

Chasing the tears of a Marlin while running with the bulls

Investigation of a P5M Marlin flying boat crash site

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VP-48, P5M, BuNo 145493, (SF 3) in-flight, date unknown, photo from TailHook

On October 4th 2014, I traveled down to San Diego to check out the crash site of a Navy P5M-2 Marlin flying boat. Locating the crash site of a flying boat on land is very rare and this particular type was only in service for a short time. The story of this accident contains heroism that needs to be recounted and remembered. It also took some daring and some luck on my part to survive visiting this crash site. This expedition was certainly more exciting than most.

The Martin P5M Marlin was built by the Glen L. Martin Company and was a twin-engine piston-powered flying boat. It entered service in 1952 and served into the mid 1960s with the US Navy and Coast Guard for naval patrol. The aircraft featured APS-80 search radar in a prominent, bulbous nose, as well as weapons-bays inside the long engine nacelles that protruded from its wings. In addition, modified versions carried an array of antisubmarine gear, including magnetic anomaly detection equipment and the Julie and Jezebel echo-sounding and sonobuoy detection systems. All told, the Navy accepted 259 production versions of the Marlin, including the P5M-2 that featured a "T-tail." In 1962, P5M-1/2 aircraft were redesignated P-5A/P-5B, while antisubmarine warfare equipped P5M-1S/2S aircraft became SP-5A/SP-5Bs. Though primarily employed in antisubmarine warfare during their service, Marlins also flew missions in

Vietnam in support of Operation Market Time, the surveillance of the coast of South Vietnam to prevent the flow of supplies into the country. The P5M Marlin was destined to be the last flying boat operated by the U.S. Navy. Only one aircraft of this type has survived and is on display at the National Naval Aviation Museum.

