

Seeking gold, divers find B-26 wreckage

"Widow maker" flew from Fort Myers base

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Thirty miles southwest of the Sanibel Lighthouse, an eerie tableau of silence, sea life and grim reminders of death spreads across the sea floor.

Spanish mackerel rocket through a ball of cigar minnows undulating above an intact aircraft wing in 70 feet of water; 1,350 feet away, goliath grouper loaf near two massive Pratt & Whitney Double Wasp radial engines; tomtates drift slowly around the badly bent propellers, one of which is still attached to its engine, the other lying on the sand a few feet away.

A thriving marine community is on this otherwise barren section of the Gulf of Mexico only because of the anomalous hardware, wreckage of a B-26 Marauder that crashed more than 60 years ago and took the lives of six young airmen.

The crash of a Marauder

At 6:10 p.m., Nov. 16, 1942, a B-26 took off on a training mission from the Fort Myers Army Air Base, now known as Page Field.

Aboard the aircraft were pilot Lt. Donald Vail of Macomb, Ill., co-pilot Lt. Fred Dees of Pender County, N.C., Lt. Louis Miles of Queens, N.Y., Sgt. William Kittiko of McKeesport, Pa., Sgt. Milton Newton of Davidson County, Tenn., and Sgt. Richard Treat of Essex County, Mass.

Fifty minutes after takeoff, the air base received a radio call from the B-26 saying the crew was bailing out — nothing more.

Search teams found the bodies of Dees and Vail on Nov. 20.

Army Air Forces documents indicate that a futile search for the rest of the crew lasted until Nov. 28.

"We got a telegram saying Bill was missing," said Abigail Kittiko Casey, Kittiko's sister. "Then we got telegrams saying they were searching. Then we got a death certificate."

Dreams of Cuban gold

For almost 50 years, the aircraft lay undisturbed on the sea floor.

Then, in 1990, charter guide Capt. Tim Wicburg stumbled onto the area.

"I was driving the boat and saw a big mark of fish: I fished there all summer," he said. "One day, I caught a piece of a plane. Then I started diving it and found the plane."

What Wicburg found were the top-turret twin .50-caliber machine guns, the aircraft's two engines and the wing of a B-26 — the fuselage was missing.

But when he saw the wreckage, Wicburg wasn't thinking World War II — he'd heard stories about a more recent B-26 crash in the Gulf.

Before fleeing Cuba on Jan. 1, 1959, the stories go, Cuban dictator Fulgencia Batista raided the national treasury and loaded the loot onto four B-26s; the planes took off for Tampa while Batista fled to the



Captain Jon "Hammerhead" Hazelbaker of Fort Myers inspects the sponge- and coral-encrusted propeller and engine wreckage of a World War II B-26 Marauder, some 30 miles southwest of Sanibel Island, in water 70 feet deep. (Valerie Roche/news-press.com)

B-26 Marauder discovered

On Nov. 16, 1942, a B-26 Marauder took off from Fort Myers Army Air Base on a training mission and crashed into the Gulf of Mexico.



Martin B-26 Marauder



Type: Bomber
Weight: 38,200 lbs.
Powerplant:
2 Pratt and Whitney R-2800-43 2,000 hp
Maximum speed: 282 mph
Maximum Range: 2,850 miles

SOURCE: UNITED STATES ARMY AIR FORCE DOCUMENTS

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Dominican Republic.

Only three of the B-26s reached Tampa; the fourth crashed into the Gulf.

"Supposedly the plane that was lost had \$3 billion on it, supposedly in gold," Wicburg said.

"Naturally, I wanted to find out if this was the Batista plane. I was hoping. I could have used \$3 billion. That'll keep a man digging."

Wicburg built an airlift — a kind of underwater vacuum for digging in sand — and went to work, but he never found any Batista gold.

Enter Tom O'Brien, who owns a security business in Chicago and often hired Wicburg while on vacation in Lee County.

