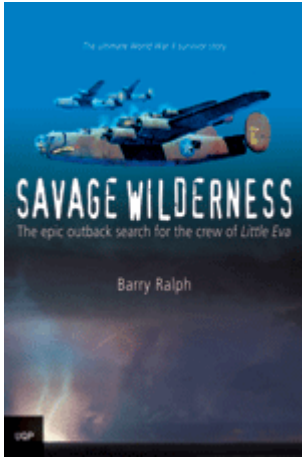


Savage wilderness: The epic outback search for the crew of Little Eva by Barry Ralph. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2004, pp. 209, A\$32.95, paperback, ISBN 0 7022 3443 5.



Savage Wilderness tells the true story of what happened to ten American airmen when their plane *Little Eva* crashed on the bush in northern Queensland's most isolated region. This story is based on police files and correspondence. Barry Ralph also made contact with veterans and historians and consulted press cuttings, photographs and official documents to give us a fully documented account. After giving biographical details on the crew and situating the events in the historical setting of the war between the Americans and the Japanese, Ralph explains how *Little Eva* and her crew left the base on 2 December 1942 to bomb Japanese supply ships. Caught in a tropical storm

on their way back, the men heard that engines of their plane go dead. Not knowing exactly where they were, the pilot ordered the crew to jump. Separated after the jump, the six members were divided into two groups. One group headed west and after a couple of weeks in the bush, thirsty, hungry and badly burnt they were rescued. Australian officials decided to organise a search for the remaining missing crew members in mid-December. The first priority was to find the crash site. Though the wrecked aircraft was easily sighted from the air, the ground expedition had to give up because of the thickness of the bush and bad weather conditions. While the plane was eventually located in mid-January 1943, evidence was found that four crew members were still alive and heading north.

Infested with flies and mosquitoes, the northern region was a hostile and threatening place where even Aboriginal people did not venture. The desperate search for food and water together with heat, insects, malnutrition and despair had already greatly affected the four men. After days and months of fighting for survival, three of them died. Though rescue missions were set up with the help of experienced bushmen, skilled Aborigines, civilians and armed forces personnel, the hostility of the savage wilderness of this region made it difficult for the rescuers to track the American airmen down. Believing that it was not possible to survive that long in this part of Australia, all rescue missions were abandoned. In May 1943, that is five months after the crash, an Aboriginal man found, by chance, the last survivor, Grady B. Gaston, physically and mentally shattered. Finding Grady Gaston alive up to two hundred miles from the crash site amounted to a miracle, but while the man 'may have survived the ordeal [he] did not survive the experience'.

This story has brought about national dismay and has become part of Australian folklore.

FANNY DUTHIL, 1 July 2005
Université du Havre