste to get away from the aircraft he ran in front of the still-turning propeller and slipped in the mud, falling in such a way that his leg was hit by the prop. The other crew members rushed to his aid and quickly put a tourniquet around the remaining portion of the leg. A first aid kit was obtained from the aircraft and the engineer was given a shot of morphine. Through it didn't take immediate effect, it did help.

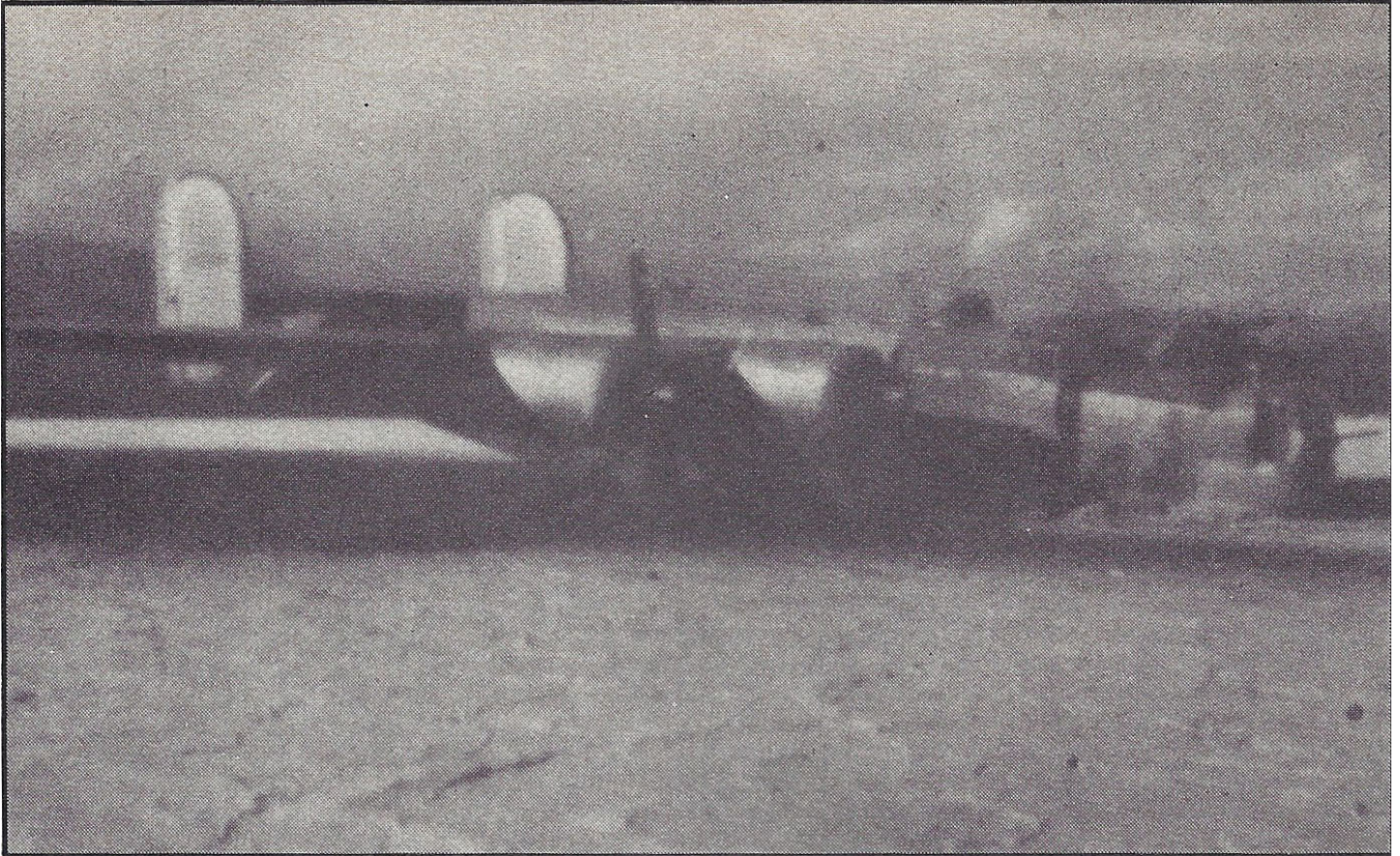
The crew popped their chutes and placed the silk panels over and under their injured comrade. It was almost noon and the temperatures on the lake bed was nearing 100 degrees. After waiting several hours they decided to take their injured comrade to the edge of the dry lake bed where it might be a few degrees cooler. They had to carry him almost one-half mile and in the desert heat it was no easy task. After arriving at the edge of the lake bed they once again tried to make the injured man comfortable. With no radio communication to call their base they could only wait for help to arrive. The lieutenant had the other men tramp out the word "plasma" in large letters on the lake bed hoping an aircraft might see it. Soon, an A-24 flew over and saw the downed TB-24 and their signal. Less than two hours later the A-24 was back and made a low pass over the stranded flyers, dropping some plasma by parachute along with a note telling them that help was on the way. In those days there were no long-range, high-performance helicopters for emergency rescue work and, in such situations, only mobile ground rescue vehicles could be used to recover survivors. The engineer was now only

