

An Aircraft Historian's Logbook

G. Pat Macha found his first plane crash site in the early '60s. Still in high school and working as a guide at a mountain camp at the time, he discovered a thrill for the chase that has never left him.

Today a retired history teacher, Macha has become one of the go-to guys for anyone trying to find or identify a crash site. Some call it aircraft archaeology. Others call it wreck finding or wreck chasing. Macha refers to himself as an aircraft historian. But whatever you call it, his passion has taken him from the San Bernardino Mountains locally to Hawaii, Alaska, Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands abroad, always on the hunt for that next elusive find.



G. Pat Macha, 1964

In the early 1980s, Macha's work took on new meaning as he began leading survivors and family members of the deceased back to the original crash sites. For many, Macha says, such a trek can bring a sense of closure.

What follows are a few selections from the log of an intrepid "wreck finder."



First wreck, a C-47. A yellow or red "X" is used to mark crash sites.

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Beechcraft Model 95 Travelair

June 8, 1964 - Businessman and pilot Rex C. Corder approaches Ontario Airport with two passengers, Curtis F. Turrill and Ray E. Snodgrass, in his private plane. Bad weather means Corder will have to make an instruments-only landing.

When a controller at nearby March Air Force Base misidentifies Corder's aircraft and advises him away from the airport, Corder, unable to see through the clouds, punches his plane directly into the side of a mountain. An investigation by the Civil Aeronautics Board attributes the accident to controller error and bad weather.

Aug. 26, 2007 - Macha visits the site again, but this time with Corder's son, Jeff, and an entire team, including an Orange County park ranger. Jeff Corder spends some time alone among the wreckage of his father's plane. The group places a memorial plaque honoring Rex Corder and pays tribute to the two passengers who also died in the crash.



Macha and Jeff Corder, 2007

Summer, 1965 - Macha, working at YMCA's Camp Conrad in the San Bernardino Mountains, stumbles upon the wreckage of Corder's plane. He adds it to a database he has created to track his finds. Two years later he returns to show his wife.



Rex C. Corder

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U.S.M.C. Beechcraft SNB-5

FOUND



Nov. 18, 1950. Marine Corps MSgt. William H. Folmer takes off from an airstrip in Tucson, Ariz., on a training flight bound for MCAS El Toro in Orange County, Calif. He is sharing the cabin with his co-pilot, TSgt. Keith M. Ferguson, the student pilot Lt. Willard M. "Bill" Grubbs, and Sgt. Milton E. Johanson. They experience heavy winds, fog and rain on approach to El Toro. Placed in a holding pattern by the control tower because of a technical problem on the ground, and thinking they are flying through clouds, they smash straight into the mountainside while waiting for clearance. All four of the crew die.

Summer, 2007. Macha returns, this time with a team, including a Cleveland National Forest ranger. The chaparral is still thick, but the team does discover some of the wreckage.

May 19, 2008. Macha returns with a team to place a memorial canister at the site. Almost exactly one year later, he takes several of the crew's next of kin to visit the site and pay their respects, including Grubbs' son and Ferguson's niece and daughter.



A cross instead of an "X"

Feb. 1965. Macha first visits the site of the crash, but it is overgrown with chaparral and difficult to document. Someone has painted a yellow cross onto a rock outcropping nearby, a twist on the usual crash site "X" and likely left to honor the fallen.



1st. Lt. Bill Grubbs

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Lockheed SP2E Neptune

Feb. 11, 1969. Naval Reserve Lt. Cdr. Robert F. Coad pilots an antisubmarine bomber on a training flight out of Los Alamitos. Six of the seven on board that day are practicing "touch-and-go" landings at El Toro Marine Base. The weather is bad, obscuring the mountains. Coad is at the controls when the plane slams into the mountains in Cleveland National Forest, killing everyone.

FOUND



Tail from fallen Neptune



Lt. Cdr. Bob Coad



Neptune in flight

Sept. 2008. Macha guides several of Coad's family members to the site, including his son, Robert F. Coad Jr., and three of his daughters. The wreckage left at the site includes parts of the fuselage, two propellers, part of a wing and communication equipment, according to a story by KABC-TV. The Navy had removed the bodies back in 1969, but the site remained all but forgotten until a series of powerful wildfires swept the area, clearing the brush.



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North American B-25D Mitchell

Oct. 2, 1944. Marie Michell Robinson gets an unexpected request to take her roommate's place as co-pilot on a B-25 bomber. A member of the pioneering Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP, she is among the first women ever trained to fly U.S. military planes. She joins the pilot, 1st Lt. George D. Rosado, and crew chief Staff Sgt. Gordon L. Walker on a flight officially listed as her training. Unfortunately, the plane goes down 25 miles west of Victorville, Calif., where she was stationed. No one survives. Shortly after the accident, her family learns she had secretly married an Army doctor only weeks before. She was 20 years old.

FOUND



Robinson's WASP lapel pin found



Robinson's personal effects

Feb. 2005. Macha and several associates track down the wreckage and find personal effects from the crew, including Robinson's WASP lapel pin. Arrangements are made to return the artifacts to the family members where possible. Robinson's effects are sent to the WASP museum in Texas.

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The search continues...

For an aviation historian, there will always be more sites to find. The following wrecks are toward the top of Macha's list.



Lt. David Steeves

Lockheed T-33 Trainer. When Lt. David Steeves crashed his trainer jet in the Sierra Nevada, he managed to stay alive for nearly two months in the wilderness. He made it out only to die in another plane crash in 1965. Several Boy Scouts came across the canopy from his first crash in 1977, but the bulk of the wreckage remains to be found.



Curtiss P-40 Tomahawk. Army Lt. Leonard C. Lydon bailed out of his plane in 1941 after he and his squadron got lost in the Sierra Nevada. Lydon survived that incident, but his plane was never found. He was later killed in Europe during World War II.

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North American P-51D Mustang

One of Macha's top priorities now is to find the wreckage from the crash of Gertrude Tompkins Silver, the only WASP left from World War II who is still unaccounted for.

Oct. 26, 1944. Silver takes off in a brand-new P-51D Mustang from Mines Field, an airstrip at the current site of Los Angeles International Airport. Her mission is to deliver the fighter plane to Newark, New Jersey. Silver is never seen again. She had just been married.



Gertrude "Tommy" Tompkins Silver



Silver in WASP dress uniform

Summer, 2010. Macha will help to coordinate a search for Silver's plane in Santa Monica Bay, complete with divers, sonar technicians, and aircraft and marine archaeologists. The search for Gertrude "Tommy" Tompkins Silver's wrecked P-51 has become something of a celebrity case. In July 2009 President Barack Obama signed an order awarding Congressional Gold Medals to all 300 surviving WASPs, bringing new attention to the story of the female pilots. Experts had been searching for Silver's plane for years, and their focus has been on Santa Monica Bay since at least 2005. But finding the wreckage of Silver's plane now has added significance and would bring a sense of closure to an often overlooked period of World War II history.

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Images courtesy of Airwrecks.com



G. Pat Macha and son, Patric Macha, at a crash site.

“Accidents are part of aviation history. There’s the human side of it. It’s not just a piece of metal. When you visit a crash site in a remote location, you’re touching the past, you’re going back and you’re right there. You’re going back to a moment in time. It’s not like a traffic accident that’s cleaned up and forgotten about. Many of us seem to need to go back to that spot or touch that spot. It brings peace to us. That’s what I’ve observed, what has been so satisfying. Whenever we can bring closure to next of kin, then I’m compelled—and the guys I work with are compelled—to do that.” — G. Pat Macha

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