

Tuesday, March 2, 1999

A 1944 Mystery is Solved



By Gregg K. Kakesako, Star-Bulletin

Lt. Col. Jeffrey Buchanan clears undergrowth to uncover part of the wreckage of a Hellcat fighter plane that crashed into the Koolaus in 1944.

Finding Ensign Warnke

**A team has recovered his
crashed F-6F Hellcat 55 years
after he disappeared**

By Gregg K. Kakesako
Star-Bulletin



At 7:55 a.m. June 15, 1944, Navy Ensign Harry Warnke took off from Barbers Point Naval Air Station in an F-6F Hellcat fighter on a routine training flight.

Warnke, 23, who had enlisted in the Navy after attending college in his hometown of Gary, Ind., never completed the mission.

For years Warnke's family believed he had crashed into the Pacific Ocean, and a headstone was erected over an empty grave at the family plot in Westville, a small farming community in northern Indiana.



By Gregg K. Kakesako, Star-Bulletin
The recovery team sets out, 2,600 feet up.

After 55 years, a nine-member team from Camp Smith's Joint Task Force Full Accounting last week recovered the wreck of his Hellcat in a deep ravine on the Kaneohe side of the Koolaus, and attempts are under way to try to find his remains.

"It's sort of a final thing if they find him," said Warnke's sister, Myrtle Tice, of Green Valley, Ariz.

"If they recover anything, I would be willing to pay to have him shipped here," she told the Star-Bulletin in a phone interview. "My father put up a headstone for him in Westville. That's where his family is from and that is where he retired to farm."



When Warnke left Barbers Point in his single-seat fighter, all of the peaks of the Koolaus were covered by moderate overcast.

Warnke was part of an eight-plane flight that had qualified several days earlier in daylight carrier landings aboard the USS Benjamin Franklin. Warnke's squadron -- the Fighting Twenty -- was composed of 36 Hellcats.

Their mission that morning in June 55 years ago was to make dive-bombing and rocket

runs on a truck at Kapaho Point, just south of what was then Kaneohe Naval Air Station.

Warnke had made four successful dives.

After the fourth run, he failed to make a rendezvous with his flight leader, Lt. J.D. Petersen, and was reported missing.

Two days later, a shoe was found on a Koolau mountaintop. The only thing visible then, according to one witness who hiked to the crash site, was a "piece of the tail." The pilot's remains were believed to have been buried near the wreckage, but the site was never marked.

That is until 1994, when the Army Central Identification Laboratory was asked by Sen. John McCain to recover Warnke's remains.

Tice, 79, said she wrote to McCain only because she wanted to know what happened to her brother.

"All my mother knew was what the Navy had told her and that was the plane went into the sea."

It was McCain's office that finally set the record straight nearly five years ago.



On Feb. 11 a team from Joint Task Force Full Accounting, on a training mission and based on data from the Army Central Identification Lab, spotted the wreckage on the rugged slopes of the Koolaus far above the H-3 freeway.

Tice has made several trips to Hawaii. One of the trips was to ensure that her brother's name is enshrined on the walls of the National Cemetery of the Pacific.

Although she has never met McCain, she is grateful that the Arizona senator was willing to take up her case.

"I am going to have to write to him," she said shortly after a military casualty officer informed her of the find.



The F6-F Hellcat

- **First flew:** June 1942
- **Total kills in WWII:** 5,156 aircraft
- **Maximum speed:** 380 mph
- **Length:** 33 feet
- **Wingspan:** 42 feet
- **Range:** 945 miles
- **Armament:** Six .50-caliber machine guns, 3,000 pounds of bombs or rockets



By Gregg K. Kakesako, Star-Bulletin

Maj. Ken Royalty, left, examines a part of the wreckage with Capt. Donald Hinton. The part had inscribed on it "F-6F," identifying the plane as the lost Hellcat. In the background is part of a wing.