"After four years, Tim started talking to me," O'Brien said. "He said he knew where some gold was. I thought, 'Yeah, dude, you just want to move money from my pocket to your pocket.' But he was adamant about it, and I finally said, 'OK, I'll get some people together.'"

Along with commercial diving consultant Capt. Jon "Hammerhead" Hazelbaker and fabricator Brian Ulman, O'Brien and Wicburg formed TBT&J Adventure Vacations and made plans to search the site.

They also contacted Pat Clyne, chief videographer for world-famous treasure hunter Mel Fisher and founder of Paradigm Video Productions, to record the team's efforts for a possible documentary.

In May, TBT&J put together a fleet of seven boats and 13 divers; the team spent a week at the site looking for Batista's treasure.

They found no gold, but they did find the aircraft's dashboard and radio call tag, on which was inscribed the plane's serial number, 117966.

The serial number could determine whether the plane on the sea floor was Batista's lost B-26, so the team sent it to Ted Darcy of WFI Research Group, whose databases contain records of lost World War II aircraft.

"We were in limbo for several weeks," Hazelbaker said. "When it came back that it was a World War II plane, after all this effort, we were in disbelief. We had no information about an MIA plane in the Gulf. It makes you wonder what the government is doing with other MIAs."

Seeking vindication

With no hope of finding Cuban gold, TBT&J shut down operations.

But something else caught their attention.

On the Army Air Forces' accident report is the conclusion: "Pilot charged with accident"; in other words, Vail caused the aircraft to crash.

But was the crash really the result of pilot error?

The history of the model aircraft Vail was flying — B-26B3 — raised doubts.

In short, the B-26B3 was notoriously difficult to fly and had design flaws that caused numerous crashes.

Because of its high accident rate on training flights, the aircraft got the nickname "widow maker" and "flying prostitute" (a reference to its small wings, which provided no visible means of support).

At McDill Field in Tampa, the adage among B-26 pilots was "One a day in Tampa Bay."

Vail's nephew, Rod McCormick of Essex, Vt., said his own father was training to be a B-26 pilot during the war but became an aircraft mechanic because the plane was so dangerous.

"I have a letter from my Uncle Donald to my mother describing how the navigation system in night flying would get you totally turned around," McCormick said. "About a month before the crash, on a night flight, he ended up hundreds of miles in the wrong direction. He was totally disoriented because the night navigational system was lousy. He ended up almost out of fuel and landed in North Carolina."

The idea that the military had blamed Vail for the crash when it might have been caused by the aircraft itself didn't sit well with the TBT&J team.

In an attempt to get to the truth, they contacted Kevin McGregor, a retired Delta and Air Force Reserve pilot who found the wreckage of Northwest Flight 4422, which crashed on Mt. Sanford in Alaska in 1948, and Northwest Flight 2501, which crashed into Lake Michigan in 1950.

McGregor watched Clyne's video of the B-26 crash site and showed it to National Transportation Safety Board investigators.

"It's very difficult to see anything forensically, but one thing's for certain: The aircraft hit the water at

a high speed," McGregor said. "This is a tremendous crash as far as violence: Both engines were separated from the wing. It's not like a slow-speed stall crash. If that were the case, the engines would still be on the wings."

The fact that the engines and wing are 1,350 feet apart suggests that the Marauder hit the water at a low angle, though storms might have moved the wing (the engines are heavy enough to remain in one place).

"Because of the torsional bending of the propeller still attached to the engine, it looks like that one had power, though we don't know how much," McGregor said. "So, OK, they had one engine running, but we don't know about the other one."

Having experts look at video of the crash site is only the first step in finding why the plane crashed, McGregor said.

"My job is to clear the way for people who are forensically adept at this kind of investigation," he said. "To say it was pilot error at this point is not appropriately backed up. It would be nice to find the real reason for the crash. We'll endeavor to do that, but it won't be a cakewalk. It will take time."

NTSB investigators might some day raise one of the propellers for analysis and return it to the site, McGregor said.

