



World War II Helldiver plane lifted from reservoir

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John Gibbins

Salvors have successfully raised a navy Helldiver aircraft that crashed into Lower Otay Reservoir in 1945.



Photo by John Gibbins

Robert Kofnovec, left, was the regular Navy gunner on this aircraft, but he let an Army gunner go up the day of the crash. He greets Dick Frazar, the son of the pilot that made the emergency landing into the lake, while waiting to see the aircraft recovered.



E.D. Frazar shown flying an SB2C-4 Helldiver. Photo courtesy of Richard Frazar



Navy pilot E.D. Frazar before he boards an SB2C-4 Helldiver. Frazar was the pilot of the Helldiver that ditched into the Lower Otay Reservoir on May 28, 1945. Photo courtesy of Richard Frazar



Archives:

- [Recovery site photo gallery](#)
- [Family members tour World War II Helldiver's crash and recovery site \(8/17/10\)](#)
- [WWII plane's number doesn't match records \(7/31/09\)](#)
- [Pilot's son hopeful for salvage of plane \(7/29/09\)](#)
- [Local museum wants WWII plane, too \(7/23/09\)](#)
- [Naval museum likely to claim bomber if it is raised \(7/23/09\)](#)
- [Navy bomber intact but under sediment in lake \(7/22/09\)](#)
- [Museum wants to restore WWII plane \(7/22/09\)](#)
- [Salvage team to assess chances of raising sunken WWII Helldiver \(7/21/09\)](#)
- [Search for fish unearths history \(7/21/09\)](#)

SOUTH COUNTY — As the bent prop of the wounded, but still intact Helldiver bomber slowly emerged from Lower Otay Reservoir Friday afternoon, two F-18 Navy Hornets buzzed the lake.

Coincidence or tribute? No one was sure, but it sure looked like the new Navy was paying tribute to the men who fought before them, to a pilot's plane that finally, after more than 65 years on the muddy

bottom of Lower Otay Lake, was brought to the surface.

With a crowd of hundreds on shore, many applauding the sight, the SB2C-4 World War II Helldiver, which crashed into Lower Otay on May 28, 1945, finally was lifted from its muddy grave. Hundreds of people had gathered at the lake all week as the long and tedious process of raising the plane took longer than expected and involved more equipment. The plane was known as "The Beast" because pilots struggled to control it, and it was a monster to retrieve from Otay's mud.

When the plane finally surfaced and was lifted off the lake by a Brewer Crane & Rigging Terex crane out of Lakeside, two days later than the initial estimate, there was lots of emotion from the surviving family and relief for the crew that recovered it.

The engine was bashed and blackened, the tail was chewed up, but the plane still looked every bit the war machine it was during World War II. It was hard to believe such a plane could lay on the bottom of Lower Otay Lake in 85 feet of water for that long and go undetected. When it finally was suspended in the air, family members reacted.

"Oh man, look at that big old engine and tail; now there's a plane that hasn't been in the air in 65 years," said Richard Frazar, whose father, E.D. Frazar, of Richmond, Tx., was forced to ditch the Helldiver into Lower Otay when the engine on the plane failed. He and Army Sgt. Joseph Metz of Youngstown, Ohio, survived the crash, swam to shore and hitchhiked back to their base at Ream Field in the South Bay. Both have since passed away, but some members of their family enjoyed the day of remembrance that came with the sight of the men's plane.

"I just wish my dad was here to see this," added Frazar, a former Marine who was at his daughter's side when the plane surfaced. His daughter, Allison Davis, rescheduled several flights back to Texas to be on the Otay shoreline Friday. Frazar's wife, June, who flew out with her husband in the couple's private plane on Tuesday, had to return early Friday afternoon to be with their daughter who is leaving for college. Frazar will fly his single-engine, two-seater back to Texas today.

"The connection back to my father is just emotional," Frazar added. "With the pictures that we have of my dad actually flying this aircraft, that were actually taken when he was flying this plane, and the picture of him with his foot on the wing and ready to climb aboard, that's all a direct connection back to my dad. It's very meaningful, and I can't wait to go to Pensacola and take my granddaughters and grandsons there to see it when it's restored to it's flying condition."

Frazar later was given permission to climb aboard the plane and recreate his father's famous pose, with one foot on the Helldiver's wing, a stance that was captured in a photo that has been widely circulated since the story first broke in the San Diego Union-Tribune.

"That was an awesome feeling to get up there and touch the plane," Frazar said. "This has been an incredible week for me and my family. We've been treated so kindly. I know my father would have loved seeing the plane, but he was such a people person. He would have really enjoyed swapping stories and meeting Bob Kofnovec, his regular gunner who came down (from Santa Clarita) on Thursday."

Duane Johnson, the Pine Valley bass fisherman who discovered the plane on his Humminbird fish finder while fishing with his buddy, former Marine Curtis Howard of Alpine, also climbed aboard the plane. The tale seemed to come full circle when Union-Tribune photographer John Gibbins noticed fishing line and a sinker on the plane's prop. Johnson also volunteered and helped ranger-diver Kevin Kidd-Tackaberry control the slight spread of fluids from the plane.

As beat up as it was, with its tail chewed up, its engine dangling off the front, it was a beautiful sight to the city of San Diego ranger-divers and Chicago-based A&T Recovery crew that worked to free it from Otay's silt and mud. And it was especially a great sight to the relatives of the pilot and gunner who made journeys to see the raising.

