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Chasing Shadows—

The Search for Northwest Flight 2501

by Valerie van Heest



Northwest's N95425 was noteworthy as it was the first C-54A Skymaster built by Douglas in Chicago (Orchard Place Airport, now O'Hare), in 1943. Intended for Línea Aéropostal Venezolana (LAV) but never delivered, this C-54 was converted to commercial standard at Santa Monica in 1946. The following April, Northwest acquired the airplane. This rare original black & white photo of Fleet No 425 has been retouched into a color image.

Today, aircraft fatalities occur with less frequency than those caused by automobiles; however, during the early years of commercial aviation there were many accidents.



February 1950 timetable promotion for Air Coach.

One such misfortune occurred on June 23, 1950, when Northwest Orient Airlines experienced its fifth fatal crash in two years. At 2030lt, Flight 2501, a Douglas DC-4 with 55 passengers and three crewmembers, left LaGuardia Airport, New York, heading nonstop for Minneapolis/St Paul, Minnesota. At 2313, when

in the vicinity of a squall line over Lake Michigan, Captain Robert C Lind requested clearance to 2,500ft. Air Traffic Control denied the request because of traffic in the area. That was the last communication from NWA2501. By dawn, evidence of a tragedy was apparent. Floating for miles off the coast of western Michigan, near the city of South Haven, were fragments of the airplane and human remains. An oil slick and more debris were discovered by a US Coast Guard cutter in Lake Michigan, approximately 18mi (29km) northwest of Benton Harbor.

With the loss of DC-4 Fleet No 425 (N95425) and all 58 souls onboard, Flight 2501 ranked as the worst US commercial aviation disaster at the time. Despite a week-



Headline story from The Seattle Times.

long search by the Coast Guard and Navy, the bulk of the wreckage was not located and the cause of the crash never determined.

In 2003, over a half-century after the crash, my organization, Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates, set out to do what no-one, not even the United States government or other shipwreck hunters, had been able to do: discover the remains of Flight 2501 and answer the question of what had caused the crash. For nearly 20 years as a diver and historian, I have been involved in searching for and documenting historic shipwrecks. Airplanes are

outside my area of expertise, but I felt that this 'landmark' accident warranted our attention. In considering the logistics of such a search, however, we realized that trying to locate small fragments of aluminum scattered over the lake bottom would be quite different than looking for a 200ft (60m)-long intact wooden vessel.

To search for shipwrecks we use side scan sonar. A 50kHz torpedo-like 'fish' is towed behind the boat, in a pattern much like mowing a lawn. The sonar sends out acoustic signals at a downward angle with a range of 2,000ft (600m) per side. As the signals strike an object on the bottom, the sonar converts the return echoes into an image which is plotted on the topside unit. The acoustic 'shadow' of an object represents its height. To search for the smaller, football-size objects of aircraft debris, however, would require using high-frequency 500kHz sonar with a maximum range of 300ft (90m) per side. Clearly, with an 83% reduction in range capability, a search for DC-4 wreckage would be very consuming and costly beyond our means.

As a result of media coverage in 2004, internationally acclaimed author and shipwreck hunter Clive Cussler heard of our interest in finding Flight 2501 and offered to support our effort. He sent Ralph Wilbanks, one of the nation's preeminent sonar operators, to work with us. Cussler and Wilbanks had found dozens of the world's most famous lost vessels, including the Civil War submarine *Hunley*, and they were determined to find the DC-4. We researched the crash using data from the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) report, Coast Guard and Navy log books, historic weather records, and newspaper accounts, and determined a probable search area. At 80sq mi (200km²), it was still a huge expanse.

Using his 500kHz sonar, Wilbanks scanned the lake bottom for a month in 2004, 2005, and 2006. In that time we covered a total of 45sq mi (115km²) working in 200 to 250ft (60-75m)-deep water. Serendipitously, we located three shipwrecks; however, the wreckage of Flight 2501 remains elusive.

With confidence that we will eventually locate the remains of Flight 2501, I began a parallel but different sort of pursuit: to find the living relatives of those who perished and piece together the human portrait of what was lost that night. Because this accident occurred a half



The approximate site of the crash.

century ago, I realized there would be many people still alive who lost a loved one in this accident. To prevent any shock these family members might experience upon hearing media announcements that will inevitably follow a successful discovery, I set out to find these individuals before the discovery is made. When one woman scarred by the tragedy told me, "I've been waiting fifty-six years for this phone call," I knew I was doing the right thing. To date I have located almost half of the Flight 2501 families, and they have all expressed support for the project.

As a shipwreck hunter, I love the challenge of finding lost historical vessels, however locating the families of Flight 2501 victims has been the biggest challenge of my life and the most rewarding. Their stories of persevering in the aftermath of such tragedy are inspiring. Fifty-seven years later these individuals, many in their eighties and nineties, still seek answers. For them, finding the wreckage will hold the most significance.

My search for families has also led me to many people: Rick Cochran, a Northwest radio operator on duty that night; Joseph Kimm, Northwest's chief pilot in 1950; John Peterson, a Northwest mechanic who serviced N95425; and Freddie Stripe, a Capital Airlines pilot flying ten minutes behind NWA2501 the night of the crash. These persons have been able to offer unique insights into the events surrounding the accident, and flying in the Fifties. I also discovered a woman who gave up her ticket on Flight 2501 a few hours before it took off and drove to Minneapolis instead. To this day, Arlene Savitt lives life to its fullest, believing that she was spared for a reason.



Ralph Wilbanks searches for Flight 2501 off South Haven, Michigan.

The search for the lost Flight 2501 resumes in May 2007 for 30 days. Joining the expedition this year are scientists with the US Coast Guard and NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), who have offered additional technology to help pinpoint the crash site. We are hopeful that we will locate the wreck this year and engage experts who may be able to determine the cause of the accident. A memorial service will be held at the site of the crash for those who perished. After more than 50 years, families can bid their loved ones a final farewell. →

(For more information about this project, visit www.northwestflight2501.org. Valerie van Heest welcomes any and all contact through her website if you have an interest in this project or connection to this accident.)