semiconscious and after receiving the plasma appeared to respond slightly. After what seemed like many hours, vehicles could be seen making their slow, bumpy way down the road to the edge of the lake bed. After the ambulance arrived the engineer was quickly loaded aboard and the crew departed the valley. It was a long, slow, arduous drive of 37 miles before the ambulance and other vehicles were back on paved highway and it was still a longer distance to the Lone Pine hospital where the injured aviator was taken. Despite their best efforts the hospital personnel were unable to save the engineer and he died that evening from prolonged exposure and shock. World War Two moved on and the desperate drama that took place on the Saline Valley lake bed was soon forgotten.

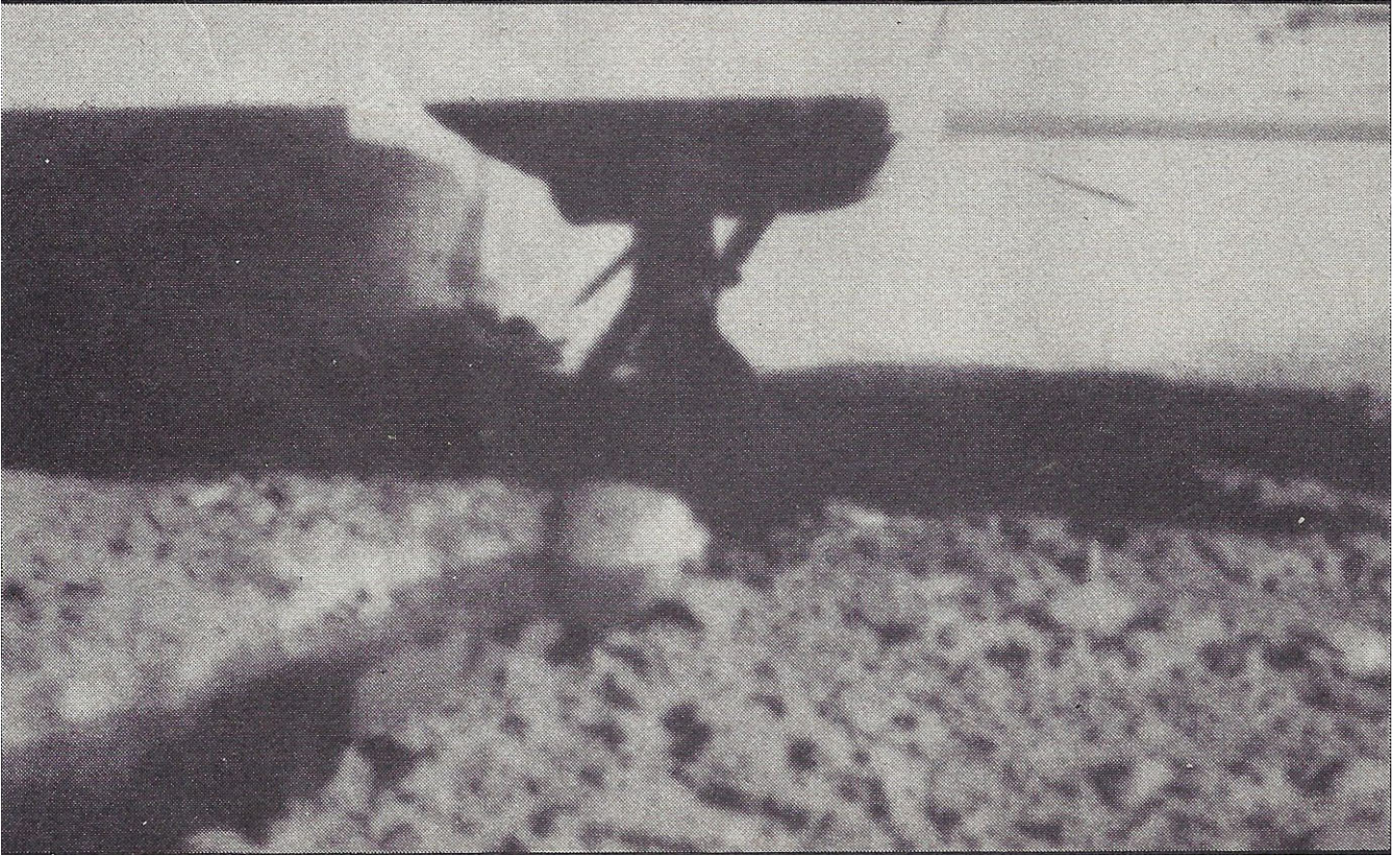
After the war, someone managed to salvage a large portion of the bomber by cutting it up into sections with an acetylene torch. However, there is still enough of the TB-24 remaining to form a sort of unofficial monument. In 1957 one of the .50 caliber machine guns was found by a camper in the area. It was deeply rusted and the barrel was bent from its 1,000 foot fall on that October day in 1944. The other machine gun is probably not too far from where the first one was located. Perhaps a camper will stumble upon it in the future, never knowing the story behind it.

My curiosity was finally satisfied and, in the long run, I actually learned more about the bomber than I had bargained for. As they say, "One picture is worth a thousand words." If you ever happen to drive into the Saline Valley and look towards the center of the lake bed you will see the remains of 51-444. Only then can you realize the helpless situation faced by that particular bomber crew in 1944.





