

Crew III of this year's Expedition 625-L has returned safely from Trek 8 (6-mile Gate to Baldy and return via Webster turnaround). While at Copper Park we made a concerted effort to visit the site of the 1988 bomber crash on French Henry (it's really on Carson National Forest land, but accessible from Baldy or Copper Park). If you think it appropriate, I'd like to include some information about the event in my write-up for your page. I searched your web site, but could only find information on the B-24 Liberator crash on Trail Peak during WW II. Did I miss it, or can you point me to a URL where I could review what information already exists on the 1988 crash?

[ A brief NTSB report of the accident can be found at JUN-26-88 (crash near Baldy) --- Selden]

As I am sure you know, the crash site as marked on the 1:24,000 Philmont North County map is in error. It would be my intention not to reveal publicly the actual coordinates of the crash site unless someone seeking that information promised as a Scout to respect the site and not to remove or disturb anything there.

From what we could tell from the actual wreckage, the aircraft was a former B-26 bomber manufactured by the Douglas Aircraft Company in April, 1950. It must have been declared surplus, for the fuselage carried the civilian identification number N4813E. There were three wooden memorial plaques on an adjacent tree as follows:

ED COUNSELMAN  
7-27-43 / 6-2-88

BILL MURRAY  
5-4-52 / 6-26-88

In loving memory  
Our Bill ~ Dad and Mom  
May 4, 1952 - June 26, 1988

There were numerous ball caps in the wreckage marked "Douglas A-26 Invader".

We also found a very faded circular patch. The surface was almost illegible, but by turning it over and reading it as if in a mirror, we made out the words, "302 SPECIAL OPERATIONS SQUADRON - ANYWHERE ANYTIME". The central image appeared to be a helicopter diving into a valley.

We went to the crash site partially for the adventure, and partially to test my GPS. On the first attempt, we inserted the map UTM coordinates marked "Airplane Crash Site" into my GPS and made a bee-line for the indicated position. Once we reached the point indicated by the GPS, we searched unsuccessfully in the growing darkness and finally had to abandon the search for that day. The crew was quite disappointed, and said so in that night's session of "roses and thorns". We had been treating it as a simulated Search

and Rescue mission to acquaint the boys with the difficulty encountered just trying to get to wreckage in real situations. I told the Scouts that either the site was marked incorrectly on the map, or else I had entered the coordinates incorrectly. This gave me a good opportunity to review GPS skills with them, and we concurred that the coordinates were indeed entered with sufficient accuracy that we should have found the wreck if it had indeed been where the map says it was.

The next day was our Baldy side hike from Copper Park. We eschewed a suggestion to hike up early in the morning to watch the sunrise because of fear of accidents on a dark trail, and because Philmont discourages hiking in darkness. Instead we had a wholesome breakfast and left Copper Park sometime after 7:00 a.m. We played in the snow patches on the way up. The snowball battles and "skiing" were enjoyable. As the pitch of the slope increased, we made a pact that since we were a crew that had really bonded together as a team, whichever folks reached the summit first would wait for the rest of the crew before we officially "touched" the summit cairn. Accordingly, when we at last all gathered around the metal summit canister, we crossed hands and sang the Philmont Hymn. At the end of the last verse, we all brought our hands down together on the top of the cairn. It was now high noon. This was truly a memorable moment, and the highlight of the trek for me.

After lunch, photos, enjoying the view, and doing fifteen jumping jacks to win a bet with our Assistant Scoutmaster back home, we started down. We paused at the miner's log cabin just below the summit and made the decision to make a final effort to find the crash site. We circled to the west and north along the slopes of French Henry through the alpine meadows, taking care to fan out and so not leave a visible path. As we approached the area where the GPS should begin to pick up the site, we stayed in our fanned-out formation. I was just getting ready to tell the Scouts to move further to the right to go where the GPS coordinates indicated the most likely spot should be. Suddenly the Scout on my far left let out a yell, "I found it! I found it!" There was a great stampede to the site of his yelling, with me being the last to arrive.

While we had initially been in a light-hearted mood up to that point, as soon as the magnitude of what had actually happened there began to sink in, we sobered up fast. We were basically filled with awe at the extent of the destruction. There were wheels and wreckage up in the trees, and other parts over a fairly wide area. No single piece of wreckage was much bigger than a backpack. When the plane struck the mountain, it created a crater about 20 feet across and 10 feet deep filled with debris. We saw about thirty ball caps lying about, as well as pieces of clothing and a pilot-type briefcase. We found the patch described above, and also the plane's radio. We had a solemn discussion of what might have been the last words transmitted over that radio. It seems possible from the extent of the devastation that perhaps the crew didn't have time to realize they were crashing. At least I hope so.

