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SAVAGE WILDERNESS

The epic outback search for the crew of *Little Eva*

The ultimate World War II survivor story

Barry Ralph

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Preface

My original inspiration to write a book about *Little Eva* was the compelling nature of this story. Yet despite the existence of numerous articles and a television documentary, there were no fully documented accounts of this dramatic episode.

During research for my book *They Passed This Way* I came across the police files relating to the original ground search. As I examined the yellowing papers in the Queensland State Archives, my enthusiasm for this project was ignited.

There were literally hundreds of archival documents and dozens of reports relating to every aspect of the police search. Although armed forces personnel, civilians and Indigenous people were all involved, this was a police search and they were responsible for meticulously compiling, storing and preserving these reports.

Over the years many people have claimed involvement with the original searches, with some even claiming to have found the aircraft prior to the official search party.

The evidence suggests otherwise. Written within hours or days of the events, the archived reports convey in minute detail the unfolding story of the *Little Eva* drama and its aftermath. *The Crash of Little Eva* is based on these definitive historical documents.

The B-24D Liberator that crashed near Moonlight Creek in December 1942 came from the 321st Squadron of the 90th Bomb Group and I was fortunate to make contact with several members of the 90th Bomb Group veterans organisation.

I was delighted by the response I received from my American colleagues.

Wiley Woods Jr is the official historian for the 90th Bomb Group and I owe him a considerable debt for allowing me access to his previous accounts of the group. He also answered many questions about those brave airmen of long ago.

Thomas Fetter, Loyde Adams and the late James McMurria all offered expert advice and invaluable recollections. I cannot hope to repay the debt that I owe Walter Higgins of San Antonio, Texas. Walter was a former pilot of the 321st Squadron and knew all those involved in this story.

Much of this book could not have been written without the support and patience of this remarkable man who, at 89, is wondering what to do when he eventually reaches old age.

I would also like to convey my appreciation to the family of the ill-fated 2nd Lieutenant Arthur Speltz. It was Mark Speltz who offered to make available his late uncle's papers and letters: a large collection of photographs, newspaper cuttings and numerous documents relating to the *Little Eva* tragedy. Through these family artefacts I gained a better understanding of Arthur 'Tony' Speltz, and one that went well beyond the superficiality of name, rank and serial number.

A similar debt is owed to Mrs Arvilla 'Billie' Wilson, the widow of the late Loy Wilson, who was one of the six men to survive the crash in the early morning hours of 2 December 1942. Mrs Wilson supplied much lucid detail and provided access to many of her husband's papers, clippings and reports as well as several rare photographs. I also made contact with the family of the late Norman Crosson, *Little Eva's* pilot. His son, John Crosson of Andersonville, South Carolina,

answered many questions about his esteemed father who enjoyed a long and distinguished career in the United States Air Force.

Unfortunately, the remarkable Grady Gaston died shortly before I began work on this project, however his widow answered a detailed questionnaire for me. Mrs Gaston clarified many unanswered questions and also made available her late husband's mementos from the incident including letters, photographs and copies of scripts from radio programs in which Grady had participated.

Members of the Queensland Police Force were also supportive of my research. Police Commissioner Bob Atkinson took a personal interest in the project and I took full advantage of available police resources including the Queensland Police Museum.

Duncan Leask and Lisa Jones supplied the service records of those involved in the search and even located century-old design plans of the outback police buildings.

John Cummins helped me locate former policemen who had long since left the force. Former assistant-police commissioner Vern McDonald is the oldest surviving senior police veteran and a virtual encyclopedia of the force's history. He effortlessly recalled details of this incident and valuable insights into the police involved. I owe him a great deal for his patience and interest.

Senior Sergeant Stephen Stafford and Senior Constable Michael 'Moose' Musumeci of Doomadgee Police Station organised an Anzac Day commemoration for the personnel of *Little Eva*, which included the unveiling of a plaque in the town centre, listing the names of the crew. It was a privilege to attend this event and to enjoy the hospitality of police, locals and Aboriginal elders. Moose also arranged an emotional visit to the wreck site. The Doomadgee elders were invaluable in providing information and insights on the Indigenous people involved in the search for survivors: thanks to Ada Walden, Clara Foster, Eva and June Gilbert and Flora Nero. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Patrick 'Monkey' Jack — the main catalyst for a rare

performance of the Aeroplane Dance, which was major highlight of the Doomadgee visit.

A special vote of thanks to John Keighran who spoke for hours about his late father, Jack. Pat Hagarty was no less forthcoming when we spoke about his remarkable father, Bob. Pat also supplied several priceless photographs.

Writer and historian Jim Eames was also an indispensable information source. Jim had earlier spoken to many of the *Little Eva* protagonists when conducting research for his excellent book *The Searchers* and generously allowed me access to all of his notes and papers relating to the episode.

Bill Bentson, an expatriate American veteran, is the ultimate source for all things military during the war years and his co-operation is most appreciated. I would also like to thank Peter Dunn, Col Benson, Rupert Goodman, Bob Pieper, Bob Alford, Roger Marks, David Vincent, Ken Lee, Mike Longton, Cec Parsons, Doug and Fay Jones, Neville and Lynn Meyers and the late Sid Bromley as well as the staff of the John Oxley Library, the Queensland State Archives, the Australian National Archives and the Northern Territory Archives who allowed me access to their collections and resources.

Finally I would like to thank my family for their ongoing support and for their understanding in regard to my passion for the future of the past.