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“Trail leads aviation experts to site of 1961 plane crash”

By Wayne Harroun

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(Article is based on research and discovery of the wreckage by a U-Trail expedition)

The Forest Service in the 1950's began using airplanes to fight fires. In the beginning, it was a risky business for the pilots -- and still is today. While an effective fire-fighting tool, the aircraft flew at low altitudes, at low speeds, and over treacherous terrain. In June, a group of pilots decided to visit a crash in the Gila Wilderness near Glenwood, drawn in the same fashion as sailors are fascinated by the Titanic. The World War II vintage PBM Avenger -- the plane of choice for fire bombers in the 50's and 60's -- had gone down in June 1961, killing its pilot, the sole occupant. In June, Ed Harrow, retired Air Force colonel and executive director of the Pima Air and Space Museum in Tucson, AZ, visited the crash site. "We were looking for a unique aviation experience," Harrow said. He called U-Trail, a Glenwood outfitter, to guide a group to the site. "We were able to go down the trail, riding in about four hours, he said. "We camped, then rode to the crash site and spent a couple of hours." The trip into the wilderness was part of a package auctioned at a museum fund-raiser. Al Bowemaster of Massachusetts purchased the trip. Bowemaster said he attempted to research the crash, and call the National Transportation Safety Board, but found few details. The bright-orange-painted airplane bore the name of the Ritchey Flying Services, Silver City-Prescott, but records in Grant County say the pilot worked for Sonora Flying Service of Columbia, Calif., at the time of the accident. Harry Bright of Silver City was then an 18-year old Forest Service firefighter working to extinguish what he recalls as the Skeleton Fire when the Avenger crashed. "I and Herb Stacey were stationed at Apache Cabin," Bright said. "We followed the Redstone Trail and Whitewater Creek to get to a lighting-caused fire -- it was rough and overgrown country." Bright then became occupied at some distance from the main crew. He paused as the No. 1 Avenger dumped its load of the fire retardant, borate. Then the second aircraft, piloted by 35-year old Verle C. Beede of New York, began its approach. Bright watched the plane struggle to clear a ridge, and fail. "I think it was Skeleton Ridge," he said. "He just couldn't clear the ridge. I believe the bomb bay door caught the ridge or a tree, and it came flying off, right at me," Bright recalled. "I dived behind a tree, and the thing hit the top of the tree I was behind." Bright, from his position on a hillside, then glanced up and into the eyes of the pilot, just dozens of feet away, as he was looking out the cockpit at his severely damaged right wing." In the few seconds, since clipping the ridge top, the Avenger was ripping through treetops. "He crashed into the base of Willow Mountain," Bright said. "There was no room for error. "I went down there to the crash, then climbed back on the ridge trying to raise Calvin Salars at dispatch," he said. "I hollered into the radio big and loud and as cussing." Finally, Bright reached a spot where the radio signal cleared the terrain. "Salars said, 'Just tell me one thing, then get off the radio -- is there any sign of life?' "No", Bright told him. The Avengers were all war surplus, most owned by the pilots, or by partnerships or small flying services. It is a huge

craft, pulled by a single, massive radial engine. Some will recognize it as the type of aircraft piloted in the Pacific war zone by a young George Bush, who flew combat missions in the Navy at 19. Avenger pilots, according to Forest Service old-timers, were a rare breed. As a high school and college student in the 60's Chris Raphael of Silver City spend summers on fire crews on national forests in Idaho. "I saw them all the time," said Raphael, who later spent five years in the Air Force as a pilot. He suspects that not all the aircraft were maintained in tip-top conditions due to low budgets. In those days, pilots and planes just stood by and waited for a call. They were paid only when they were able to deliver a load on a fire. One of the pilots had a oil line break and had to set down on a Forest Service dirt strip no more than 2,200 feet long, grossly inadequate for the big plane. He got in safely, but how was he going to get out? After unloading every ounce of unessential equipment to lighten the plane, the pilot made one brief, abortive attempt. The young Forest Service workers brainstormed the problem, and attached the brush and trees at the end of the runway with axles and chain saws, gaining about a 30-yard advantage. With all but about 20 gallons of fuel dropped to further reduce weight, the aircraft was pulled into the clearing, and a rope was lashed between the tail wheel and sturdy tree. One of the boys swung a sharp ax severed the rope, and the plane lurched forward. "He cleared the trees at the end of the runway by about 30 feet," Raphael said. Jack Foster of Silver City worked on the Prescott National Forest in Arizona before joining the Gila Forest staff. He retired in 1972 after working with early firefighting aviation crews. "In the middle to late 50's, we started out with one of the big PBM Avengers," Foster said. "Then we went to bigger, twin-and four-engine aircraft. "Nobody seemed to realize how dangerous it was," he said. "One pilot took off from Prescott to dump slurry on a fire in the Tonto National Forest," Forest said. After the retardant was unloaded, he circled the fire a couple of times to admire his work. "That 60 seconds or so made a big difference," Foster said. The pilot ran out of gas and landed on a flat spot about a half-mile short of the Prescott runway. "By the time I got there, the pilot was out of the plane and walking around," he said. "I asked, 'Are you hurt?'" "Only my pride," the pilot replied. While the philosophy at the Forest Service has changed from fighting every blaze, to managing some burns and fighting only dangerous or destructive wild-fires, pilots in old airplanes are still called on to fight fires, and sometimes they crash and sometimes they die. It's a risky business.