

Underwater discovery unravels mystery

A Coast Guard plane was lost in 1967 answering a distress call.

By Terry Tomalin, Times Outdoors Editor

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The captain of the charter boat stumbled across the wreckage by accident.

"He told us that he had found something," recalled Michael C. Barnette. "He didn't know what it was and he asked if we would take a look."

Barnette was heading back to port with some friends after a day of scuba diving off the Panhandle. The author of *Shipwrecks of the Sunshine State* spends most of his free time exploring the ocean's depths in search of lost chapters of Florida history.

"The water was 60 feet deep and the visibility was good," Barnette said, recalling that day in July 2006. "Right away we could tell that it was a plane and not a boat and that immediately got me thinking."

At first, Barnette thought it might be an old drug plane that had crashed unbeknownst to authorities on some moonless night.

But a close examination of underwater photographs and a thorough search of government records and local newspaper articles revealed quite a different story, one of bravery and heroism nearly lost to the sea floor's shifting sands.

"I was shocked," Barnette said. "I couldn't believe that after all these years the mystery had finally been solved."

To the rescue

Forty years ago today, a 40-foot fishing boat called the Flying Fish began taking on water about 30 miles east of Apalachicola. In 1967, the U.S. Coast Guard's air station was still located in St. Petersburg.

At the time, one of the primary "assets" at the Coast Guard's disposal was the Grumman Albatross, a 60-foot long airplane that could take off and land from land or sea.

When the Coast Guard received the Flying Fish's distress call, Lt. Clifford E. Hanna and a crew of five were dispatched to assist the foundering vessel. The wind was blowing 15 knots, the seas 2 to 3 feet, but the visibility was "zero in fog," according to a log of radio transmissions from that night.

Miraculously, around 9 p.m., Hanna was able to locate the sinking fishing boat and drop a dewatering pump to the beleaguered vessel.

The March 7, 1967, St. Petersburg Times had an account of what happened next:

The captain of the fishing boat, C.L. Lundy of Biloxi, Miss., heard a "loud crash" and saw a "flash" through the dense fog, shortly after the pump was dropped. Lundy could see nothing further, because of the fog. But the base had lost contact with the aircraft, and launched the search.

In the days that followed, Coast Guard ships from as far away as Key West helped search for the six missing men.

"They went all out," said Barnette, who has spent hours looking through records to piece together this story. "They even had the U.S. Navy involved."

The fog soon lifted and the searchers found the bodies of three of their missing comrades: the pilot Hanna, age 30, the co-pilot Lt. Charles F. Shaw, 22, and the night mechanic, Petty Officer Ralph T. Studstill, 38.

Hanna and Studstill were wearing inflated life jackets when found, according to a Times report. A pen flare gun on Hanna's jacket had been fired.

"It appears they were able to make some use of their emergency equipment," Capt. Curtis Kelly, the commander of base St. Petersburg told the Times.

Coast Guard officials eventually called off the search without finding the bodies of the other men aboard the plane, Eckley M. Powlus, Arthur L. Wilson and James Thompson of St. Petersburg.

For 40 years, the location of the plane remained a mystery until Barnette and his friends came across the wreck last summer.

"I knew we had found something special," Barnette said. "Once I started looking through the records, I realized that it had to be the missing Albatross. There were no other airplanes of that type reported down in that area."

Barnette passed his findings on to Coast Guard officials who have yet to issue an official response.

"We were very careful not to disturb the site in any way," he said. "We treated it with respect, realizing that it could be the final resting place for the three brave men."

It is unclear whether any of the six men still have family in the area; if so, Barnette would like to talk to them.

"We would really like to place a wreath or plaque on the site to commemorate the loss," Barnette said.
"Something should be done."

For more information on Barnette's book, go to <http://uwex.us/shipwreckbook.htm>. Terry Tomalin can be reached at 727 893-8808 or tomalin@sptimes.com.

