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Biological Field Station Volunteer Divers Locate 1948 Plane Wreck in Otsego Lake

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The Biological Field Station Volunteer Divers Team has located the sunken wreckage of a 1948 plane crash in Otsego Lake, New York. On September 22, the dive team was investigating side scan sonar targets from a July 2012 remote sensing survey when the group found the heavily damaged remains of an Ercoupe single-engine airplane sunk in Otsego Lake. The dive was part of a long-term project to map the lake to gain a greater understanding of the cultural and biological resources in the historic waterway.

The aluminum aircraft, distinguished by its unique twin-tail configuration, crashed into Otsego Lake around 3 pm on July 13, 1948. Two World War II veterans, **Edward Francis and Harold Caulkins**, both aged 24, were killed in the aviation accident.

A pilot in another aircraft who was flying nearby saw the Ercoupe plane as it suddenly began a deadly tailspin from an altitude of 2,500 ft. before eventually hitting the lake surface.

The bodies of Francis and Caulkins as well as some parts of the plane were recovered in 1948 several hours after the crash. Francis was a flying instructor and had taken off from the Cooperstown airfield shortly before the plane accident.

The Ercoupe was a lightweight, low-wing monoplane that started production shortly before World War II.

Sixteen years after the crash, in 1964, a Richfield Springs, New York diver named **Lee Couchman and his son** rediscovered the sunken plane. Couchman reported he had been looking for the sunken aircraft “on and off for the better part of 10 years.” Couchman told a newspaper reporter that he brought up parts of the small airplane on the first dive.

Couchman and another Richfield Springs SCUBA enthusiast, **Terry Crandall**, later made dives on the sunken plane wreck. Crandall reported that in 1964, they raised the sunken aircraft using a metal barrel and tire inner tubes as flotation. However, as they were towing the sunken plane by boat toward the south end of the lake, it broke from its towing harness and sank, to become a legendary mystery of the “Glimmerglass Lake,” as Otsego Lake is known. Crandall said they recovered the wheels and struts.

The BFS Volunteer Diver team conducts a variety of SCUBA and scientific diving tasks around Otsego Lake including installing navigation buoys, eradicating zebra mussels from Cooperstown’s water intake pipe, and performing research dives to benefit the health of the nine

mile long lake located adjacent to Cooperstown. **Paul H. Lord**, a master SCUBA instructor and an adjunct instructor of Environmental Sciences at SUNY-Oneonta, directs the dive squad with assistance from Jim Vogler, instructor of Biology.

“For decades this sunken plane has been a bit of a ‘phantom’, part of the lore of our picturesque lake,” said Lord, a Cooperstown-area resident. “I was wondering if our dive team would ever come upon it.”

Joseph W. Zarzynski, RPA, a professional underwater archaeologist from Wilton near Saratoga Springs, New York, is a volunteer diver with the team and provides archaeological training to those involved. Zarzynski funded the 2012 side scan sonar survey, conducted by Garry Kozak (GK Consulting), to benefit the BFS Volunteer Dive Team program.

The BFS Volunteer Dive Team and boat support personnel involved with the September 22 dive inspection were **Lee Ferrara, Chip Dunn, Jim Vogler, Kaylee Herzog, Dale Webster**, and **Joseph W. Zarzynski**. **Paul H. Lord** oversaw the dive.

Following the dive team’s non-invasive inspection of the sonar-generated target, the divers reported that about 15 ft. of the rear of the aircraft, the part aft of the wings, is all that now remains. The twin-tail section is partially intact, but the fuselage is severely broken apart, essentially a pile of twisted and jagged aluminum fragments. Parts of the sunken aircraft were reportedly recovered during 1948 and 1964 salvage efforts.

There are no plans to raise any of the historic sunken aircraft remains. The discovery was recently reported in the Wall Street Journal (<http://online.wsj.com/article/APb51badae92dc4a9aa2a43777678b05b4.html?KEYWORDS=Ots+ego+lake>).

Because of its age, over 50 years old, and since the 1948 plane accident is significant in local aviation and lake history, the sunken aircraft site is protected by state and federal historic preservation laws.

Following this season’s shipwreck inventory fieldwork, the team will report to New York State, the custodial caretaker of this underwater heritage, the locations and details of several shipwrecks and the sunken plane, the submerged cultural resource finds discovered this year.