

Aviation Day looks back at 1940s crashes

Photos

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Karen DeRoss

These pieces believed to be the control column, left, and the tail wheel pivot, right, from a single-seat fighter plane, a Grumman F6F Hellcat, that crashed west of Castle Crags near Boulder Peak in 1945, will be displayed at Aviation Day in Montague this Saturday, along with many other artifacts. "It's just not right to have stuff in the garage or closet," said Bruce Batchelder, a member of the Experimental Aircraft Association Siskiyou County chapter who is helping to organize the event. "This stuff needs to be on display, that's the whole point."

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order to offer what help they could.

In 2009 Doyle Yondell of Mount Shasta found bullet casings near the crash site off I-5 and showed the EAA the location. Remains of this crash recovered by the EAA chapter 654 were put into the Sisson Museum.

Stacy Churchwell, the brother of the B-24 co-pilot, George Churchwell Jr., is traveling from Merritt Island, Fla., to attend Aviation Day with his wife and other family members.

Also traveling a long distance to attend Aviation Day is Nancy Ballard Hopen, the niece of Navy Lt. (jg) RA Hopen who was killed when his single-seat fighter plane, a Grumman F6F Hellcat, crashed west of Castle Crags near Boulder Peak in 1945. She is making the trip to see her uncle honored at Aviation Day from Cherokee Village, Ark.

The Arcata Coast Guard search unit and the 4th Air Force in Medford made efforts to locate the wreck in 1946, but the remains of the plane were not found. Later that year, George Costa of Dunsuir found the wreck and reported it to the Forest Service. The Navy came and took away the human remains, transporting them to Arlington National Cemetery. The Navy also blew up the large pieces of wreckage at the crash site, leaving only small scrap remains.

In June of 1946, the father of Lt. (jg) RA Hopen, Jens Hopen, left his home in New Jersey and headed to Weed to search for the remains of his son's plane with \$900 – his life savings. He set up camp near Eddy Creek at the base of Mount Eddy and hired guides to assist him in searching the area on horseback. After 32 days, the search turned up nothing and Hopens left the area, having no money to continue. "His search just didn't go far enough south," said EAA member Bruce Batchelder. "He went home broken hearted."

In 1954, Jim Nile of Mount Shasta, working as a timber cruiser for Southern Pacific Land Co., spotted some blue metal slightly off his cruise line. He thought it was aircraft aluminum.

Jim Gubetta of Weed remembers seeing pieces of blue aluminum in an open pit just down the slope from where Nile spotted the remains three years later, in 1957. Gubetta offered to help the EAA chapter 654 with this Hellcat recovery that took place in June of this year.

On June 27 the remains were found again, more than 50 years later. "Without the incredible memories of these two men, our war bird recovery group would have spent years searching for the wreckage, but they led us right to it," said Batchelder in a report describing the Hellcat crash and how its remains were found.

Although the crash site of the Hellcat aircraft has been found, the plane parts recovered and Lt. Hopens' remains honored in the National Cemetery, Batchelder said the EAA chapter 654 is still trying to gather information regarding Jens Hopens' visit to Weed. "Our hope is to find out who those guides were, anything, any footprint... We want to know who here remembers him," he said. Their goal is to fill in the story of a dad spending his life savings to find out the details of his son's death. "We want to memorialize it."

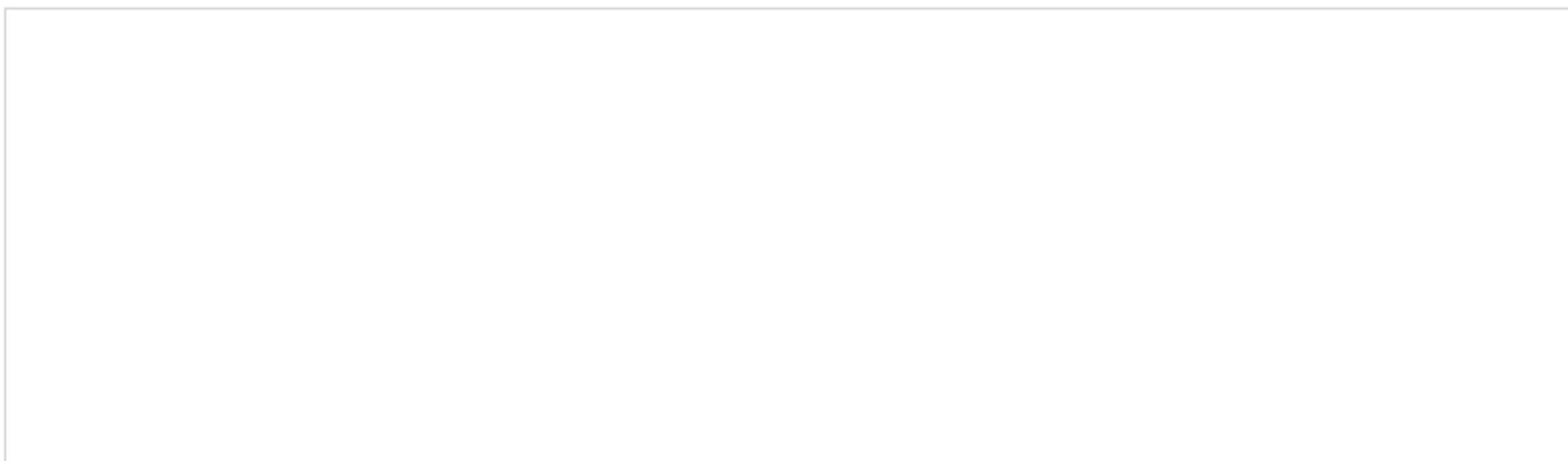
Aviation Day will bring history to life this year with displays of scraps from the B-24 and Hellcat aircrafts. Batchelder said it will be "very special" to have family of the those involved in these crashes as the honored guests at Aviation Day this year.

Other highlights of Aviation Day are a flyby of F-15 fighters from Kingsley Field in Klamath Falls, scheduled for 10 a.m., demonstrations and static displays from the U.S. Forest Service, Cal Fire and California Highway Patrol.

For further information about the event, contact:

- David Weld, Shasta Valley Aviation, at 459-3456 or flyshastavalley@snowcrest.net.
- Bruce Batchelder, Jefferson Aviation Archaeology, at 938-0385 or realestatelakeshastina.com
- Terry Weathers, aviation history display, 530-468-2234 or tmw@sisqtel.net

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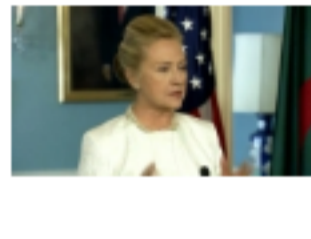
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