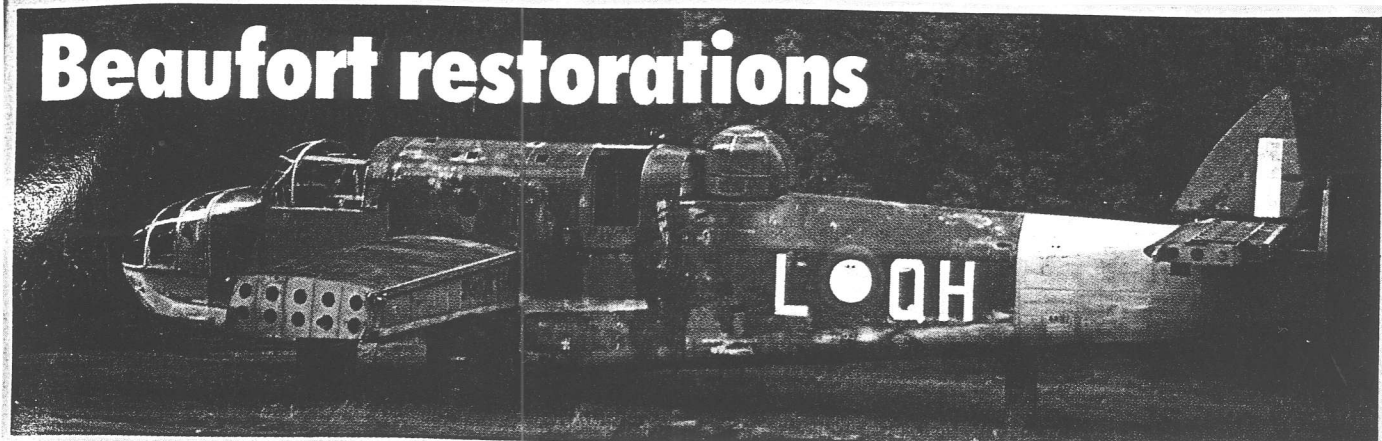


Beaufort restorations



FLYPAST DEC. 87

ONCE 'extinct' the Bristol Beaufort is alive and well in Australia. A9-557 'QH-L' (above) served with 100 Squadron RAAF and is now under restoration by Ian Whitney at his home. It was recovered in 1974 from Tadi, Papua New Guinea, in an operation funded by Yesterday's Air Force, who hung on to the best of three.



Beau repairs

Piecemeal plan: The Australian War Memorial has embarked on an ambitious project to bring the infamous Beaufort bomber back to life

By NICK RICHARDSON

THE LAST FLIGHT OF THE RAAF's Beaufort bomber A9-557 was a mission to destroy Japanese fuel and ammunition dumps at Elimi, near Wewak, on the north coast of Papua New Guinea. The bomber, from the RAAF's 100 Squadron, left its base at the Tadjai airstrip near Aitape, further west along the coast, on January 20, 1945, with a bellyful of bombs. It returned some hours later holed by anti-aircraft fire, and with a live bomb trapped in its bomb bay.

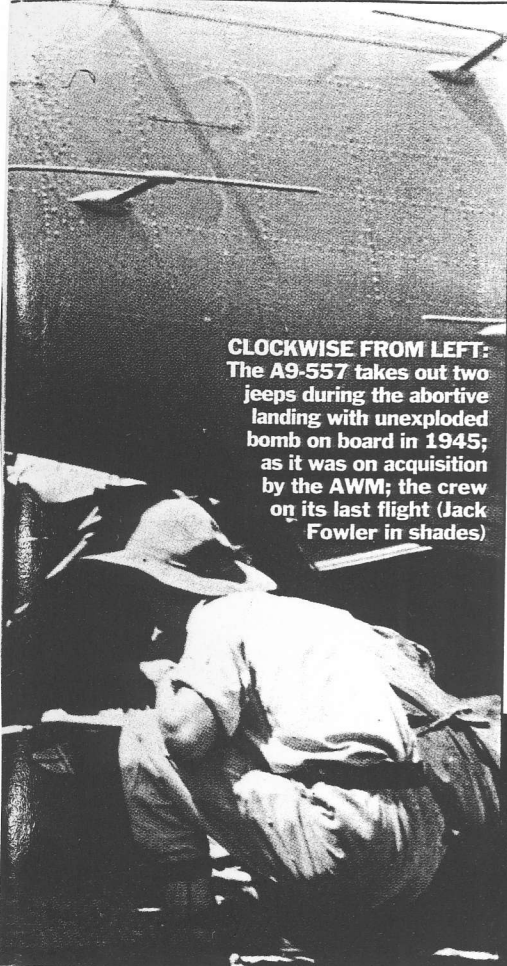
Jack Fowler, the pilot, made a series of sharp dives over the sea hoping to dislodge the bomb, but without success. Finally, he alerted the Tadjai control tower that he was going to land without lowering the plane's flaps, so as not to shake the bomb free on landing, elim-

inating the braking mechanism and guaranteeing a faster, more perilous descent. The Beaufort landed smoothly, but travelling at 80 knots it soon ran out of runway. Fowler slewed the plane to the left, taking the Beaufort onto an access road leading to a workshop where two jeeps were parked outside. When the aircraft's brakes failed, it careened over both jeeps and came to rest with the front fuselage hitting the workshop's overhanging roof. There was a momentary silence. The four-man crew waited for the bang; yet the bomb fell into one of the jeeps and somehow failed to explode. The crash killed a soldier in one of the jeeps, however, but the Beaufort crew walked away. The bomber itself was crushed, holed and disabled and later abandoned to the steamy PNG climate for almost 30 years.