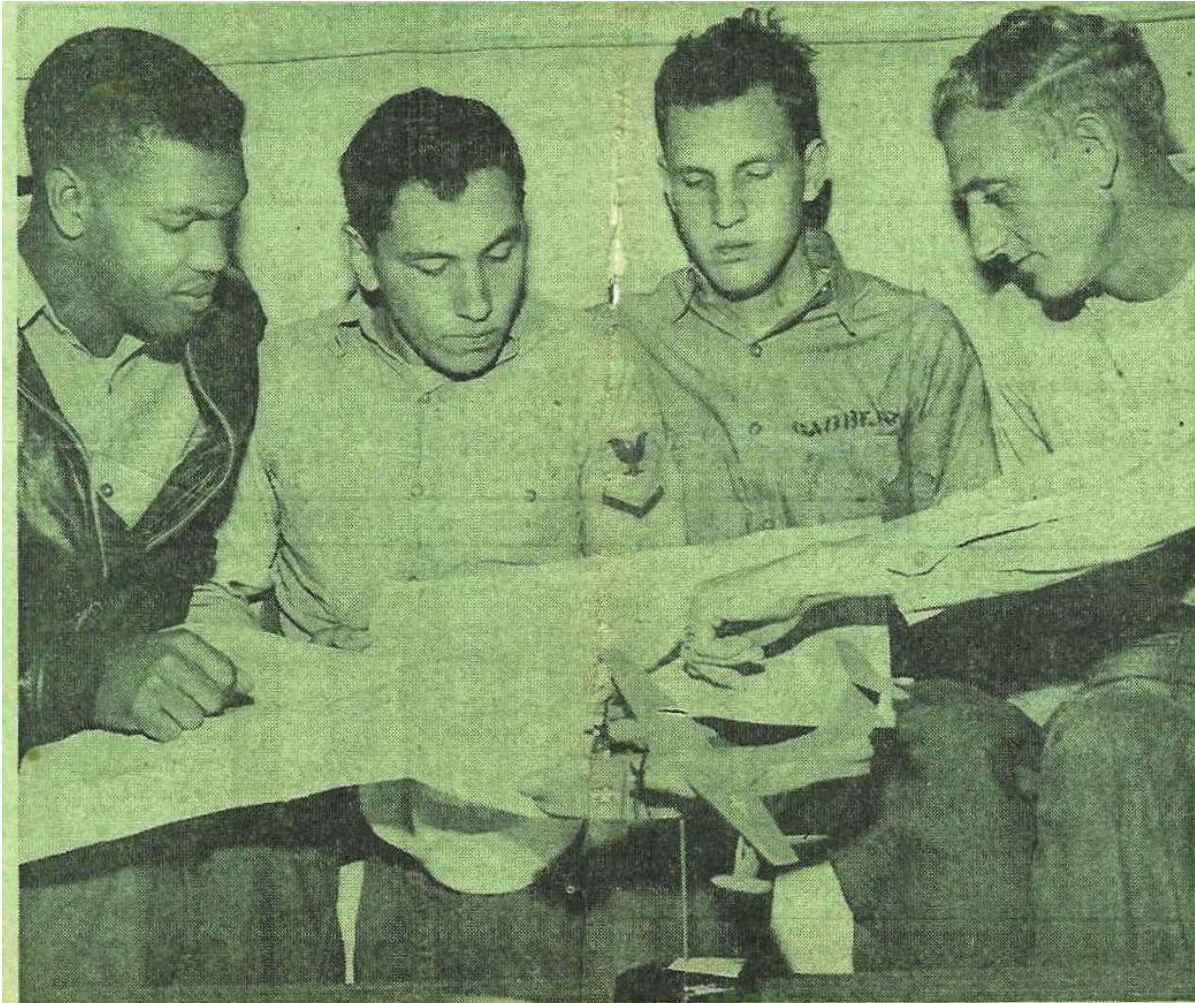


VP-48, SP-5B Marlin, BuNo 135533, (SF 5) at NAS North Island, circa 1963, photo by Clay Jansson

On January 1st, 1959, Patrol Squadron Forty Eight (VP-48) based at NAS North Island California lost the last P5M-2 manufactured, Bureau Number 135483, (SF 5). The reserve pilots who made up the squadron called themselves the "SUNDAY FLIERS" because of the "SF" markings on their seaplanes. The mission flight plan was to fly to the Salton Sea sea-drome and return. The aircraft took off at 1507 (3:07pm), with a gross weight of 72,167 pounds, which included 1,850 pounds of internal ordnance and 16,800 pounds of fuel. Trouble started only 15 minutes later at about 1522 while on an easterly heading and leveling off at 7,000 feet, two miles west of Pine Valley California. An oil leak was detected in the starboard engine. The oil leak was followed almost immediately by an uncontrollable fire forward of the number three power recovery turbine. The aircraft then made a West-Northwest heading while losing altitude. While on this heading, nine crewmen parachuted (eight successfully) and the internal ordnance stores were jettisoned. At about 1527 the aircraft rolled into a nose down, steeply banking right turn and crashed into the side of a mountain about three miles Northwest Descanso CA.

On that fateful day, the Navy lost two of its best officers, co-pilot LTjg M. E. Dickens and pilot LTjg J. G. Collier. Dickens was lost when he bailed out too late and too close to a mountain top and his chute did not have time to open. The Navy said he would have lived had he jumped a minute sooner or later. He landed on top of a mountain peak.

The pilot, LTjg Collier fought to keep the plane in the air, but he was unable to feather the #2 engine. He heroically stayed at the controls of the doomed plane so that the crew could get out. He was then unable to escape in time before the plane impacted the ground. His unselfish act of bravery earned him the Distinguished Flying Cross.



SURVIVORS—Four of eight crewmen who parachuted safely from a burning patrol plane yesterday show on map where it crashed in San Diego's backcountry mountains. From left, they are AD3 Allen F. Van Dyke, AM3 Lewis H. Wheeler, AN Lawrence Gabbert, and AD2 Richard Reiselman.

Pictured are four of eight crewmen who parachuted safely from the burning patrol plane. From left they are AD3 Allen F. Van Dyke, AM3 Lewis H. Wheeler, AN Lawrence Gabbert and plane captain AD2 Richard Reiselman. Not shown are Navigator Richard B. Tippetts, AT1 William D. Little and AE2 Lawrence J. Denault. The name of the last crewmember is not known. Their pilots gave up their lives to permit them to parachute safely from the patrol plane. "Two died to save us" said the eight crash survivors.

According to eyewitnesses, the ponderous patrol plane crashed in flames in the mountains 40 miles east of San Diego. According to the accident report, wreckage from the plane was found "120 feet from the impact point". The "entire fuselage was very severely broken up and scattered" and the wreckage burned for 12 hours after the crash before it was finally extinguished. The accident report also stated that there was a large amount of melted aluminum in the crash area and the point of impact was centered around a large rock in the crash area.

More than 55 years later, I headed out to the crash site with a buddy of mine to investigate the site. From where we parked, we immediately found small parts and pieces of melted aluminum leading up a road that narrowed into a trail into a rocky canyon. The road was intersected at the bottom by a fence and gate that had several warning signs on it. One sign said "Poison Oak, Please stay on trail", the other said "Western Rattlesnake, Please stay on trail". There was a third simple hand written sign taped to the fence that said "Steer in Here". I know about poison oak and rattlesnakes and never had any problems with cows. It said there was a trail, so I thought it was OK to go.



After seeing no obvious danger, we foolishly ignored the signs and hopped the fence to follow the trail of debris. Sure enough, bits and pieces of debris from the plane crash led up to a large pile of rocks and bigger debris.



Pieces along the trail up to the impact site

The pieces just kept getting bigger and bigger and were centered around a large rock pile just like it said in the official report. Debris collected into pools in-between the large rocks. Evidence of fire and melted metal were apparent all over the site.



The ground nearest the impact area was covered by numerous small parts and pieces. The small slag puddles of melted debris were like tears of the Marlin dropped from the sky randomly scattered around the crash site.