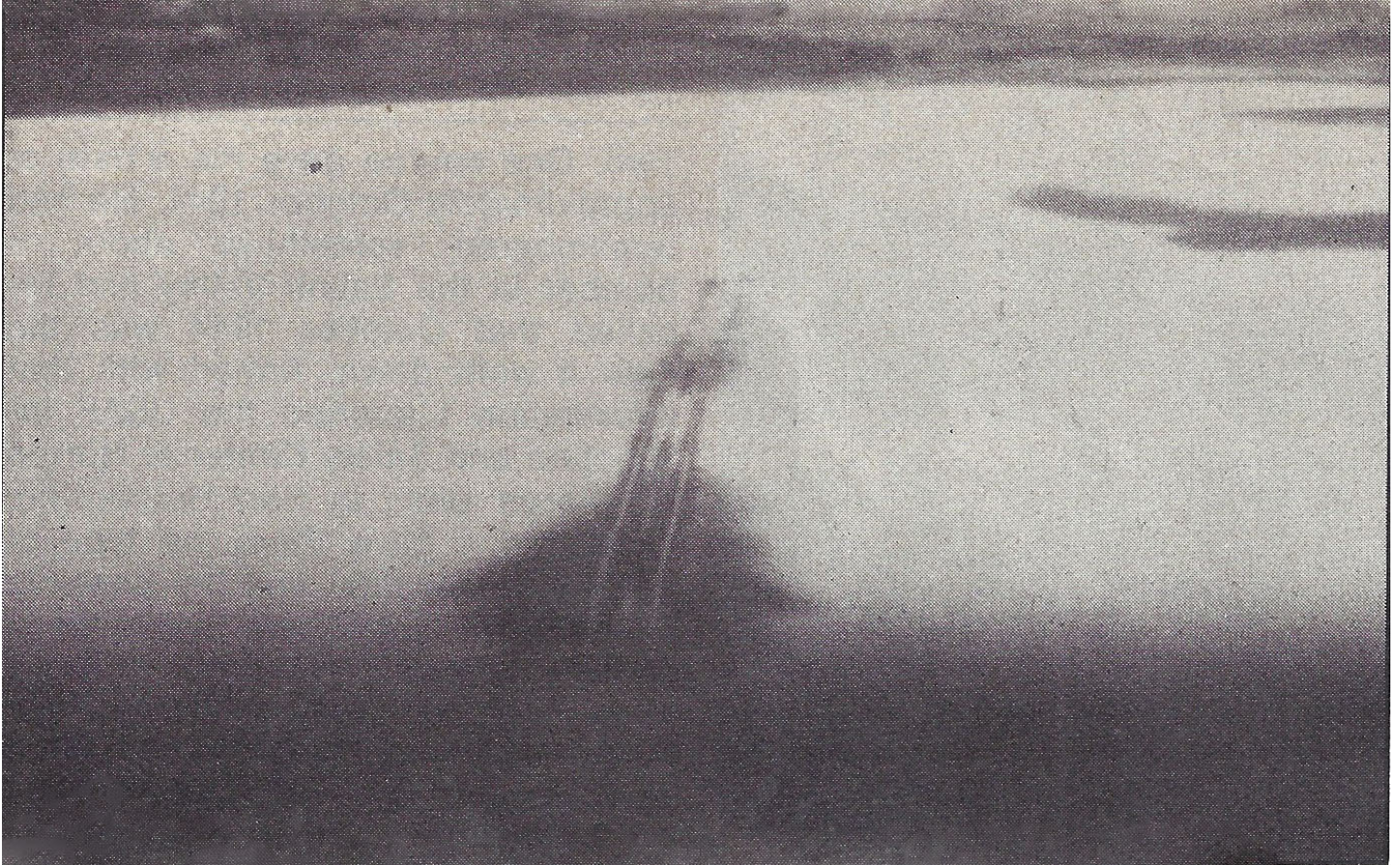
Right-side view of 45-1444 deeply buried up to its nose turret in the Saline Valley mud.
Salt-covered lake surface is in the foreground.



