



PAPAHĀNAUMOKUĀKEA Marine National Monument

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World War II Era Fighter Plane Discovered at Midway Atoll

(Honolulu) – Maritime archaeologists working with NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service discovered the remains of a sunken World War II era P-40K Warhawk fighter aircraft while doing research in Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument aboard NOAA Ship *Hi’ialakai* in August. The wreckage was found in about 25 feet of water off the southeast side of the barrier reef within the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge and Battle of Midway National Memorial.

Building upon several years of archival research, oral histories and eye-witness interviews, the three-person Maritime Heritage team led by Monument Maritime Heritage Coordinator Kelly Gleason spent several days surveying potential aircraft crash site locations.

“This discovery is a compelling reminder of the history that rests on the seafloor at Midway Atoll,” said Gleason. “Sunken aircraft sites like the P-40K Warhawk convey the sacrifices these young aviators made throughout World War II in the Pacific. Archaeology is an exciting way we can help to uncover these stories of bravery and resilience.”

During drift dive and towboard surveys at an area off Eastern Island, the site of Midway’s historic runways, the team found various artifacts: an engine, landing gear, numerous .50-caliber shells with the markings “1941” and several other objects. A few hundred feet away, the team found three propeller blades (one with a hub still attached), a strut, three .50-caliber machine guns, a machine gun muzzle, dozens of .50-caliber shells and other aircraft parts.

“This is an exciting time for the refuge,” said U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Refuge Manager Dan Clark. “Discovering this wreckage is a tangible reminder of the sacrifice of so many for our freedom. We honor our American heroes as the find continues to remind us why Midway Atoll is a national memorial in addition to a wildlife refuge that deserves the continued underwater research efforts by NOAA’s Maritime Heritage Program. As a former Coast Guard aviator, I am humbled to know another important part of our national aviation history has now been discovered.”

Conducting research back aboard the ship, the team determined that the engine was an Allison V-1710, used in Curtiss P-40K Warhawk airplanes, and that the landing gear was consistent with what would be found on such an aircraft. The machine gun muzzle contained an attached plate that identified the type of gun and aircraft it belonged to, also pointing to a Curtiss P-40K Warhawk. According to archival records, only one P-40K Warhawk wrecked at the east of the reef of Eastern Island at Midway Atoll in February 1943, when the plane’s controls froze and the pilot, Lt. Ray Obenshain, Jr., parachuted to safety.

Further research by the maritime heritage team uncovered that this particular plane was part of the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) 78th Fighter Squadron, which made aviation history in the planning and execution of the longest over-water flight of a single engine, land-based



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airplane ever attempted. The squadron was stationed at Midway from January 23 until April 21, 1943; their mission was to protect the island, its garrison and fortifications and the submarine and communications base from enemy attacks.

The team documented the site with measured sketches, a preliminary site map and photographs. Further research is ongoing.

The Monument has at least 60 potential shipwreck sites and 70 potential sunken aircraft sites; to date, 22 of these have been discovered and documented. This is the fourth historic WWII era aircraft discovered within the Monument.

Pictures are available [here](#).

Papahānaumokuākea is cooperatively managed to ensure ecological integrity and achieve strong, long-term protection and perpetuation of Northwestern Hawaiian Island ecosystems, Native Hawaiian culture, and heritage resources for current and future generations. Three co-trustees - the Department of Commerce, Department of the Interior, and State of Hawai'i - joined by the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, protect this special place. Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument was inscribed as the first mixed (natural and cultural) UNESCO World Heritage Site in the United States in July 2010. For more information, please visit www.papahanaumokuakea.gov.

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