

ARCHIVE

Investigation of 1942 crash off B-26 Marauder off Sanibel Island begins in earnest

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

Published 3:49 p.m. ET May 13, 2018 | Updated 3:49 p.m. ET May 13, 2018

The story originally appeared in The News-Press, Oct. 31, 2008

POLK CITY - For 66 years after a B-26 Marauder went down in the Gulf of Mexico 30 miles off Lee County, the cause of the crash has been officially listed as unknown.

But recent evidence from the aircraft itself and memories of World War II airmen are leading to a revision of the record.

This week, a team investigating the crash met with members of the B-26 Marauder Historical Society at the Fantasy of Flight aviation museum, hoping to gather clues.

A crash in the Gulf

At 6:10 p.m., Nov. 16, 1942, a B-26 took off from Fort Myers Army Air Base, now known as Page Field. Pilot Lt. Donald Vail of Macomb, Ill., had 144 hours' flight time in B-26s; the aircraft had flown 95.6 hours.

Fifty-five minutes later, the air base received a radio call from the B-26 saying the six-man crew were bailing out.

Search teams found the bodies of Vail and co-pilot Lt. Fred Dees of Pender County, N.C., on Nov. 20. Neither the rest of the crew nor, for many years, the plane, were found.

"It was night; there was 3,500-foot overcast; they were 30 miles out," Delta Air Lines pilot Kevin McGregor, an aircraft crash specialist, told the historical society. "It was a brand-new plane with a brand-new pilot. Something happened to make the pilot order a bail-out."

Finding the plane

In 1990, fishing guide Tim Wicburg discovered wreckage of a B-26 in the Gulf and thought it was a plane that had crashed after smuggling billions of dollars out of Cuba the day Fidel Castro took power.

Along with Tom O'Brien of Chicago, commercial diving consultant Capt. Jon "Hammerhead" Hazelbaker, and fabricator Brian Ulman, Wicburg formed TBT&J Adventure Vacations and set out in May to find the Cuban treasure.

Instead of gold, TBT&J divers found the aircraft's serial number, which identified it as a B-26 that crashed Nov. 16, 1942.

TBT&J obtained the official accident report, on which was typed, "Pilot charged with accident," which the team took to mean that the Army Air Forces blamed Vail for the crash.

More: Memorial Day tribute honors treasures of the soul

The B-26 was an early model of the Marauder and notorious for crashing from mechanical failure, so the team decided to investigate and possibly exonerate the pilot - they found out later that the official cause of the crash was unknown.

Gathering evidence

Pat Clyne of Paradigm Productions in Key West shot video of the wreckage in May and sent it to McGregor, who was intrigued by what he saw.

On Sept. 17, McGregor, Clyne and TBT&J members dove the wreck site.

Debris was scattered over a quarter mile; the right wing was badly damaged (the left wing was not); the right propeller was not attached to the engine (left propeller and engine were intact). This all indicated that the plane crashed at a shallow angle, at high speed, with the right wing hitting the water first.

McGregor figured the key to the crash was the right propeller, so the divers raised it and sent it to propeller expert Paul Gaither in Opa-Locka.

Flat pitch

Marauders used variable-pitch Curtis props; the pilot can change the angle, or pitch, of the blades relative to the airflow.

Sometimes, though, the props changed angle on their own, resulting in flat pitch with the blades facing flat into the airflow.

Gaither determined that the pitch on the Marauder's right prop was flat.

"Somehow, they lost control of the pitch in flight," McGregor said. "If you can't get out of a flat pitch, you lose control of the aircraft. It's like putting out a drogue chute. I don't think a plane is flyable with a flat pitch."

Marauder veterans said that Curtis props tended to malfunction on takeoff rather than in flight, but Edmond Clemenzi, 91, who flew 72 missions as a B-26 bombardier, said the pitch probably changed in flight when a ground wire from the prop to the motor that controls pitch vibrated loose.

"That happened once when we were flying out of Lakeland over the Gulf in 1942," Clemenzi said. "The pilot said to bail out, and I said, 'B.S.' There was a switch that overrode the automatic switch, and that fixed it. The pilots should have known it, but they didn't because they didn't have the hours."

McGregor said the loose-wire theory was a possibility.

Gaither made a second discovery. Large pieces were missing from the inside of three of the right prop's four blades: The blades had crashed into the engine cowling, either while the plane was still in flight or as it hit the water.

Hazebaker believed that the prop moved backward while the plane was in the air, causing the blades to slam repeatedly into the engine.

Next steps

TBT&J is now forming a non-profit organization called Underwater Historical Explorations to raise money for future projects and to finance the completion of a documentary on the B-26 Marauder.

Clyne, who worked for treasure hunter Mel Fisher for more than 30 years, has shot 18 hours of video and will soon begin post-production.

"I started this to make money, and I got sucked in, like Mel sucked me in 35 years ago," Clyne said. "I'm not going to get rich in money on this, but if I stick with these guys, I'll be rich in other ways. This is a great story. It has legs, and it sure beats anything on the Food Network."