

SIERRA LIFESTYLES

Trek recalls loss of nine in 1938 Yosemite air disaster

By Erik Skindrud
GAZETTE EDITOR

There's no trail to the top of Mt. Bruce, a 9,743-foot peak about 10 miles east of Wawona in Yosemite National Park.

As one of the peaks that make up the Buena Vista Crest, the mountain offers a stunning overview of the Merced River drainage and the towering Clark Range. It is an offbeat corner of the Park—rugged and spectacular.

About 200 feet below Mt. Bruce's summit, scattered aluminum marks a spot where the single-greatest loss of life occurred in Yosemite's history.

On the evening of March 1, 1938, a TWA flight with six passengers and three crew struggled to gain altitude as ice robbed its wings of lift. Sometime before 10 p.m., the DC-2 sliced through lodgepole pines and smashed into the broken granite that forms the mountaintop.

The nine aboard did not suffer—but an ordeal was just beginning for the victims' loved ones.

Despite a large and sustained search, snowfall quickly buried the wreck. Not until more than three months later did 23-year-old H.O. Collier of Fresno locate the crash site after an arduous push over snow from Wawona. The young man was motivated, at least in part, by a \$1,000 reward offered by the airline.

Collier studied reports from previous searches. The experienced outdoorsman also knew the Sierra terrain.

In a scene repeated early this month—when a Park visitor found a single-engine aircraft and its dead pilot near Vogelsang High Sierra Camp—Collier stumbled on the crash site alone.

One can imagine Collier's thoughts as he approached the wreck and peered into the shadows. "There were two pine trees which had been broken off as the plane plunged toward the ground," Collier told journalists later. "I looked inside and saw eight bodies. They were unrecognizable."

Pumped with adrenaline, Collier grabbed a pilot's cap and plunged back through the drifts for 12 hours to Park headquarters, where he informed rangers.

Collier would later write an account of his discovery that he would try to sell to Reader's Digest magazine.

The publication turned him down. After scattered news reports, memories of the crash would fade with time.

Families of those lost on the stormy night would remember much longer. Aboard the San Francisco-to-Burbank flight were J. Tracy Dirlam, 22, and sister Mary Lou Dirlam, 19. Both were Stanford University students. Also aboard were Mr. and Mrs. L.B. Waltz of San Francisco, Victor Krause of Lincoln, Neb., and Martha M. Wilson of Philadelphia. Young Wilson was the flight's "stewardess"—in the days before flight attendants.

Rounding out the occupants were Hervey M. Salisbury, a TWA pilot traveling to Los Angeles. The pilot in command was John D. Graves. C.W. Wallace was the first officer.

While little recalled today, the tragic tale resurfaced through an odd occurrence several summers ago.

In June of 2009, Redlands antiques dealer Bob Hoskin found a cedar chest at a garage sale.

He was hooked when he saw a manila envelope with "Lost Airliner" written on it. Also in the chest were a TWA pilot's cap and two leather-bound magazines.

Interviewed last week, Hoskin recalled the discovery as one of the most intriguing of his career.

"Ironically enough, I bought (the items) at a garage sale on Buena Vista Street," he said.

The sale, it turned out, was at the home of the late H.O. Collier's daughter. With the artifacts in the cedar chest was one priceless document—a typed, 35-page account of Collier's search and discovery.



A June 1938 photo shows members of the original recovery party at the snow-covered wreck site. Heavy storms slammed the Sierra during the previous winter—including the epic March storm that led to the aircraft's demise.

"He said he found God on the trip," Hoskin related. "He became an ordained minister after finding the wreck."

Hoskin remains enthralled by the find. He has also pondered ways to make money on it—although that's not his first priority, he said.

Just weeks after finding the trove, Hoskin flew to Kansas City, Mo. to offer it for sale to the city's Airline History Museum.

He later brought the collection to a San Diego event sponsored by the PBS television series Antiques Roadshow.

While his meeting with a professional appraiser was recorded, it was not edited into the final show, he said.

The appraiser, though, thought the items might fetch \$6,000 or more at auction.

"It has the potential of being worth even more money," the antiques dealer said last week.

Hoskin has spoken with producers connected to the History Channel—and says they may create a documentary about the plane's disappearance and rediscovery.

There's no deal for the production yet. The crash story may remain a footnote of aviation history—and an obscure one at that.

G. Pat Macha, author of "Aircraft Wrecks in the Mountains and Deserts of California," and host of the History Channel's "Broken Wings" show, has never been to the wreck site.

"I did research on this many years ago," Macha told the GAZETTE. "The wreckage was dynamited, buried to some degree using rocks, and in later years, parts were packed out using



The crash site is located about 200 feet below Mt. Bruce's summit, which forms part of the Buena Vista Crest about 10 miles from Wawona. Pilot John D. Graves reported ice forming on the craft's wings before the impact.

mules."

A recent expedition reached the crash site after a seven-hour trek from the Quartz Mountain-Chiquito Pass trailhead in Sierra National Forest.

The mostly aluminum wreckage is scattered across several hundred square feet. The largest piece appears to be a crumpled fuel tank.

No plaque or memorial marks the spot. Human remains were packed out and returned to families long ago.

A short climb from the crash site, one can stand on Mt. Bruce and look towards Half Dome, the upper Merced River and a stretch of seldom-visited lakes.

All is quiet—and will likely remain so in this beautiful but solemn corner of Yosemite.



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While considerable crash debris remains on Mt. Bruce, Park crews burned much of the aluminum years ago in an attempt to reduce the aesthetic impact on the site, former Yosemite historian Jim Snyder said in a 2011 interview.



BOB HOSKIN COLLECTION | CONTRIBUTED

A pilot's cap and two leather-bound magazines recovered by Collier on Mt. Bruce are part of the collection purchased by antiques dealer Bob Hoskin at a Redlands garage sale in 2009. The collection, which includes additional documents, was appraised at \$6,000 by the PBS television series Antiques Roadshow, Hoskin said.