



PAPAHĀNAUMOKUĀKEA
Marine National Monument

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Life of a Brewster Pilot is Reminder of Courage and Sacrifice during Battle of Midway

The Battle of Midway (June 4-7, 1942) is considered the most decisive U.S. victory of World War II and is referred to as the turning point of the war in the Pacific. During this early era of air combat, what American aviators lacked in technology, they made up for in skill and bravery.

Outmatched by the far superior Japanese Zero aircraft, the U.S. squadrons knew the odds were against them as they entered into air combat flying the less maneuverable Brewster Buffalo, an aircraft commonly referred to as the “flying coffin.” Of the 19 Brewsters that took off from Eastern Island during the Battle of Midway, only four returned and of those, only two were operable.

In February of 1942 – mere months before the famous battle – a Brewster F2A-3 Buffalo made an emergency water landing during a squall in the lagoon at Midway Atoll, now a National Wildlife Refuge and part of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

The discovery of that plane last summer made headlines nationwide because of the rarity of finding such an aircraft; only one other has ever been found. This plane has been referred to by warbird aficionados as “the holy grail” of historic aircraft due to its unique history and short timeframe of use for American fighter pilots.

New information about the sunken plane at Midway reveals the remarkable story of the pilot, Lt. Col. Charles W. Somers, Jr., who survived the crash and went on to have a distinguished career as a U.S. Marine Corps aviator. In March of 1942 he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross after destroying a Japanese four-engine seaplane in combat. He went on to become one of the first officers attached to VMF-214, the famous Black Sheep Squadron and later participated in the Korean conflict.

“With this discovery, we are reminded of Midway’s role as a fortified outpost and a key naval and air battle station, and we get a deeper glimpse into this plane and the man who flew it,” said James Delgado, Director of NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries Maritime Heritage Program. “The discovery of the Brewster is another powerful reminder that oceans and lakes – in addition to being valuable natural resources – are also repositories of our history, from antiquity to the modern era.”

A team of researchers worked to put the pieces of the puzzle together with the help of several partners and collaborators. Scientists from the National Park Service Submerged Resources Center helped with on-site documentation. The National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Florida took a keen interest in the Brewster discovery and assisted with finding information about its pilot. Naval History and Heritage Command and SEARCH, Inc. both helped with the archival research.

“Being a maritime archaeologist often involves doing underwater detective work, and this was definitely a case where we had a big mystery to solve on the seafloor,” said Kelly Gleason, the maritime archaeologist for Papahānaumokuākea.



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“In this case, it was the distinctive landing gear that led us to believe we had a Brewster Buffalo. Following this determination, we did quite a bit of research to track down the story of the pilot.”

The Brewster F2A-3 Buffalo was part of VMF-221, the Marine Aviation Squadron based at Midway Atoll during WW2 and the Battle of Midway. Of the two Brewsters that were reported down near Midway, the plane discovered in 2012 was determined by its specific location to have been captained by Col. Somers. Oddly, his landing in the lagoon at Midway may have been fortuitous; shortly after the crash, he spent time on O’ahu to recover from an illness and therefore did not participate in the fateful Battle of Midway.

This find is the third historic aircraft documented to date in Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, and only the second at Midway Atoll. While archival records describe more than 70 potential aircraft losses within the Monument, this is the first aircraft discovered that was stationed at Midway to defend against the Japanese attack in 1942.

Keo Lopes, part of the NOAA marine debris team doing survey and cleanup work at Midway, discovered and reported the site. “It just so happens that [the discovery] coincided with the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Midway, so it was kind of a somber feeling...knowing that a lot of lives were lost in the battle.”

On September 13, 2000, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt designated the lands and waters of Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge as the Battle of Midway National Memorial, “so that the heroic courage and sacrifice of those who fought against overwhelming odds to win an incredible victory will never be forgotten.” This is the first National Memorial to be designated on a National Wildlife Refuge.

This site is a window into a fascinating era of aviation history, and a reminder of the bravery and sacrifice of World War II veterans. The story of Col. Charles W. Somers, Jr. helps to put a face on these men.

“History is about people like all of us, ordinary until extraordinary events at times help make people exceptional, said Delgado. “This discovery is a reminder of why there are special places in the oceans that are protected and how human stories like this connect us all to these places.”

The Pacific Aviation Museum Pearl Harbor is planning a Battle of Midway exhibit and hopes to include the story of this aircraft; the only other of its type is on display at the Aviation Museum of Central Finland.

“Buffalos were very common here on Ford Island,” said Pacific Aviation Museum Pearl Harbor Curator Burl Burlingame. “The Midway Brewster is a really integral part of aviation history, and we’d love if a piece of it could be preserved here at the museum.”

PMNM researchers hope to conduct more fieldwork at the site in the summer of 2014.

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