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Navy postpones recovery of remains in 1944 crash

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The Navy had planned this month to attempt to recover the remains of Navy Ensign Harry Warnke, who died in a plane crash on O'ahu on June 15, 1944, but has postponed the effort until May.

"We have postponed it until probably springtime because we are already into sort of the rainy season and we are still awaiting final approval through all of the environmental administrative requirements," said Army Maj. Rumi Nielson-Green, spokeswoman for the Joint Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Accounting Command.

Warnke's remains and the F-6F Hellcat fighter he was flying have been embedded for decades in a deep ravine on the slopes of the Ko'olau Range overlooking H-3 Freeway.

His sister, Myrtle Tice, 85, lives in a retirement complex in Green Valley, Ariz., and is hoping to put her brother to rest before she dies.

"It's been 60 some years. I can wait a little longer," Tice said. "If I live that long. I have to hope for the best."

Tice said before her father died, he bought a headstone for his only son so he could be buried next to his parents in Westville, Ind.

"I would certainly like that," Tice said. "I would really like the whole thing to be settled one way or the other. I just don't know what they can even find now after all this time."

In May, the Navy filed a draft environmental assessment with the state to try to recover Warnke's remains. The plan is to send a crew to the crash site and dig up the remains without disturbing any of the endangered plants or animals on the mountainside.

The Joint Prisoner of War/ Missing in Action Accounting Command will do the work, mandated by Congress to recover remains of missing troops of all wars since World War II whenever possible.

Warnke was 23 years old and assigned to Fighting Squadron 20 that Thursday morning in 1944 when he took off from Barbers Point with seven other planes on a training mission. They were practicing dive-bombing angles on a truck at Kapaho point near what is now Marine Corps Base Hawai'i in Kane'ohe. He didn't return to base, and it was presumed that he crashed.

Two days later, his plane was found in upper Halawa Valley. The only signs of him were a shoe and a small amount of human remains, which a recovery crew buried at the scene. Warnke was listed as killed in action, body not recovered.

According to the environmental assessment, a crew of about 15 people will be sent up to the site to recover the remains and personal effects of the naval aviator.

The project would require clearing plants, and the removal and sifting of soil to find remains. Two helicopter landing zones and two paths to the crash site will be cleared.

Nielson-Green said that recovery cases are assigned priorities and that the mission is daunting, with thousands of missing service members from World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the Cold War.