Better than gold

Although TBT&J didn't find Batista's gold, they found something more important, said Clyne, who helped Mel Fisher salvage more than \$400 million in treasure from the 17th-century Spanish galleon Senora Nuestra de Atocha.

"As in most treasure hunts, they will find that the real treasure is in the journey," Clyne said. "Their journey took them to treasures that gold and silver could never replace: It's treasures of the soul. Now, that's real treasure, and it can never be stolen from them."

From the Army Air Forces Report of Aircraft Accident, Jan. 9, 1943:

Nov. 18: Report of overdue aircraft.

Vail, Donald, E, 2nd Lt, Pilot:

Dees, Fred, NMI, Jr, 2nd Lt, copilot:

Treat, Richard, NMI, staff sergeant:

Newton, Milton, H, staff sergeant:

Kittiko, William (sic), G, staff sergeant.

B-26B-3, 4117966.

Departed AAB Forty (sic) Myers Florida 13:10 November 16, 1942. Local performance flight.

Nov. 18: Search of complete land and sea area initiated this am. All available Army and Navy air stations are assisting in search. Reports of parachute or parachutes seen in vicinity south of Fort Myers and also approximately twenty five miles south of Clewiston have not been confirmed. Extensive gulf patrol being contemplated for November eighteen.

Nov. 21: Two crew members of subject air craft found this date. Donald E. Vail, 2nd Lt. pilot; Fred NMI Dees, 2nd Lt. co pilot. Both were dead. Search for remainder of crew continuing.

Nov. 23: Civil Air Patrol, Coast Guard and 336 BG (336 Bomb Group) Crash Boat continued search of area. One oil slick reported and marked. Searching temporarily suspended awaiting Navy locator. Civil Air Patrol covering area in routine flights.

Nov. 24: Search of the general area in which two crew members were found 20 Nov was continued today. Civil Air Patrol, Coast Guard and 336 BG crash boat assisted in search. CAP (civil air patrol) reported seeing parachute but boats were unable to locate same.

Nov. 24: Unable to obtain services of Navy locator this date. Coast Guard contemplating grappling search.

Nov. 25: Coast Guard feels grappling hooks useless in such a large area. Contemplate search area of oil slick.

Nov. 26: Coast Guard search negative. Continuing search.

Nov. 27, 1942: Coast guard located object that may be missing plane. Diver sent to investigate

Nov. 28, 1942: Diver making necessary preparations to begin search.

From Report of Search, Dec. 16, 1942:

It is believed that the crew or part of the crew of the aircraft had made a successful parachute jump. This decision was reached because of the good condition of the bodies which were found, and the CAP (Civil Air Patrol) report mentioned above under Thursday, November 19, 1942.

The duration of the flight was probably about 55 minutes. The take off as indicated above was made at 1810 E.W.T. Lieutenant Dees' watch was stopped at 1905 E.W.T. It is not considered possible for the watch to have run

twelve hours after contact with the water.

It is not considered probable that the pilot could have been lost in 55 minutes, especially with approximately eight (8) hours of fuel aboard.



Captain Jon "Hammerhead" Hazelbaker of Fort Myers, Fl. inspects the sponge and coral encrusted propellor and engine wreckage of a WWII B-26 Marauder, 26 miles southwest of Sanibel Island, 72 feet deep.



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Captain Jon "Hammerhead" Hazelbaker of Fort Myers, Fl. inspects one of the propellers of the wreckage of a WWII B-26 Marauder, 26 miles southwest of Sanibel Island, 72 feet deep.



Captain Tim Wicburg, who discovered the wreck in 1990 while fishing, measures the wingspan of the WWII B-26 Marauder that sits 72 feet deep, 26 miles southwest of Sanibel Island in the Gulf of Mexico.



Detail of the wing wreckage of the WWII B-26 Marauder that sits 72 feet deep, 26 miles southwest of Sanibel Island in the Gulf of Mexico.



Identification tags salvaged from the wreckage of the WWII B-26 Marauder, including the radio call ID, front, which was used to identify the plane.