We concluded that aviators as a group are special people who love doing what others fear to try. It is my opinion that they died doing something they loved, and so should be at peace.

We were so struck by the scene that we wanted to do something appropriate in memory of the crew. I did not know the words to the Air Force Hymn, but I did know the Navy Hymn, "Eternal Father Strong to Save." We sang that for the crew, and then departed for Copper Park. None of us took a single thing from the wreck except the photos we took, and the notes we made. Anything we moved, we put back where we found it.

That evening, by coincidence, a backcountry chaplain came by Copper Park to hold an ecumenical service. His theme was the 23rd Psalm and the role of God the good shepherd comforting his flock. I was particularly struck sitting in that beautiful green meadow as I looked up at the crash site high above us that we were indeed in "the valley of the shadow of death." When the chaplain asked if there were any special prayers to be offered, our crew asked him to include Ed Counselman, Bill Murray, and their families. <-> This was the end of a very exciting, yet emotionally-moving day. I will remember it as long as I live, and so will the Scouts that were with me.

The next day we hiked to Head of Dean via Baldy Town. In the Baldy Town Museum, I began asking the staffer there for details about the crash. The staffer was initially reluctant to even confirm that there had been a crash, but when it became apparent that we had truly found the site, he told me what he knew. His version was that Counselman and Murray had purchased the plane surplus and were flying it to an air show "in Taos". They encountered a violent storm in the Baldy area that disabled their navigation equipment. Knowing that they needed power to clear Baldy, they put the throttles ahead full. Unfortunately, the plane was not level at the time, and instead was nose down. Accordingly they essentially did a full-power dive into the side of French Henry. The staffer said that normally only the staff knows about the site, and was surprised when I told him it was clearly marked (albeit incorrectly) on the detail area map. I replied that our crew had shown proper respect for the matter, and would continue to do so.

Later that day near Ewell's Park, we met a ranger who was passing by on his day off. He told me that he had been shown the site by an older staffer who had been part of the original SAR crew. He said that when the bio-hazard team had gone up on the mountain to remove the human remains, they had only found about eight pounds of body parts. He said the airshow was in Santa Fe, not Taos, and that the crew had intended to distribute the ball caps at the air show. He said that the families of the aviators had been taken up the crash site last year for a memorial service.

So, that's all I know so far. Our crew would like, for our own personal satisfaction, to learn as much as we can about the tragedy. Whether, or to what extent, we share that information with others, would become a matter of judgement based on a desire not to see any desecration of the site as has occurred at Trail Peak.

I must admit to you that I am one of those partially responsible for the looting of the Trail Peak site back in "the old days." I attended a Junior Leader Instructor Training Course in Philmont's South country in the summer of 1962, some thirty-seven years ago. The highlight of that course was a twenty-mile round trip hike to the summit of Trail Peak to

see the bomber crash site there. Our training course Scoutmaster cautioned all of us in no uncertain terms: "If I find any of you taking a single piece of the bomber wreckage, you are going to have to hike back up here to return it." I suppose that in my then-13 year old mind he had just laid down a challenge that no Boy Scout worth his salt could refuse. Accordingly, at the Trail Peak wreck site, I located a piece of aluminum about the size of a quarter, surreptitiously removed my metal canteen from its cloth cover on my Army web belt (yes, we actually hiked like that back then!), put the aluminum piece in the bottom of the canteen cover, and put the canteen back on top of it. No Scoutmaster turning out my pockets was going to find anything incriminating! As soon as we got back to base camp, I mailed the piece of aluminum home to Mom.

My mother kept all my letters home, and this year while preparing for Philmont, I came across them, all neatly sorted by date as only a mother would do. I remembered my un-Scout-like act, and read through the letters one by one. Sure enough, in one of the letters there it was - after all these years. At that moment I vowed I would make amends by indeed hiking that piece of wreckage back up to Trail Peak and putting it back where I found it.

Unfortunately, my crew this year decided to do a northern trek, so I haven't been able to fulfill my vow as yet. However, I have explained the matter to my son and my crew. I spoke to my crew of how what was an act of defiance back then is now a matter of deep regret, and the source of a need to make amends. This may in part account for the respect our crew showed for the French Henry crash site. My son has assured me that that if I (now aged 51) am unable to get that piece back where it belongs before I die, he will do it for me.

And so Scouting does come full circle. The foolishness of youth does indeed get replaced in time by some wisdom and some appreciation of the higher values of Scouting. May there always be a Philmont, and a place where a man who has learned a lesson there long ago can pass it on to the youth of today.

Any information you could share with us about the French Henry crash will be carefully respected and genuinely appreciated. Thank you for letting me share this experience with you. I attach a photo taken at the site.

/s/ George Hay Kain, III  
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