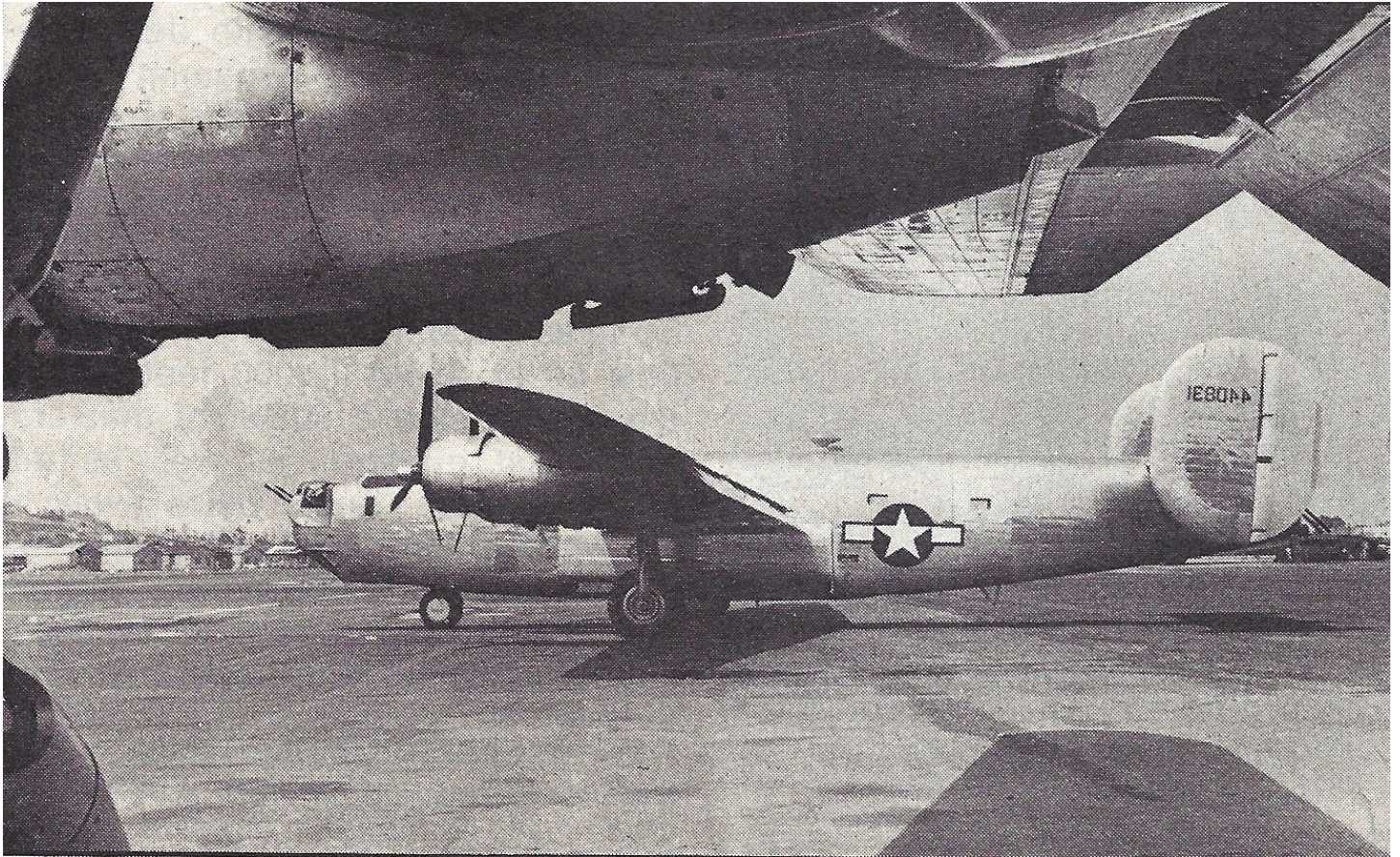
The right main landing gear was almost buried in the saline mud.
Upper right portion of the photo shows mud piled up on the flaps.



