

ARCHIVE

Treasure hunt turns mystery to history at SW Fla. museum

By **Kevin Lollar** news-press.com

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With a little imagination, a visitor to the Southwest Florida Museum of History can feel the ghosts of six American airmen hovering above the twisted right propeller of their B-26 Marauder.

For 66 years, the prop lay on the floor of the Gulf of Mexico, 30 miles south of the Sanibel Lighthouse.

Then, last summer, an organization known as TBT&J Adventure Vacations raised the prop and other parts of the plane and donated them to the museum, which will host a multimedia event tonight detailing the history of the Marauder the recovery efforts.

"This is actual history," museum general manager Matt Johnson said. "History is not a bunch of names and dates that you memorized in high school and then forgot. Names and dates don't mean anything. History is causes and effects and the people involved. The story we're telling here is the story of men who died with the goal of protecting the United States."

That story is a tale of wartime mystery, a legendary treasure and some unexpected twists.

In the early evening of Nov. 16, 1942, six airmen boarded a B-26 at Fort Myers Army Air Base, now known as Page Field, for a training mission.

At 7 p.m., 50 minutes after takeoff, the air base received a radio call from the B-26 saying the crew was bailing out - then silence.

Search teams recovered the bodies of pilot Lt. Donald Vail of Macomb, Ill., and co-pilot Lt. Fred Dees of Pender County, N.C.

The rest of the crew - Sgt. William Kittiko of McKeesport, Pa., Sgt. Milton Newton of Davidson County, Tenn., Sgt. Richard Treat of Essex County, Mass, and Lt. Louis Miles of Queens, N.Y. - were never found.

Jump ahead 48 years, to 1990: Fishing guide Capt. Tim Wicburg found wreckage of a B-26 in the Gulf and thought it was a plane that crashed after smuggling billions of dollars out of Cuba on Jan. 1, 1959, the day Fidel Castro took power.

Wicburg, commercial diving consultant Capt. Jon "Hammerhead" Hazelbaker, fabricator Brian Ulman, and Tom O'Brien, who owns a security business in Chicago, formed TBT&J and spent a week in May diving the wreckage - Pat Clyne of Paradigm Productions in Key West, was on board to make a documentary of the search.

They didn't find any treasure; but they did find the plane's serial number, which identified it as a B-26 that crashed Nov. 16, 1942.

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With treasure out of the picture, TBT&J got interested in the history of their B-26 and obtained the official accident report, on which was typed "Pilot charged with accident."

TBT&J thought the military blamed the crash on pilot Vail, but this model of the B-26 was infamous for crashing due to mechanical failure, so the team decided to investigate and possibly exonerate Vail.

They enlisted the help of aircraft crash expert Kevin McGregor, who determined that the catastrophic failure of the right propeller rather than pilot error caused the crash.

"This story has the makings of a best seller," museum spokeswoman Helen Finnegan said. "It starts with a treasure hunt. Then there's the forensics aspect, trying to right a wrong. Then there's the human aspect of the families who can finally have closure. If you tried to script this story, you couldn't do it."

TBT&J has formed a nonprofit organization called Underwater Historical Explorations to raise money for future projects and to finance completion of Clyne's documentary.

"After two years working on this and meeting all the different people and going through all the changes, to finally get the project in the museum is a once-in-a-lifetime thing for all of us," O'Brien said. "I hope people see this and realize that there is more history to be found and more to be put to rest: We're already working on three other sites."

Mark Casey, vice president and news director of KPNX-TV in Phoenix, is also happy that wreckage from the B-26 will be on display at the museum: His uncle was Sgt. William Kittiko.

"I think it's great that people will get the opportunity to see this," Casey said. "This is close-up, human drama. I'm proud of my uncle. I'm proud of the crew

"And I'm proud of Tom, Jon, Tim and Brian. There's an adventure aspect to what those guys did. They recovered the artifacts, and they unraveled a mystery."