

STORIES OF TWO NAVY HELLDIVER CRASHES

In the Spirit of '45, I would like to tell you about how history does not die, it evolves and even comes back full force into the present sometimes! My story about the fatal crashes of two Navy Helldiver bombers, one crash that I witnessed in March 1945, and the other fatal crash which happened in March 1948, have come together 65 years later, amazingly, in the same month of March, 2010.



This is my story: I was sitting at my word processor one day in 2003, wondering what mark I would be leaving in the sands of time, when I realized that my story as a pioneer female in the military during WWII was worth recording. So I wrote a book about my experiences in the control tower at NAS Astoria. The one happening, which was indelible in my memory, was watching the crash of an SB2C-3 which was taken up by a chief aviation pilot who had made a bet the night before that he could pull a Helldiver out of a flat spin. A Helldiver was not an easy plane to fly, let alone maneuver, according to most Navy pilots. In fact, it had some nicknames such as The Beast, and Son of a Bitch Second Class (their words, not mine). The tower personnel watched as he gained altitude

down along the Coast Range east of Seaside, went into broad flat spins, then disappeared below the horizon.

In due Navy procedure, the pilot's body was removed the next day, and the wreckage was left behind. In my best recall, his fatal crash occurred sometime in March of 1945, a little after 8 a.m. when I was coming off the graveyard shift...the full picture which had returned in living color as I was writing about this recollection.

Fast forward from my writing the book in 2003, to 2005. I'm sitting in the family room around 8:30 one night when the phone rings and a nice sounding gentleman's voice says, "This is Ralph Hawes, jr. Are you Margaret Parent Lutz who was a WAVE control tower operator at NAS Astoria airbase in 1945, and your First Class was Walter Traglio, and you had another controller by the name of Edna Peterson from San Francisco working with you?" I froze, then asked, "Who are you and where are you calling from?"

"I'm calling from Sycamore, Georgia, and I'm a Naval Archivist who lived in Warrenton in 1945. I have spent my life collecting data about the activities at NAS Astoria." Thinking I needed to verify him, I asked, "Do you have any information on the fatal crash of an SB2C-3 on a Sunday in March, 1945?" There was a moment of silence as keys clicked on a keyboard. Then he began reading "Stanley Thompson was the pilot, the crash occurred at 8:45 a.m. on March 21st, (remember that date of the 21st) about 7 miles above Wheeler, Oregon, and he was doing flat spins." That news confirmed the accuracy of my memory, but strangely enough, brought me near to tears once again with the recall. I asked for and received the official Navy record of the incident, which is an insert in the back of every one of my books.

That was 2005. Now, fast forward again to March (that special month) of 2010. Most recently, on March 19th, I received an email from Christian Gurling who is the curator of the Tillamook Air Museum, saying, Peggy, yesterday a logging crew from Stimson Logging Company discovered the wreckage of an SB2C-5, and I'm wondering if that's the same plane you watched go down from the tower in 1945? I responded that it couldn't be because mine was an SB2C-3, and I have the official record declaring that

it was a 3. Christian said the site had been secured by the Navy, FBI, OR State Police and that no one was allowed there until information was released by the Navy, but could he tell them about my witnessing experience? Well, four days later I was called by Channel 2 and Channel 8 and asked for interviews about my memories because this was an identical type of plane, and no one knew yet where this plane had been based, or exactly when it went down. Could they be the same? No, and I explained. But the interviews went on, and on the 6 o'clock news that night of March 23rd, the anchor said, "Good story, Brian," to which Brian Tilkin responded, "Isn't it coincidental that it was 65 years ago almost to today, that Peggy Lutz watched the fatal crash of an SB2C Navy Helldiver in approximately the same part of the Coast Range." See how history evolves?

While the investigation was going on, Christian Gurling took the ID numbers and went to the Naval Archives where he learned that indeed, that plane was attached to, and flew out of NAS Tillamook on that fateful day of – guess what—March 31st of 1948. With that information this finding now became his piece of history! Since June, Christian has relentlessly researched, found where the pilot is buried, checked there and received a newspaper story that confirmed that CAP Robert Smedley was 29 years old, had a wife and an 8 ½ month old baby girl named Susan. Christian then went on a search for daughter Susan. He has found her, now in her 60's, living in Atlanta, GA, and totally thrilled to learn that her father's accident is being memorialized at the Tillamook Air Museum. And would you believe: her married name, Thompson, is the same as the pilot of the 1945 crash, i.e. Stanley Thompson!

The details of CAP Smedley's fatal flight can be read on the official Accident Findings Report. The crash site eight miles up a logging road out of Wheeler, has now been opened up, but there is little left to see. Plus, the investigation was so thorough that even a few cockpit switches were found, along with some fragments of a leather flight jacket, and those are in the possession of Christian Gurling as he pieces together the 65-year-old story of that crash.

The crash I witnessed March 21, 1945, is still undiscovered, no doubt silently blanketed by nature's cycle of growth and decay.

Isn't it amazing how our memories get imprinted in such indelible ways. and isn't it even more amazing how history can parallel itself, repeat itself, or go silent then come back to do closure decades later. As Paul Harvey would say, "Now you know the rest of the story." In fact, two stories, 65 years old, totally unrelated except by the month of March, that came back to life together in the same month of March, 2010.