I searched the site for interesting pieces and parts with part numbers and other identifying markings. Parts were trapped under bushes and large rocks that needed to be dug out. Many pieces of the plane remained at the crash site beckoning me to explore further up the canyon. As I explored, I wondered how much the site had changed since 1959, over 55 years ago.

I was just getting down to business and interested in examining some of the parts closer when my hiking buddy alerted me to an approaching bull. The bull came charging down the trail towards us wanting to know who was trespassing on his territory!



The bull did not look friendly as he reared his hornless head. We immediately ran towards the rock pile for protection. We tried in vain to keep the rock pile between us and the bull. Every time we moved one way the bull responded in kind trying to intercept us. We played keep away by jumping up on top of the boulders while he paced around one side and then the other. This seemed to piss off the bull more as he was snorting and howling at us and generally not being kindly to strangers. Our only grace was the fact that the bull could not climb up and over the rocks that we were trying to keep between us and him. It soon became like a Mexican standoff with the bull on one side of the rocks and us on the other.



I was able to take a few more pictures of the debris while I was on the run, but I was not able to spend anytime examining any of the parts. It was click and run, click and run with my camera. Only then did I realize that I was wearing a bright red ball cap that was obviously not helping the situation. I snatched it off my head and stuffed it into my pocket. We also soon realized that we were trapped! The only way out of the canyon was past the bull. All thoughts of further investigation of the crash site were abandoned and all we could think of was about how we were going to get out of there.



We soon hatched a plan of escape. We ducked down and hid behind the rocks hoping to stay out of the sight of the bull. We hoped that by not seeing us, he would calm down and maybe even forget about us, but I'm sure he could still smell us. We waited and moved slowly and silently around the rocks keeping him just out of sight. Gradually the bull started to take less interest in us and he even started chewing on a branch in a tree. It looked as if our plan might work and it was our chance to escape. My buddy made a break for it and made it half way down the road unnoticed by the bull. But as I started making my way down the road, low and behold, the bull appeared and started his charge towards us. Halfway back, my hiking buddy who was in front of me shouted something like "here he comes". I did not bother to look back behind me because I instantly knew what he meant and the implications of what he said. We both booked it and we did our best adrenaline fueled run downhill to the gate as the bull was close behind breathing down our necks and hot on our trail.

I could only run sooo fast and I'm sure that bull could run faster than me. Time for plan "B", we split up, with me on the left and my buddy on the right of the ever widening trail. I was "flying" down that trail with the bull in hot pursuit wishing for more speed just like a jet pilot about to be shot down. I knew the end was near, but the fence and gate were in site! I took flying leaps as I sprinted down the road with whole body going airborne momentarily. Coming back down to earth after one leap, I fell crashing down into the

dirt. I braced for impact just as I hit and scrapped my forearm in the gravel. I thought I was all done for and the end was near, soon to be trampled to death by the bull. I looked over towards my impending pursuer and lucky for me that bull just ran right past me continuing the chase after my buddy who was closing fast on the gate. He leaped up and over the gate to freedom and safety.

The bull halted at the fence and let my buddy know who the boss was as they both traded looks at each other across the fence. Lucky for me, the bull continued to take interest in my buddy as I wondered what to do next. I wearily got up and took shelter behind some scrawny trees that did little to hide me, trying to catch my breath while my heart pounded in my chest. However, I was still trapped. The bull was between me and the fence and now I had little protection if he turned his attention towards me. So close to freedom, yet so far. My buddy saw my predicament and quickly acted. He grabbed a tree branch as a diversion and drew the bull along the fence line away from my position. At last, I was able to escape over the fence to safety away from "Bull Mountain". The beer afterwards at the Ballast Point brewery never tasted so good!



The best way to see a steer, behind a fence! Giving us the evil eye before we left

Many lessons were learned from this expedition including: hike with a buddy, try to run faster than your buddy if trouble is close behind, and pay more attention to warning signs. Well that's the whole story and that's NO Bull to be messing with. I would have liked to spend more time exploring the crash site, but that bull had other ideas. I could tell you where this crash site is located, but I can't recommend it. It is guarded by poison oak, rattle snakes, and one mean bull.



VP-48, P5M, BuNo unknown, (SF 4) on weekend mission to NAS Whidbey Island Washington circa fall 1961, photo by John Ham



VP-48, P5M, BuNo 145493, (SF 3) in flight, date unknown, contributed by Mahlon K. Miller

P5M Specifications:

Powerplant: Two 3,450 hp Wright R-3350-32WA engines

Dimensions: Length: 100 ft., 7 in.
Height: 32 ft., 8 in.
Wingspan: 118 ft., 2 in.

Weight: Empty: 50,485 lb.
Gross: 85,000 lb.

Performance: Max Speed: 251 mph at sea level
Ceiling: 24,000 ft.
Range: 2,050 miles

Armament: Up to 8,000 lb. of ordnance carried internally or externally

