

Eternal Reefs for the Crew of the B-26 Bomber

June 2, 2016



Memorial Plaque with Flag

This past Monday as the country celebrated Memorial Day and took time to remember and reflect on our fallen soldiers, the Fort Myers Beach VFW held a ceremony to pay honor to the crew of a Marauder B-26 Bomber who went missing in 1942. On a routine practice flight from Army Air Base Fort Myers (today's Page Field), pilot Lt. Donald Vail, co-pilot Lt. Fred Dees, and crew: Lt. Louis Miles, Sgt. William Kittiko, Sgt. Milton Newton, and Sgt. Richard Treat disappeared. The Army Air Force reported the aircraft as "overdue" and a search was conducted by all available Army and Navy air stations assisting. Three days later Lt. Vail and Lt. Dees bodies were found; the rest of the crew was never recovered; neither was the aircraft.

Fast forward to 1990 when Tom O'Brien, a treasure hunter in search of gold believed to be offshore from the Castro Revolution (1953-1959) caught a piece of the plane about 40 miles offshore. It was not until 2008 that the aircraft was officially identified as the lost Bomber of 1942. O'Brien and his crew then turned their attention to rescue the long forgotten aircraft and have the official report of "pilot charged with accident" to a mechanical failure, which was common to B-26's during that time.

The Ceremony Begins

The parking lot of the VFW filled quickly with nearly 70 people, veterans and citizens ready to pay a long over due 'thank you' to the 1942 crew of the B-26 Bomber. A seven person marching unit moved across the lot and stood at attention awaiting orders to fire a seven gun salute. Following them was a marching band of drums and bagpipes.



Tim Robbins, WWII Vet and VFW member placing the flag



The 6 reefs with VFW members and onlookers

The crowd who gathered around the six eternal reefs was then led in prayer. George Frankel had the pleasure of introducing Tim Robbins, a WWII veteran, to the crowd. As Robbins stood from his chair, he was met with an enthusiastic round of applause. He had the honor and privilege of accepting and placing the American flag on the reef in which a plaque was affixed that read in part, "This crew was aboard the first of eight B-26's from the 480th Bomb Squadron, 336th Bomb Group, lost in training accidents between 11/16/1942 and 11/15/1943. In all, 47 airmen died. Please respect this site for it is the resting place of four airmen and is sacred ground."

Frankel then closed the ceremony by thanking all who had attended. The marching drummers and bagpipers then followed the seven person brigade out of the parking lot and most of the spectators headed back indoors.

Planning The Ceremony

Captain Jon Hazelbaker of Hammerhead Marine Services contacted Frankel about putting together a memorial service for the crewmen. Frankel recalled that Hazelbaker asked about making a memorial for the flight. "The reality was," said Frankel, "four of the crew have never been recognized. So, Jon and I decided something needed to be done on a bigger scale."

Shortly after, they met with many veterans at the VFW, who were very enthusiastic about the idea. Frankel said the entire planning process was done between the veterans of the VFW, the Underwater Historical Explorations, and Eternal Reefs, and "it was an absolute pleasure," he said.

Although the wreckage of the aircraft was identified in 2008, it took a while to identify it as the actual missing B-26 Bomber from 1942. After that, a collective effort was made to locate any descendants of all six servicemen. Unfortunately four of the crewman's lineage led to dead ends. No family could be located for Lt. Miles, Sgt. Kittiko, Sgt. Newton or Sgt. Treat.



Captain Tim Wicburg (UHE discovered wreck site), Jake Wickburg (diver for UHE), Tom O'Brien, (UHE, Expedition Organizer), Tracy Miller, (UHE-Head of Research), Captain Jon Hazelbaker (UHE-Managed Search, Diving and Salvage Operations), Larry Beggs (President of Reef Innovations, Inc).

The Reefs



VFW member standing at one of the reefs

When it came to deciding on which reefs to go with, Frankel shared that the reefs used for this memorial “work with Mother Nature.” The reefs are constructed out of a “VH neutral concrete, with most of the weight at the bottom, so the reefs will be very stable.”

The reefs are scheduled to be placed at the site where the wreckage was discovered during the first week of June, with Scuba Nation TV being on location to film the event for a future episode.

Perhaps the next time you’re walking along the beach, give a glance out over the water and remember that there are four service men out there who never made it home. May we thank them and may they rest in peace.

TM. Jacobs

Photos by T.M. Jacobs

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