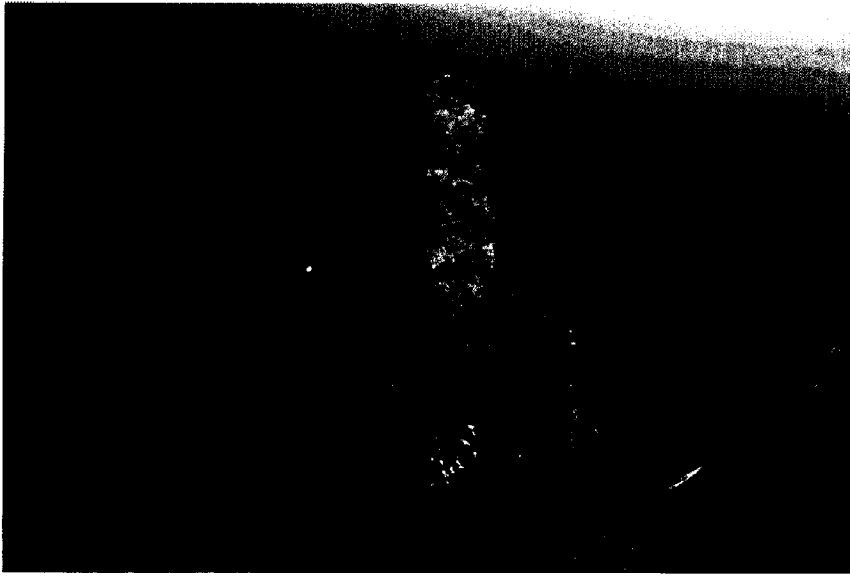


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## WWII bomber built in Tulsa rediscovered



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By MANNY GAMALLO World Staff Writer  
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**She was called The Tulsamerican, a World War II bomber that came to symbolize the patriotic fervor and spirit of Tulsa when she was built 66 years ago.**

By any measure, The Tulsamerican wasn't an ordinary bomber, but the last B-24 Liberator to come off the assembly line at the old Douglas aircraft plant in Tulsa.

As the last of her kind, her construction was a matter of pride for Douglas employees, who not only helped pay for her through the purchase of war bonds, but named her, painted her nose art, signed their names to the plane, and held raffles to see who would fly aboard her during test flights.

When she flew off to Europe for combat, she may have been gone, but certainly not forgotten, as Douglas' workers kept track of her missions. She was that special and dear to them.

She never lasted long in combat, however. Savaged by German fighters after a bombing run over German-occupied Poland, The Tulsamerican crashed into the Adriatic Sea on Dec. 17, 1944.

Her crash made front-page news in Tulsa - she was that well-known and dear to the city's heart.

Now, more than six decades later, The Tulsamerican is in the news again, after her wreckage was discovered off the coast of Croatia.

Kevin Gray of Tulsa, who has researched The Tulsamerican for nearly 10 years and was instrumental in helping find her, said the plane was positively identified by Croatian divers over the Memorial Day weekend.

In a way, he said, it was fitting that The Tulsamerican was found on Memorial Day weekend, "a time when we honor our fallen." Three of the plane's 10-man crew, including an Oklahoman, were killed in the crash.

The 32-year-old Gray said he began his research on the plane after spotting a picture of the plane in the Tulsa World in 2001.

