

# HIDDEN IN PLANE SIGHT

*Text and photos by Dennis D. Burns, Esq., and Ruth Yu, M.D., Ph.D.*

While diving in shallow water just off the coast of San Diego in June 2014, we came upon the wreckage of a Korean-War-era U.S. attack aircraft. Even though the wreckage lies in less than 60 feet of water in an area traversed by hundreds of recreational and commercial dive boats annually, it has remained either undiscovered or unreported for more than 61 years.

Our first encounter with the aircraft occurred while we were sonar mapping the seafloor near our home in La Jolla, Calif. The discovery was unlikely; aboard our 13-foot dinghy we were equipped only with a consumer-level side-scanning Humminbird sonar and a lot of patience.

When we first dived the site in November 2013, only a few inches of what was then just an unidentifiable metal mass poked out from underneath the hard-packed sandy bottom. By chance, when we decided to revisit the site seven months later to look for some smaller targets we had previously recorded, we were stunned to see the outline of an entire airplane emerge from the gloom as we descended. The winter storms had apparently swept away enough of the sand to transform the obscure metal mass into the remains of a vintage aircraft.

We contacted several aviation and wreck-hunting experts to identify the aircraft. They helped us use the Bureau of Aeronautics registration plate on the fuselage to positively identify the craft as an A-1 Skyraider.

**The 18-cylinder engine of a Douglas A-1 Skyraider protrudes from the sand in 60 feet of water off the coast of San Diego.**



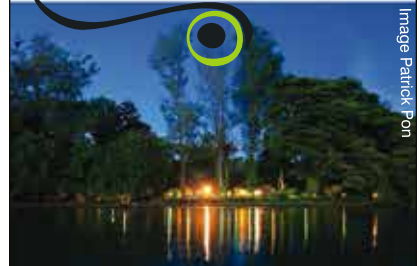
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DIVE SLATE //



Clockwise from far left: The Skyraider's Bureau of Aeronautics identification plate; the autopilot inverter control and interior light control in the cockpit; 20mm cannons on the Skyraider's wing; the aircraft aboard the USS *Antietam* prior to its crash

The information on the plate allowed us to access naval records that revealed the plane's production in 1951, its service history and its ultimate demise on May 19, 1953. Surprisingly, we also found a photograph of the aircraft taken during its assignment to the aircraft carrier USS *Antietam*.

According to the official incident report, the pilot ditched the warbird after experiencing engine trouble during a training exercise. He managed

to land the plane in one piece on the ocean's surface; he exited the craft without incident and was rescued by a helicopter. The plane reportedly sank less than one minute after it landed. Just days after the crash, the Navy began a 12-day salvage operation, but it ultimately proved unsuccessful.

The A-1 Skyraider, manufactured by the Douglas Aircraft Co., is sometimes colloquially referred to as the "Dump Truck" due to its capacity to deliver

extraordinarily large loads of ordinance to a target — even as much as the much larger B-17 bomber. Skyraider aircraft served extensively in both the Korean and Vietnam wars and were among the only propeller-driven aircraft to take down jet-powered MiG fighters in combat.

Although this particular Skyraider has been underwater for more than 60 years, its 50-foot wingspan remains largely intact. Four 20mm cannons,

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in two pairs, adorn the wings. Its enormous 18-cylinder engine is broken away from the fuselage and lies next to the portside wing, partially buried in the seafloor. The cockpit, torn open and exposed, contains instruments, controls and the pilot's seat and safety harness. Scores of electrical switches and circuit breakers line both sides of the cockpit.

The remains of the fuselage, aft of the cockpit, contain scattered remnants of mechanical debris as well as a rubber-coated self-sealing fuel tank. The tail section has collapsed and is buried or missing. Shiny stainless steel tubing and structural debris litter the inside and outside of the fuselage.

The wreck site does not appear on any known map or other marine navigational resource, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's listing of known sunken vessels and aircraft. Besides a 1953 newspaper article reporting the crash, no other information about it has been published.

Since discovering the wreck site we have learned that most professional wreck hunters maintain a strict practice of not publicizing the location of discoveries to preserve the sites for as long as possible. Though we are by no means professional wreck hunters, we have also chosen to adhere to this practice.

Federal law strictly protects the wreckage of any U.S. military aircraft. The aircraft, its artifacts and debris field may not be "disturbed" without severe civil and even criminal penalties pursuant to the Sunken Military Craft Act of 2004.

We have contacted several aviation-history museums in an attempt to solicit preservation or recovery of the aircraft via a permit from the Navy. Until such efforts bear fruit, the wreck will be left intact in its present position, awaiting discovery by the next curious divers looking for a new dive spot and an exciting glimpse of aviation history.



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