Five years ago, the Australian War

Memorial bought the shell of A9-557 from a Melbourne collector. Now it is part of an ambitious restoration project. When finished, it will be the only complete one of its type anywhere. Slowly, and with painstaking diligence, War Memorial staff have assembled many of the 39,000 parts that made up the bomber in preparation for a non-flying version of the original. The Memorial aims to unveil the Beaufort at the opening of its Bradbury Aircraft Hall in Canberra at the end of 1999.

Drive: The project will cost about \$300,000, and the AWM Foundation has taken a key role in encouraging its financial support. The drive for funds will be helped by the distinctive industrial history of the Beaufort: more than 40 companies were originally involved in the bomber's construction, ranging from GMH and BHP to Dulux.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The A9-557 takes out two jeeps during the abortive landing with unexploded bomb on board in 1945; as it was on acquisition by the AWM; the crew on its last flight (Jack Fowler in shades)

tailplane were made in Newport, Victoria, while the three wing sections were made at Islington, in South Australia. The parts were then taken by rail to the Government Aircraft Factory in Mascot, Sydney, and Fishermen's Bend, Melbourne. The original plan was to supply some of the bombers to Britain's RAF which up until early 1942 had supported the bomber's production, but only a few were delivered to Britain before Australia became involved in the Pacific War. Between late 1941 and August 1944, 700 bombers were made. Their very production was a triumph of industry over expertise: 8500 workers – almost 3000 of them women – laboured to put them together. White estimates that only 20% of the Beaufort workforce had any previous aircraft production experience.

Despite such efforts, the Beaufort was not without its problems. About half of those produced were destroyed in service, usually as a result of mechanical

near Lae in PNG, almost 42 years to the day since it disappeared. RAAF Wing Commander Mike Sargent says it was on a transport mission between Milne Bay and Madang when it went missing. The weather was stormy and the bomber appears to have been off course when it crashed, but there is no evidence in this case that the Beaufort's history of mechanical flaws was responsible. The bodies of the seven crew and passengers will be given a full military funeral next month at the commonwealth war cemetery in Lae.

Amalgam: The Beaufort's decentralised construction may have worked to the Memorial's advantage in the restoration project. The final version of the restored Beaufort will be an amalgam of A9-557 and a couple of other models, which preceded and succeeded its construction in Melbourne. White has no manual to guide him. The original drawings have disappeared. There is a 1200-page repair book which is a closely-typed

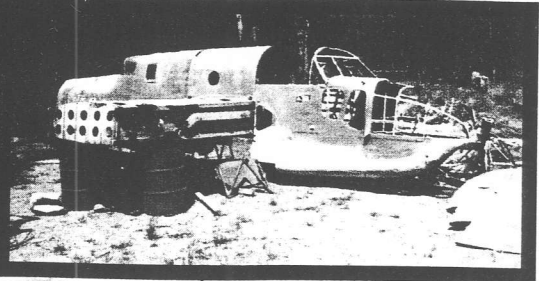
list of parts, but much of the work is being carried out by volunteers who know the Beaufort and can identify the correct parts, which have been warehoused at the Memorial's Treloar Building in Canberra.

Even so, the restoration is a massive job. Heartened at the success of its recent restoration of the de Havilland Mosquito, which it has described as "the most extensive and technically difficult conservation/restoration project" it has undertaken, the Memorial is now at work on a similar, though arguably less demanding restoration – a Wirraway, which was the first mass-produced plane designed and made in Australia. This particular Wirraway has a special claim to its place in history because, on Boxing Day 1942, it shot down a Japanese Zero – a David and Goliath contest given the Zero's clear superiority.

White is delighted with the Beaufort's progress. The A9-557 was delivered to the

RAAF in January 1944 and spent its whole operational life in PNG, flying 103 missions over seven months. Fowler flew it more than any other pilot – 33 times – and regarded it with affection, referring to it as his "beaut kite". Two months after their narrow escape at Tadjji, on March 13, 1945, he and his crew were killed in another Beaufort – A9-650 – when one of its bombs exploded prematurely. ■

The fund-raising co-ordinator for the Australian War Memorial Foundation is Mark Baker. tel (06) 243 4371



'THE MOST DISTURBING ASPECT OF THE BEAUFORT BOMBER'S HISTORY WAS THE FREQUENT UNEXPLAINED CRASHES. SOME DISAPPEARED AT SEA, OTHERS SPEARED INTO THE GROUND OR INEXPLICABLY BLEW UP'



John White, the curator of the Memorial's military technology, points out that building the bomber during World War II was a huge industrial effort, involving seven factories in three states and 600 subcontractors. Australia then had a small industrial base and few skilled workers, so the responsibilities were shared around in a model example of co-operative federalism.

The forward and tail end of the fuselage, the undercarriage and the outer casing of the engines were made at Chullora, in outer Sydney. The rear fuselage and

failure or production faults. But by far the most disturbing aspect of the bomber's history was the frequent unexplained crashes. Some disappeared at sea, others speared into the ground or inexplicably blew up. The Beaufort's reputation was so bad at one stage that a Victorian training base referred to the bombers as "Gippsland Hailstones". Several investigations were held, but improved maintenance meant that by late 1944 the Beaufort had become more reliable.

Last January the RAAF located another Beaufort, A9-106, in dense jungle