Robert Metz, brother of the gunner, said he wished his brother could have been there to see the plane he was in that fateful day. Metz knew many family members such as his brother's wife, Hilda, and daughter, Debbie, were back in Ohio following the progress of the plane's recovery.

"I know my brother would have loved this," said Robert Metz, 85, younger brother of Joseph Metz. He was there with his son, Eric. "Looking at that plane makes you wonder how they'll ever restore it."

Thus ended a week of hard work and struggles for A&T Recovery, the Chicago-based salvage team hired by the National Naval Aviation Museum in Florida to retrieve the plane. A&T Recovery worked with the city of San Diego ranger-divers on the project. The museum's foundation used donated funds to cover the estimated \$125,000 for the recovery, including the city ranger-divers time.

There were setbacks due to a broken pump, and the crew underestimated the amount of mud and silt that surrounded the plane and was inside it. Visibility was zero at the plane. Divers talked of "Braille diving."

"This is the 38th plane we've recovered, but this one was particularly challenging because of the zero visibility," said A&T Recovery diver Keith Pearson. "I know every inch of this plane by feeling it in the dark down there."

A&T Recovery was assisted by Nelson Manville's ranger-diver team of Mark and Jim Miller (no relation), Patrick Walter and Kevin Kidd-Tackaberry. Mark Miller went all-in on Thursday when he ran out of air during a dive. He ended up spending nearly six hours in a hyperbaric chamber later, but he was back Friday to see the plane and help in any way he could.

"It's really something that we put a lot of work and energy into," Miller said. "Some people had doubts that we were going to get it up. But it's up. It's pretty intact, and it's great to see something on the surface that I was diving on all week, but never saw it."

Walter remembered the first dive that he and Jim and Mark Miller made on the plane. He spent hours of his own time that night checking the serial number of the plane. The Navy report had the wrong number on it, and it didn't match the plane. But records indicated it was Frazar's plane.

"This is a chance of a lifetime for us to work on a project like this," Walter said. "It's just been an awesome week for us."

Dredging and pumping took much longer than they thought, and it might have taken longer if the city of San Diego hadn't chipped in a dredger used during the hydrilla invasion at Lake Murray in the 1980s.

"Otay Lake kicked our butts," said Taras Lyssenko, the "T" in A&T Recovery. "We're used to working in Lake Michigan with no media around us, no constraints on our time. Here we had to operate under the constraints of the city of San Diego, and we had to deal with that bureaucracy. We don't work 9 to 5 on these jobs, but this week, we had to do that."

Al Olson, who the "A" in A&T Recover, said he didn't get that excited about it until the plane was

towed to the shoreline.

"As soon as we had it in 26 feet of water or so there, that's when you get the warm and fuzzy feeling that you know you have it," Olson said. "The situation out there, the zero visibility, what we call Braille diving in multiple shades of black. There's actually shades of jet black. But the thing is, I'm just so proud, and I know all of us on the team are proud, to recover a national treasure like this. Then to get that flyover from those F-18s, that was pretty special. I'm sure it was the Navy doing a special salute to one of their predecessors."

Olson knew the plane was there years ago, but when he visited Lower Otay to find it, he came up empty. Johnson and Howard saved his company a lot of time and money by finding the plane in February of 2009.

The National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Fla., will have the plane transported to Florida. The cost of the recovery was estimated to be \$125,000. Restoration could run \$200,000 and more, with the cost for the raising and all of the expenses for restoration coming from donations to the museum's foundation.

The National Naval Aviation Museum in Florida has been working to get the plane out of the lake, but it required city, state and county permits. Finally, on Monday, A&T Recovery began the process of raising the plane. Part of the agreement with the city of San Diego was the use of Manville's ranger-divers. The men drew praise from A&T's crew.

"Those city divers were amazing," said Todd Brown, equipment manager for A&T Recovery crew. "It was really great working with them. Despite all the problems, it was a great week."

In the end, no one knew for sure if the F-18 flyover was a coincidence or not, but one thing was certain, the former military personnel on the beach and in the crowd knew what they were seeing when they looked at the Helldiver as it rested proudly on the shoreline. Its size and look made it look all business at a lake that has been used for recreation for over half a century. Many of the biggest bass in the world are offspring of the bass that Orville P. Ball brought into Upper Otay from Florida in 1960 what was known as the Florida Bass Experiment.

But on this day, on this particular shoreline of Lower Otay, it was about paying tribute to men and women who served and men and women who will serve. Some left their lives on the battlefield. In this case, one left his plane in Lower Otay.

And if anyone had any doubt about what it meant to members of the Greatest Generation, all they had to do was look at the face and watch the body language of Bud Brain 89, a beloved member of the A&T Recovery team, as he held a tow rope to the national treasure.

Bud Brain, a rugged D-Day survivor, stood on the shore, holding that tow rope to the plane like he was latched onto his past. He stood there like a sentinel, statue-like. He stared at the plane the way an old soldier might look at a relic from his days in battle. He didn't move. He held the rope. His thoughts were of another time, another place when war machines like this SB2C-4 Helldiver, when men like Bud Brain, E.D. Frazar, Robert Kofnovec, Robert and Joseph Metz, changed the course of history.

Now it will be up to Capt. Bob Rasmussen, Vietnam War hero and former Blue Angel pilot, to oversee the restoration at the National Naval Aviation Museum. As president of the Naval museum, he knows the significance of the plane, one of only six believed to exist, and possibly the only SB2C-4 model.

After 65 years at the muddy bottom of Lower Otay, it will go to its rightful place there and in history.

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