From the Koolaus to Southeast Asia

The mission: Account for the missing and bring closure to families

By Gregg K. Kakesako
Star-Bulletin



Surveying a remote crash site for a World War II fighter more than 2,600 feet in the Koolaus is a far cry from operating in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

But nine members of Joint Task-Force Full Accounting took on the assignment as real-world training to prepare themselves to investigate and help recover remains of servicemen killed in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

The 160-member, multi-service Pacific Command Joint Task Force operation was created to account for U.S. servicemen killed in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. In 1973 at the close of the Vietnam War, 2,583 servicemen were missing. Since then that figure has been trimmed to 2,069.

Air Force Maj. Joe Davis, task force spokesman, said its mission is achieve the fullest accounting of Americans missing from the Southeast Asia war.

Numerous unsuccessful attempts had been made since 1994 to try to pinpoint the crash site of Navy Ensign Harry Warnke, who died when his Hellcat fighter smashed into the slopes of the Koolaus during a training mission more than a half-century ago.

As Army Sgt. 1st Class Patrick Franco, who has made 20 survey and recovery trips to Vietnam, pointed out after last week's operation: "It's been more than 50 years and it looks like the right case. This will help to bring closure to the family, and that is what I want in this case and all the others."



As with a Southeast Asia recovery mission, Army Maj. Ken Royalty, task force team leader, even interviewed witnesses such as Rear Adm. F.E. Bakutis, who in 1944 was commander of Fighting Squadron 20 -- Warnke's unit.

"The guy was pretty sharp," said Royalty, referring to the 86-year-old retired Navy officer. "He was dead on in pinpointing the location."

Bakutis, who holds the Navy Cross and during the Pacific War would become a double Navy ace by downing 12 Japanese fighters, had hiked into the Koolaus and reported that the plane had buried itself all the way to the tail. Only two feet of the tail was visible.

Royalty also credited previous efforts by the Army Central Identification Lab, which made last week's task easier.

"We relied on their documentation and earlier searches," Royalty said.

The first attempt by the task force team to reach the site by foot last Monday had to be called after 30 minutes since the helicopter landing zone on the ridge overlooking the H-3 freeway was covered with heavy clouds and rain.

Two days later the team would try again. This time only a slight early-morning haze greeted 25th Division UH-60 Black Hawk pilot Chief Warrant Officer Dan Baum. Just a few clouds topped the peaks of the Koolaus.

Below the Army helicopter, early-morning commuters lined up along the H-2 and H-3 freeways. A gentle crosswind buffeted the Black Hawk as Baum approached the summit.

Nearly 1,000 feet to the east lay the Hellcat crash site. But it would take nearly an hour of hiking along the muddy, sparsely vegetated -- but treacherous and rugged -- ridge line of the Koolaus before the team would reach the site located in a deep ravine.

The debris from Warnke's Hellcat was scattered on a slope, which Royalty estimated to be at an angle of at least 75 degrees. The first signs of the wreck were found about 500 feet from the summit. Most of the wreck was heavily embedded in the slope. The team estimated the crash site extended over an area 330 feet by 83 feet.

Army Sgt. 1st Class Patrick Franco, a linguist with the team, said the site survey was conducted exactly the way it would have been in Southeast Asia.

It was up to Army Sgt. 1st Class Al Iversen, who has made 18 Southeast Asia survey and recovery trips, to first determine the exact location by taking and recording ground position satellite readings.

The team lined up above the wreck and worked its way down using machetes to clear away the undergrowth. Small blue pin flags were used to mark various pieces of the wreck.

Repeatedly, team leader Royalty would remind his crew: "Boys, we are looking for pieces with numbers. I need part numbers. No one can argue with that."

Franco said: "The No. 1 priority would be to uncover any remains, personal effects, such as dog tags or wallets or ID cards. Then we would look for items from the wreck such as a helmet or an oxygen hose."