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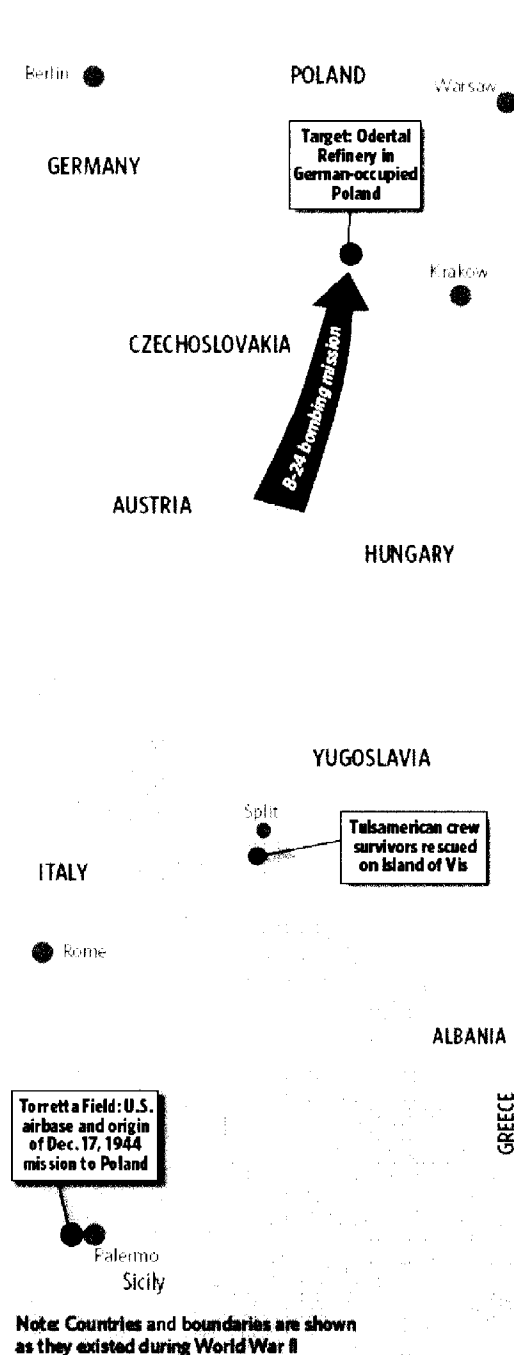
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In a way, he said, it was fitting that The Tulsamerican was found on Memorial Day weekend, "a time when we honor our fallen." Three of the plane's 10-man crew, including an Oklahoman, were killed in the crash.

The 32-year-old Gray said he began his research on the plane after spotting a picture of the plane in the Tulsa World in 2001.

He said the photo inspired him to learn all he could about The Tulsamerican, and since then he has collected a wealth of information about the plane and details about her construction in Tulsa.

In 2003, Gray's attention turned to finding the plane when he began e-mailing Croatian divers who were diving on American aircraft wreckage in the Adriatic Sea.



Last December, the wreckage of what was believed to be a B-24 was spotted in the water, and by springtime Croatian divers went down on the site, this time confirming that the wreckage was that of a B-24.

But a mystery unfolded as to whether the wreckage was that of The Tulsamerican.

Gray said the tail section of the wrecked plane was missing, and that section contained its identifying serial number.

Despite that, though, Gray felt sure it was The Tulsamerican, given its badly crumpled wreckage.

Gray said crew members reported the plane went into the water nose first, and then flipped over onto its back before submerging.

He said dive crews eventually hit paydirt when the crumpled cockpit was lifted so divers could get at the plane's data plate, which identified her as The Tulsamerican.

Val R. Miller of Oklahoma City, the last surviving crew member of The Tulsamerican, said he was "flabbergasted that anyone could find the plane."

Miller, who at 87 still practices law, said he was a substitute bombardier on that ill-fated flight. It was his first mission aboard The Tulsamerican, and it was to be his last mission of the entire war.

Miller said The Tulsamerican was returning from a bombing run on

Gray, said he would love to see a part of The Tulsamerican returned to Tulsa and take its place at the Tulsa Air and Space Museum, which currently has a small exhibit to The Tulsamerican.

Sources: Tulsa Air and Space Museum, Kim Jones, curator; "The Oklahoma Aviation Story," news reports.

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Val R. Miller wasn't the only Oklahoman aboard The Tulsamerican. Also flying with him were Tech. Sgt. Charles E. Priest of Tallant, a tiny community north of Barksdale, and Staff Sgt. John F. Toney of Muskogee.

Priest was among the three killed, while Toney survived, but died several years ago.

Although Miller said he never knew Priest and Toney well, he remembered meeting them a few months earlier for a photo opportunity around The Tulsamerican.

The plane's mystique, as it turned out, followed it from Tulsa to its base at Torretta, Italy.

The Tulsamerican was assigned to the 461st Bomb Group of the 765th Bomb Squadron and, after it arrived in Italy, some 50 Oklahoma air crews gathered around the plane for a photo shoot.

#### **Original Print Headline: A pride rediscovered**

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