

The Search for Excalibur, the doomed flying boat

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The huge plane made it about 10 metres off the water before dropping back onto the Bay of Exploits in northern Newfoundland.

Eleven people died when the flying boat Excalibur crashed and sank in 1942 while trying to leave Botwood, a remote little town that was at the time a key hub on the transatlantic route. It was almost the end of the age of flying boats. Planes with wheels began to fly from nearby Gander, and Botwood disappeared off the radar, its historic role known only to aviation enthusiasts.

But the incident was never forgotten by the U.S. military, which is still missing two personnel from that day. And now a U.S. search team is hoping to close the book on the crash. They have been searching the waters for the wreckage since early last week and want to learn whether there is a reasonable chance of recovering the missing bodies.

The team has located three of the plane's propellers, the fourth of which was already on display in a local museum, along with smaller and less easily identified material. They expect to spend another two weeks on the site, using sonar and a magnetometer to pinpoint good locations to send divers into the chilly waters.

"It's almost like an underwater crime scene," said Captain George Mitroka, a member of the Joint Prisoners of War, Missing in Action Accounting Command (JPAC) and leader of the team in Botwood. "We're trying to connect the dots."

The wrecked plane is a VS-44, a Sikorsky flying boat designed in the late 1930s. Excalibur was one of three such planes commissioned by American Export Airlines, which later merged with Pan Am.

Weighing in at 26 tonnes each, they had a wingspan of nearly 38 metres and could fly more than 6,000 kilometres. Few expenses were to be spared in their outfitting and operation.

"It's not the bag of peanuts you get now," Botwood archivist Everett Elliott said with a laugh, as he described the lavish meals served on board planes in this era.

But the planes weren't delivered until the U.S. had entered the war, and they were put to military service instead.

The dearth of runways capable of handling the largest planes of the era made flying boats practical, and the lumbering giants used a slow route that hopscotched to Europe. Botwood was one of the key stops.

"To see these huge planes, large for the time, coming into the harbour, it had to be an awesome sight for the residents here," said Mr. Elliott, who was born after the war.

It was a boom time for the town. More than 10,000 troops poured through, reconnaissance flights were conducted from the spot and there were brief stopovers by world leaders including Winston Churchill, who was trapped overnight by bad weather.

In 1942, disaster struck. Excalibur crashed and sank while attempting a takeoff. Eleven of the 37 people on board were killed. Part of the plane was raised briefly, but it sank again during an attempt to tow it to shore amid choppy waves.

Local divers found wreckage in 1988, but they didn't have the tools to mark the spot precisely.

Many factors could have influenced where the pieces of the plane ended up, Capt. Mitroka of JPAC noted, and the exact locations of its debris fields are not known.

"Botwood's not known for its diving, so there's not a lot of people out there exploring," he said. "Even though someone was on it 20 years ago, they didn't have [global positioning equipment]"

Capt. Mitroka, whose team is part of a unit that has conducted missions in Southeast Asia, Europe and the South Pacific, said their findings this month will help inform a decision on whether to mount a full-scale recovery operation.

Although the missing bodies in the Botwood crash date back more than six decades, they could still be in good shape.

Because they have been protected from oxygen by the water and a layer of silt, Capt. Mitroka said, there is reason to believe there could be recoverable remains.

The era of the flying boat

THE FLYING ACES

The Excalibur was one of three Flying Aces built by Sikorsky. The Excambian is restored in the New England Air Museum, the Exetor crashed in South America and the remains of the Excalibur rest at the bottom of the Bay of Exploits.

BOTWOOD'S KEY ROLES

Botwood, Nfld., is built on the west side of a long bay that stretches north for about 50 kilometres or so before the open sea is reached. It has a protected deep-water shipping port with an easily defensible entrance. Prior to the establishment of the airport at Gander, Botwood's sheltered harbour and the fog-free zone in which it lies, provided the

base for Pan American Airways and British Overseas Airways Corp. During the 1930s and 40s, the two nations used the town to launch the world's first regular transatlantic flights.

CELEBRITY SPOTTING

On a lighter side, Botwood was a great place for celebrities who sometimes had to wait there for good flying weather. Prominent among these visitors was Charlotte, the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg. Winston Churchill was forced to wait overnight in Botwood in November of 1942. The town also saw a stream of stage and screen celebrities, including Bob Hope, who then went on to Europe to entertain the American troops.

Botwood Heritage Centre, Town of Botwood