It would be his job to sketch a map of the area. Then all of the recovered parts would be photographed, while Royalty and Air Force Master Sgt. Hung M. Nguyen would videotape the area, pointing out key features and items recovered.

"Excavation would be left to CILHI (Central Identification Laboratory)," Royalty said.

Air Force Capt. Donald Hinton, Joint Task Force air operations officer, said it looked like the pilot approached the Koolaus from Kaneohe.

"It seems that it may have yanked on the stick, just barely clearly a ridge and ended up upside down," Hinton said.

The team was able to recover two propeller blades -- one that still had a legible decal, "Hamilton Standard Propellers. East Hartford, Connecticut."

Each blade weighed at least 90 pounds. Both were carried from the site by Marine Maj. Mike Johnson and Army Lt. Col. Jeffrey Buchanan for further study.

Two other pieces of the wreckage bore the numbers "82" -- Warnke's aircraft number. Also recovered was a part with F6-F inscribed, noting the type of aircraft -- a Hellcat; large pieces of the wing and two tires.

Although no remains were uncovered, Royalty was optimistic that when a team from the Central Identification Lab excavated the area it would be able to recover something.

"I won't rule it out," said Royalty. "I remember one site in Vietnam. You couldn't tell a plane had crashed there, but they were able to get out 90 pieces of bone fragments."



Joint Task Force Full Accounting

- **Established:** Jan. 23, 1992
- **Mission:** Account for the 2,267 servicemen still missing in Southeast Asia from the Vietnam War
- **Staff:** 160 linguists, analysts and other specialities from all military services
- **Headquarters:** Camp Smith
- **Operations:** 2,870 investigations, 477 recovery operations, repatriation of 465 sets of remains
- **Search areas:** Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia

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Sunday, February 15, 2004

Sister hopes to retrieve remains from Koolaus

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Myrtle Tice's brother crashed a Navy plane nearly 60 years ago

By Gregg K. Kakesako
gkakesako@starbulletin.com

Myrtle Tice almost gave up hope that the remains of her brother, a World War II Navy aviator who crashed into the Koolaus nearly 60 years ago, would ever be recovered.

"I really hope that someday something could be done," said Tice, who will be 84 next month. "I am getting older."

The Arizona native wonders if any remains of her brother, Ensign Harry Warnke, are recoverable after decades being buried in the mud on the slopes of the rugged Koolau peak.

However, if all goes as planned, a team from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command late next year will fly to the crash site 2,600 feet in a deep ravine in the Koolaus near Kawaipoo peak overlooking the H-3 freeway to begin excavation operations.

It was Tice who sought the help of her senator, Arizona Republican John McCain, 11 years ago to prod the military in renewing the search for her brother's remains after she was told that a civilian had located the wreckage.

On Feb. 11, 1999, the Star-Bulletin accompanied a nine-member Joint Task Force Full-Accounting team that found the wreck of Warnke's Hellcat in a steep ravine. The debris was scattered on a 65- to 70-degree slope. The crash site covered an area estimated to be 330 feet by 82 feet.

After landing on one of the Koolau peaks, it still took the recovery team another 45 minutes to hike along the ridge to the crash site. At times mist settled over the recovery team as it walked on the ridge line facing sheer drops on both sides.

Two 90-pound propeller blades were found and carried out. Two other pieces of the wreckage bore the number "82," Warnke's aircraft number. Also recovered was a part with "F6F" inscribed, noting the type of aircraft -- a Hellcat; large pieces of the wing and two tires.

No attempt was made to dig for remains. The team mapped the area, noting where the wreckage had been found.

On June 15, 1944, Warnke, then 23, took off from what was then Barbers Point Naval Air Station in a single-seater F6F Hellcat fighter. Warnke, who had enlisted after attending college in Gary, Ind., was part of an eight-plane flight that had already qualified for daylight carrier landings on the USS Benjamin Franklin.

The training mission of eight single-seat fighters was to test dive angles on a truck at Kapahi Point that had been placed four miles south of Kaneohe Naval Air Station, now called Marine Corps Base Hawaii. None of the planes carried rockets or bombs.