[Last modified March 5, 2007, 05:54:27]

FALLEN ALBATROSS: THE LOSS OF U.S. COAST GUARD UF-2G #1240



UF-2G #1240 (U.S. COAST GUARD PHOTO)

"The Blue Book says we've got to go out, but it doesn't say a damn thing about having to come back..."

The Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation developed the Albatross based on a late 1940s U.S. Navy requirement for a general purpose transport that could operate from land or water and, with skis, from snow and ice. The Albatross was a continuation of the Grumman line of amphibians, which was spawned in the 1930s and included the Duck, Goose, Widgeon, and Mallard. On October 24, 1947, the first Albatross prototype took to the air. During the aircraft's production run, which stretched from September 1947 through May 1961, Grumman constructed 466 Albatross amphibians. Ultimately, the U.S. Coast Guard obtained a total of 91 Albatross. Grumman delivered

the first Albatross, #1240, to the U.S Coast Guard from its Bethpage, Long Island factory on May 7, 1951.

SPECIFICATIONS

WING SPAN: 80 feet

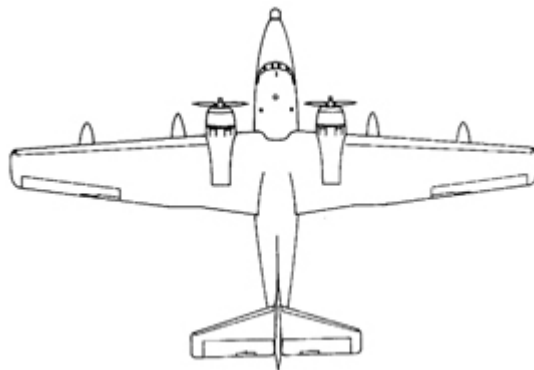
LENGTH: 60.6 feet

TOP SPEED: 240 mph at 7,600 feet

RANGE: 2,660 miles at 1,800 feet

POWERPLANT: Two Wright Cyclone R-1820-76A/B radial piston engines

WEIGHT: Empty - 22,883 pounds; Maximum at Takeoff - 35,700 pounds



(U.S. COAST GUARD PHOTO)



HU-16E #7250 DECOMMISSIONING CEREMONY AT C.G.A.S. CAPE COD (U.S. COAST GUARD PHOTO)

The 91 Albatross delivered by Grumman would help form the backbone of the U.S. Coast Guard's aviation arm for the next 25 years. The National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics helped design the compartmentalized hull, which was rated to operate in 4.5 foot seas. However, the Albatross endured much worse conditions. In one instance, after successfully landing to rescue downed airmen in 16 foot seas and unable to take back off, the pilot proceeded to motor 98 miles back to base. For many years, the unofficial U.S. Coast Guard nickname for the amphibious aircraft was the "Goat." Cumulatively, the dependable aircraft would log over 500,000 flight hours for the U.S. Coast Guard. On March 10, 1983, at 2:30 p.m., the last surviving operational example of a fixed-wing amphibious aircraft to be operated by the U.S. Coast Guard or any branch of the military was withdrawn from active service.



PORT AND STARBOARD VIEW OF UF-2G #1240 AFTER DELIVERY FROM GRUMMAN (U.S. COAST GUARD PHOTOS)

UF-2G Albatross #1240 was assigned to C.G.A.S. St. Petersburg. On the evening of March 5, 1967, the 40-foot yacht *Flying Fish* became disabled and began sinking, which prompted her captain to make a distress call. Lt. Clifford E. Hanna and a crew of five boarded UF-2G Albatross #1240 and flew north towards Carrabelle to assist the sinking vessel. Even though heavy fog blanketed the area, Lt. Hanna located the *Flying Fish* just before 9:00 P.M. The Albatross made a low pass to drop a dewatering pump to the sinking yacht. The pump was successfully dropped with near perfect precision, however, as the aircraft disappeared into the foggy night following the low-level pass, a loud noise cracked across the dark Gulf of Mexico.