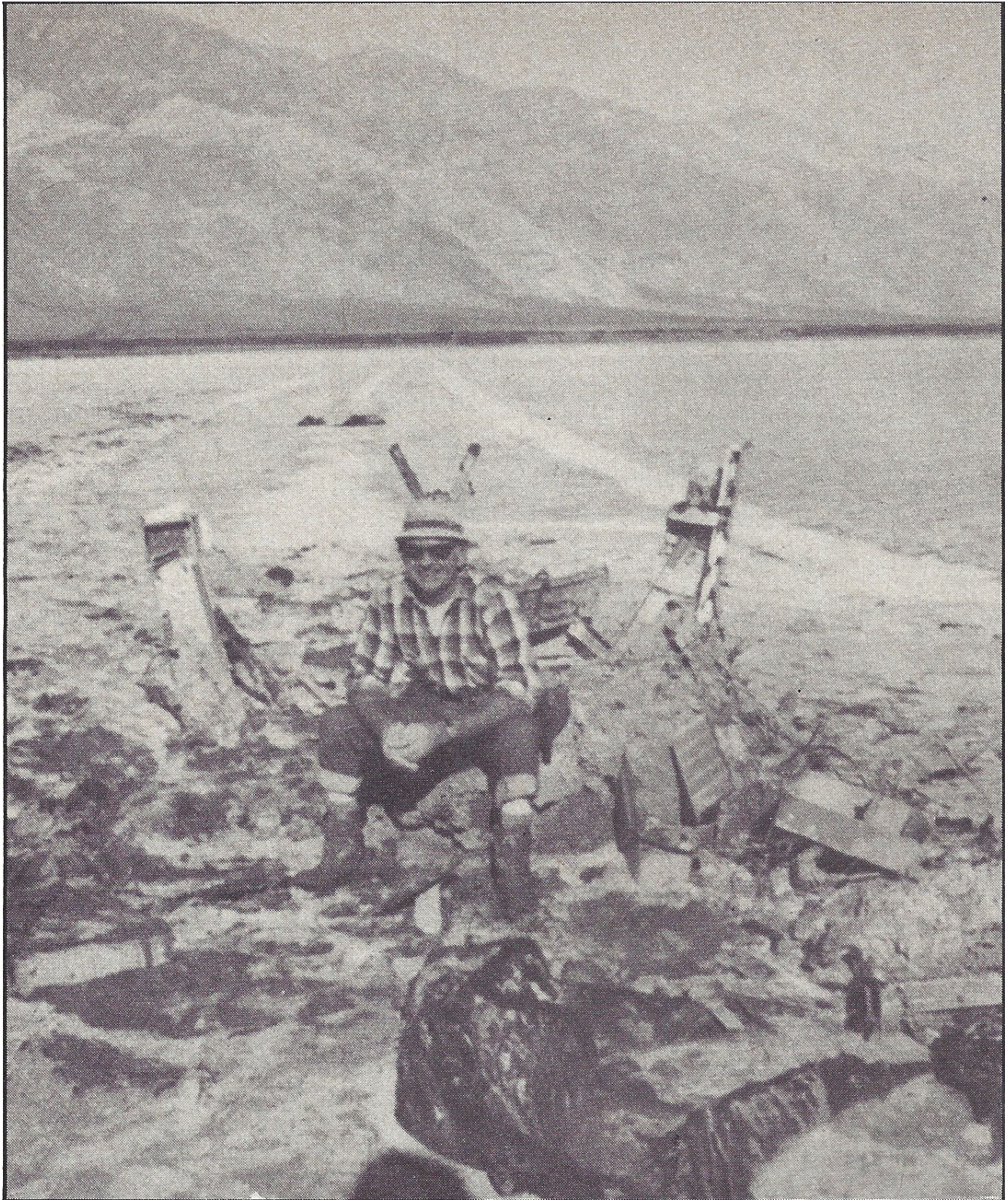
Front view of 45-1444 showing the feather engines and the lower portion of the fuselage buried in the mud.
(www.aircraftwrecks.com)



Aerial view of the tracks made by 45-1444 where it touched down on the deceptive Saline Valley lake bed.
The .40 caliber machine guns were thrown out of the aircraft about one mile from touchdown.



Consolidated B-24J of the type that went down in the deadly Saline Valley.



The intrepid Jess Flaherty, hands and boots covered by the thick Saline Valley mud, rests on the B-24's nose gear. In the background can be seen the landing tracks, still plainly visible after more than 30 years of exposure to the elements.



the remains of the TB-24J as it appears today. Scattered about the wreckage are the main landing gear struts, self-sealing rubberized gasoline tanks and various aluminum panels. Beneath the "V" strut is the nose gear with the tire still on the rim.