After making four runs, Warnke failed to rendezvous with his flight leader, Lt. J.D. Petersen. As they are on many days, the peaks of the Koolaus were covered in moderate overcasts for the early-morning training exercise.



Harry Warnke: The Navy ensign died in a crash in a mountain ravine on June 15, 1944

Tice, who now lives in Green Valley, 15 miles south of Tucson, Ariz., said her family believed that Warnke had crashed into the ocean. A headstone was planted over an empty grave in the family plot in Westville, a small farming community in northern Indiana.

In 1993, Tice wrote to McCain: "I would certainly accept the cremated remains of Harry Warnke. This would put an end to a sad event. The return of a body after the war would have eased my parents' grief. They are now both deceased, but there is a stone and plot for my brother with their graves."

Earlier this week, in a phone interview with the Star-Bulletin, Tice questioned if any of her brother's remains could have survived being buried for nearly six decades. If Tice seems skeptical, it's because she has been waiting for nearly 60 years and she is concerned that she may never see her wish fulfilled.

"But if there are any remains I would like to have them," she said.

Shortly after the crash, Rear Adm. F.E. Bakutis -- who commanded Warnke's unit, Fighting Squadron 20, in 1944 -- hiked to the crash site and reported that the fighter had buried itself to the tail. A shoe was found. Warnke's remains were believed to have been buried near the crash site on June 17, 1944, but it was never marked.

In April 1996, Army investigators interviewed Bakutis, who told them about his visit to the crash site and that the plane was "completely imbedded in the mud and the only thing that was visible was a piece of the tail."

Bakutis drew a map of the area, explaining that he had gotten off the trolley that used to service the Omega radio station and had to walk several meters. He said that plane had originally been located by a lineman working on the Omega station.

Lt. Col. Gerald O'Hara, military spokesman, said he doesn't believe anyone has been to the crash site since the 1999 investigative operation. He said no details will be available until at least 90 days before the excavation mission begins.

A report by the 1999 recovery team estimated that the excavation could take up to 60 days and could possibly involve a platoon of 30 to 40 soldiers.

Each year the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command undertakes 10 World War II recovery operations, O'Hara said.

However, priority is given to operations in Southeast Asia and related to the Vietnam War, then the Korean War and lastly World War II, O'Hara said.

"The area is in the watershed area and will need permits in order to do a proper recovery operation," O'Hara added. "I don't expect that to prevent our work. (We) will just need to make sure we have all the proper documentation before we do the

recovery next year."

The 1999 recovery operation was done when O'Hara's unit was solely designated to account for the missing in action from the Vietnam War. In October, the operations of the 11-year-old Joint Task Force Full-Accounting at Camp Smith and the 30-year-old Army Central Identification Laboratory at Hickam Air Force Base were merged. Until it was deactivated on Sept. 30, the Army Central Identification Laboratory, one of the world's best forensic facilities, was tasked with seeking out and recovering remains from America's conflicts, beginning with World War II.

A memorial is planned at the Naval Air Museum at the old Barbers Point Naval Air Station in the lobby of Building 4, said Brad Hayes, museum director. The Warnke memorial will be on display in the lobby of building 4 (the control tower building at Kalaeloa airport).

"There is a portrait of him when he was commissioned an ensign, along with a copy of the Navy accident report from the VF-20 Skipper, Cmdr. Bakutis," Davis said. They are mounted on the propellor from the F6F-3 that Warnke was flying when killed at 8:50 a.m.

Tice said that her daughter, Pat Turner, still lives in Michigan City, which is 15 miles away from the family plot.

"She would take care of my brother's remains if anything happens to me," Tice said.

Today, there is one American still missing from the Gulf War, more than 1,800 from the Vietnam War, 120 from the Cold War, more than 8,100 from the Korean War, and more than 78,000 from World War II.

Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command

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