(U.S. COAST GUARD PHOTO)

The captain of the *Flying Fish* reported seeing an orange glow "like a camp fire" approximately two miles southeast of his position. The crash was believed to have occurred about 22 miles east of Apalachicola; 20 miles south-southeast of Dog Island Light; 8 miles from the Carrabelle Sea buoy. Over the next several days a small armada of U.S. Coast Guard and Navy vessels combed the area.

Numerous Coast Guard aircraft, as well as Navy aircraft using magnetic anomaly detectors, probed the Gulf of Mexico. The searchers were unable to find the aircraft, though they did find the bodies of pilot Lt. Hanna, copilot Lt. (J.G.) Shaw, and crewman Studstill. As Lt. Hanna was found tied to a float tank and had a pen flare gun with two expended cartridges in his flight suit, it was apparent that at least some of the crew survived the initial crash. The three remaining servicemen and the wreck of the UF-2G Albatross #1240 were never found.

FLIGHT CREW OF U.S. COAST GUARD UF-2G ALBATROSS #1240

Lieutenant Clifford E. Hanna (U.S. Coast Guard Aviator #1061)
Lieutenant, Junior Grade, Charles F. Shaw (U.S. Coast Guard Aviator #1199)
First Class Aviation Machinist Mate Ralph H. Studstill
First Class Aviation Electronics Technician Eckley M. Powlus, Jr.
Second Class Aviation Electronics Technician James B. Thompson
Third Class Aviation Electrician's Mate Arthur L. Wilson

WRECK OF U.S. COAST GUARD UF-2G ALBATROSS #1240

In July 2006, A.U.E. divers investigated the wreck of an unidentified aircraft resting offshore Carrabelle. The site was dominated by the aircraft's wing and two radial engines. Both engines had become dislodged from their mounts, though no trace of their propellers was observed. The nose was heavily damaged, and the cockpit was all but absent. The lower hull of the fuselage was largely collapsed, which complicated the initial identification as an amphibious aircraft. The aft portion of the fuselage was fractured, with the tail resting parallel to the wing and on its starboard side. The horizontal stabilizers appeared to be missing from the tail assembly. Based on the diagnostic features observed on the wreckage, the location of the site in relation to the historical account of the crash, the lack of other documented aviation accidents in the general area, and expert opinions from veteran Grumman Albatross mechanics and pilots, we conclude the previously unidentified aircraft wreck off Carrabelle is missing U.S. Coast Guard UF-2G Albatross #1240. The site has potential significance because the wreck represents the very first Grumman Albatross delivered to the U.S. Coast Guard. According to Federal Aviation Administration records, there are only 11 Grumman Albatross representative of UF-2G (later designated HU-16E) #1240 currently flying.



VIEWS OF THE HEAVILY DAMAGED COCKPIT AND NOSE.



(L) VIEW LOOKING AFT AT COCKPIT BULKHEAD AND INSTRUMENTS; (R) REMAINS OF THE LEFT WING.



(L) STARBOARD ENGINE; (R) PORT ENGINE - NOTE THE COOLING HUB AT THE END OF THE SHAFT, UNIQUE TO THE GRUMMAN ALBATROSS.



VIEWS OF THE PORT ENGINE NACELLE - NOTE THE OPEN ACCESS PANEL AND SMALLER FEATURE UNDERNEATH, WHICH WAS A SLIDING WORK STEP THAT COULD BE OPENED TO ALLOW CREWS A STABLE PLATFORM TO WORK ON THE ENGINES WHILE AT SEA.

ASSOCIATION OF UNDERWATER EXPLORERS •



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON UF-2G #1240, [CONTACT US](#)

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Hi-

I am happy to provide whatever information I have gained on this site. FWIW, Gibb Brown and many other individuals helped with confirming the identification. To answer your specific questions:

1. The Times article was not entirely accurate on the sequence of events on the discovery and identification. I was told about the aircraft wreck, which has been locally known for quite a while. It was thought to be a DC-9 for some unknown reason, and that is the local name of the wreck. A friend asked if I could identify it. We did a quick dive on it last year and took some images. I was unable to initially ID it, as I did not make the connection it could be an amphibious aircraft, and due to the heavily impacted disposition of the wreck. I only made the connection earlier this year when reviewing archival newspaper reports of other maritime accidents and made the connection. I contacted as many Albatross pilots and mechanics as I could find, and consulted other historians. Most felt with a 99% confidence the wreck was an Albatross, and given the location, it is extremely likely this is #1240. I put a page up on the internet documenting everything:

<http://uwex.us/uscg1240.htm>

2. Hard to tell. It has been dived on by spearfishermen for years. Also known to anglers. I did not see the props but they could have spun off during the accident (?). The nose and cockpit is heavily impacted from the crash, as is the fuselage. I did not instruments, so it does not appear as if it has been stripped by divers.

3. I contacted USCG HQ and provided the info and pics on the website cited above. The historians told me the chain of command was notified but no response has been received. Terry Tomalin of the St. Pete Times also contacted them for the article, but got no response. I have a lot of friends in the USCG and would really like to get this remarkable story out, so I was kind of surprised at the perceived lack of interest from the USCG. I contacted many news sources over a month ago, and the St. Pete Times was the only one to pursue this, mainly due to past stories Terry and I have worked on. I did post this on several USCG forums last month.

4. No, the coordinates are not being published. However, as mentioned before, they are known locally. The captain that took us there will not provide them to us, which keeps us out of the issue I suppose. The USCG historians asked for it, but I let them know the captain wanted to keep them confidential.

5. Not that I know of. We wanted to dive the site again to fully document it with stills and video, and to have a wreath-laying ceremony over the wreckage. We asked for the assistance of the USCG in these efforts to commemorate the loss of the USCG aviators on the 40th anniversary, but again got no response.

6. Yes, I have several images from the wreck site myself and a friend took, but the best views are on the website.

7. From archival newspaper reports, background info and photos received from the historians office at HQ, and personal files (my father is a big aviation buff). If I can be of any further assistance, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Cheers,
Mike
727-560-2554 cell
St. Petersburg

Michael C. Barnette
Shipwrecks of the Sunshine State: Florida's Submerged History
<http://uwex.us/shipwreckbook.htm> Association of Underwater Explorers
<http://uwex.us>

----- Original Message -----

From: JKSTICE@aol.com
Date: Monday, March 5, 2007 4:43 pm
Subject: ALBATROSS UF-2G, CGNR 1240
To: barney00@tampabay.rr.com
Cc: msmith@airlines.org

> Association of Underwater Explorers

>

> Dear Sir:

>

> I was unaware that the USCG #1240 was located until I read today's St
> .Petersburg times.

> I was a pilot attached to CG Air Station STPETE when the accident
> occurred and am sensitive and sincerely interested in how this all
> came about.

> I am also a member of the Ancient Order of the Pterodactyl, which is a
> Coast Aviation organization comprised of Coast Guard retired and
> active duty pilots and aircrewmembers that are bound to preserve and
> promote Coast Guard aviation history. Therefore your unique discovery
> and all the details are extremely important to us.

>

> If you don't mind, I have some questions pertaining to your discovery.

> 1. Did your organization randomly locate the wreckage or were you
> specifically looking for it?

> 2. Did it appear that the wreckage had been previously disturbed by
> other divers; i.e., cockpit instruments missing, etc.?

> 3. When did you notify the Coast Guard officially, what information
> did you provide them and what was their response?

> 4. Did you publish the co-ordinates in any divers publications and/or
> provide them to anyone else?

> 5. Does your organization and/or do you have knowledge of any other
> organization planning to again dive on the wreckage?

> 6. Are there other photographs of the wreckage available other than
> those published on your web site?

> 7. Where did you obtain all the pertinent data and photos concerning
> the 1240 that is published on the web site?

>

> I personally want to thank all that took part in this discovery and
> your fantastic historical web site presentation.

>

> Regards,

>

> Jack K. Stice

> Commander

> US Coast Guard(ret)

> Palm Harbor, FL

>

> Copy to: Mont Smith, Captain, USCG (ret), President, Ancient Order of
> the Pterodactyl