

Cooperstown Crier

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[Divers locate lost plane in Otsego Lake](#)

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Divers have located the remains of a plane that crashed in Otsego Lake decades ago, as part of an ongoing effort to document cultural artifacts long hidden under its surface.

The team located the remains of an Ercoupe single-engine plane that crashed in Otsego Lake in 1948, killing the two World War II veterans, Harold Caulkins and Edward Francis, on board.

Their bodies, along with some of the wreckage, were recovered after the crash, and in 1964 the rest of the plane was located. However, while it was being towed to shore, the plane sunk again, becoming a part of local diver folklore.

“All the divers have a story related to this,” said archeologist Joseph Zarzynski, who was part of the team that found the plane.

He also said that, based on the sonar readings, he expected them to find the plane, before they dove on it on Sept. 22.

Word of the plane’s rediscovery was picked up by the Associated Press and appeared in The Wall Street Journal.

“Some people get exponentially more excited about plane wrecks,” said Lord, head of the Biological Field Station Volunteer Divers Team, when asked why the find had generated so much interest.

The effort through which the plane was found is part of the work of the BFS Volunteer Divers Team.

Operating out of the State University College at Oneonta’s Biological Field Station, located on the shores of Otsego Lake, the BFS Volunteer Divers Team has been active for over a decade.

“For years, off and on, there was no dive capability at the biological field station,” said Lord, who helped found the team.

Some of the projects the dive team has been involved in include monitoring the lake’s zebra mussel population, identifying a plant and a byzoan not previously known to be in the lake, and sampling subsurface flows. The team also places navigation buoys in Otsego Lake.

“We try to support any research in the lake,” said Lord, who teaches classes at SUNY Oneonta on SCUBA Diving, Environmental Science, Aquatic Pollution and Marine Biology.

The dive team has between half a dozen and ten divers, as well as three to four volunteers who tend for them. In order to dive with the team, a diver must, at the minimum, be certified as an advanced diver.

The team began to turn its attention to the lake's cultural resources after Zarzynski, an underwater archaeologist, began volunteering with them.

A retired high school teacher from Saratoga, Zarzynski got a second masters degree in archaeology in the 1980's while he was still teaching.

He was heavily involved in the efforts of the nonprofit organization Bateaux Below, Inc., which discovered and mapped a number of French and Indian War era ships in Lake George, including a seven sided floating gun battery.

After Bateaux Below disbanded, Zarzynski began diving with the BFS Volunteer Dive Team, beginning in spring 2011. Zarzynski brought up the idea of investigating some of the lake's cultural resources, an idea that Lord was amenable to.

This led to a July 2012 side scan sonar survey of approximately 1/3 of the lake bottom, which Zarzynski paid for out of his own pocket.

"Side scan sonar is the quickest way to identify anomalies on the bottom," said Lord.

"The idea is, find out what's there," said Zarzynski. "My hope is that we'll find one class of every vessel that was on the lake."

The survey identified 27 targets for the team to dive on that could be cultural artifacts.

"So far we've dove on nine of those underwater targets," said Lord. "Eight of them proved to be cultural artifacts."

The other cultural artifacts that the team has dove on are boats of various types, including modern fishing and paddle boats, a runabout and work boats. Zarzynski believes that some of these boats are over 100 years old.

There are no plans to raise any of the boats or the plane at this time.

Indeed, aside from taking fishing lines and lures off the wrecks, the team has not touched them, although each wreck has been extensively documented with photography and video.

"They need to leave any artifact, every artifact in the vicinity of the wreck right where it is," said Lord, saying that their location can provide clues to how the vessel ended up on the bottom.

Zarzynski has been instructing the rest of dive team in archaeological observation, likening each wreck to a crime scene, and says that their reports have been improving over time.

“The remarks I’m getting back are much better, much more insightful,” said Zarzynski. “If you go about it the right way, you can deduce a lot.”

At the end of the year, the team will present what they have discovered to the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. New York State is the custodial caretaker of Otsego Lake’s underwater historical heritage.

As for what else the team might find, Zarzynski expressed confidence that they would be able to locate Native American watercraft.

Lord says that Zarzynski has been scouring back issues of The Cooperstown Crier and The Freeman’s Journal.

“He has been all over all the online files looking for stories about things that have sunk in the lake.”

As for what people can do if they’d like to help, Zarzynski says that they’re interested in oral history and any stories people might have about things that have gone down in the lake.

“That’s an untapped thing so far,” said Zarzynski.

Zarzynski says that Otsego lake is about 165 feet deep at its greatest depth, and that some targets will need to be dove on with a remotely controlled vehicle. He also says that he is willing to pay for side scan sonar surveys of the rest of the lake.

Zarzynski’s eventual goal is to document all of Otsego Lake’s cultural resources and to help set up a management plan for them, so that the public can be aware of them and they can be protected. He expects this process to take between two and three years.

“Hopefully when this is done we find out what is in the lake,” he said.

- See more at: <http://www.coopercrier.com/localnews/x934958136/Divers-locate-lost-plane-in-Otsego-Lake#sthash.b0sPByJX.dpuf>