

The story of the aircraft lost in The Bahamas - Moore's Island, Abaco: FM-2 Wildcat Fighter

Hard Bargain
Moore's Island

Wood Cay



Castaway Cay

MERE months before VE Day, an Allied fighter plane crash-landed at remote Moore's Island, a seven-by-four-mile cay in the Bight of Abaco.

Hard Bargain and The Bight host 950 people, mostly fishermen and government hires. The cay lies between Sandy Point, Abaco, and Sweeting's Cay, Grand Bahama. Pilot Herbert Stanley Fyfield was born in Manhattan in August, 1922, and moved to more bucolic northwestern Connecticut, dying in Roxbury, population 2,260, in March, 1989. Fyfield was an Ensign in the US Navy aged 23. He flew with Squadron VF#6 Operational Training Unit out of Naval Air Station Sanford, near Daytona. The Grumman FM-2 Wildcat fighter could accommodate one pilot, as was 29ft long with wingspan of 28ft and only a single engine. The plane boasted an "improved power plant, increased ammunition capacity, and improved directional stability with a modified fin. It was the first line fighter for the Navy and Marine Corps at the outbreak of World War II [with] more than 35,000 aircraft" produced and a kill ratio of 7 to 1.

Fyfield had 290.4 flying hours, 19.6 of them in this aircraft. The crash happened on a Thursday at 10.40am when classes for Jonathan Dean, age seven, were still in session. Visibility was ten miles, wind was from the west-northwest, and he had been airborne just one hour and 30 minutes. The analysis describes a "deferred emergency

By Eric Wiberg



landing", explaining that "after gunnery run, this pilot became separated from the flight and proceeded to get lost when his compass went out. Pilot became confused and flew around for approximately an hour when he sighted land. Having only ten gallons of fuel, and no suitable airstrip available, he made a wheels-up landing in a clear area which turned out to be Mores Island in the Bahama Group. Had the pilot flown with the sun at his back during morning flight, he would have hit the state of Florida at some familiar section".

In January of 2023, our expedition's modus operandi of vessel was simple: sail into an anchorage for a few days, go ashore, and have our eldest sailors - in their eighties - inquire after the eldest residents. To move things along, we took the dinghy in on the evening of arrival and circulated not only books about mailboats, but photos of elderly islanders taken from a previous visit to the island in 1991. Fortunately, these included parents of persons living on the island and broadened the base of mutual trust and conviviality considerably. The laptop containing those images

was left at a local café for the duration of the second day for anyone to copy from.

As a consequence of this candor, islanders helped us promptly locate, film and photograph the aircraft's distinctive "uprated R-1820 power plant, [with] water injection for increased power for takeoff from small deck escort carriers." Our chief guide was James Modi Dean, retired fisherman, aged 85, born in 1938 and thus seven years old when he saw the crash. His son-in-law, Rodney Davis, in his sixties, drove us to the Dean house, where Mrs Dean recalled speaking to the disoriented young Herbert: "He kept saying he wanted to go home and have lunch with his mother in Fort Lauderdale," he said, smiling broadly on the family porch.

Antoine drove us to Modi's house and then took all of us to the crash site, which was really in the middle of town, between a church and a school, and behind a row of waterfront homes. Almost immediately we found a large engine upright in the mangrove swamp, intractable and wedged in without propellers but clearly a large radial aircraft engine. We also located and photographed wheel and tyre assemblies, aluminum framing, and other small metal parts clearly of historic aircraft origin. We eagerly swashed through the bush with his son AJ Davis, a very helpful guide in his thirties. He is a fisherman and with his wife, Brenda, is also a restaurateur. Devon Davis is a school teacher and an excellent resource who coordinated communications between various persons and groups after the visit.

Our captain, the yacht owner Howard, spent time speaking with Modi Dean. He learned they were in school when the plane roared overhead and splashed resoundingly into the mud just a few hundred yards inland. They raced to help Herbert Fyfield and took him to the main road. It was important that witnesses make the distinction that this was 'not' the same air crash as the drug runner whose small plane flipped on the main street in the 1970s and spilled piles of US dollar cash throughout town!

The disciplinary board recommended "Pilot reprimand. Board action pending, recommended continue training for subject pilot with special emphasis on Navigation and Radio Aids. Assessment: 100% pilot error - gross carelessness. Lost on gunnery exercise. Could have used sun to return to mainland. Compass failed.



OUR VOLUNTEER GUIDE, James, Captain Howard, Jonathan Modi Dean, and AJ

Poor navigation when compass went out. Lost. Aircraft and engine are strikes," meaning stricken from inventory. The military bulletin reported that a "search was carried out by [Coast Guard] CG-83497 and CG-83505; a Dumbo [air-sea rescue unit] was sent from Daytona Beach, and four planes from NAS Banana River."

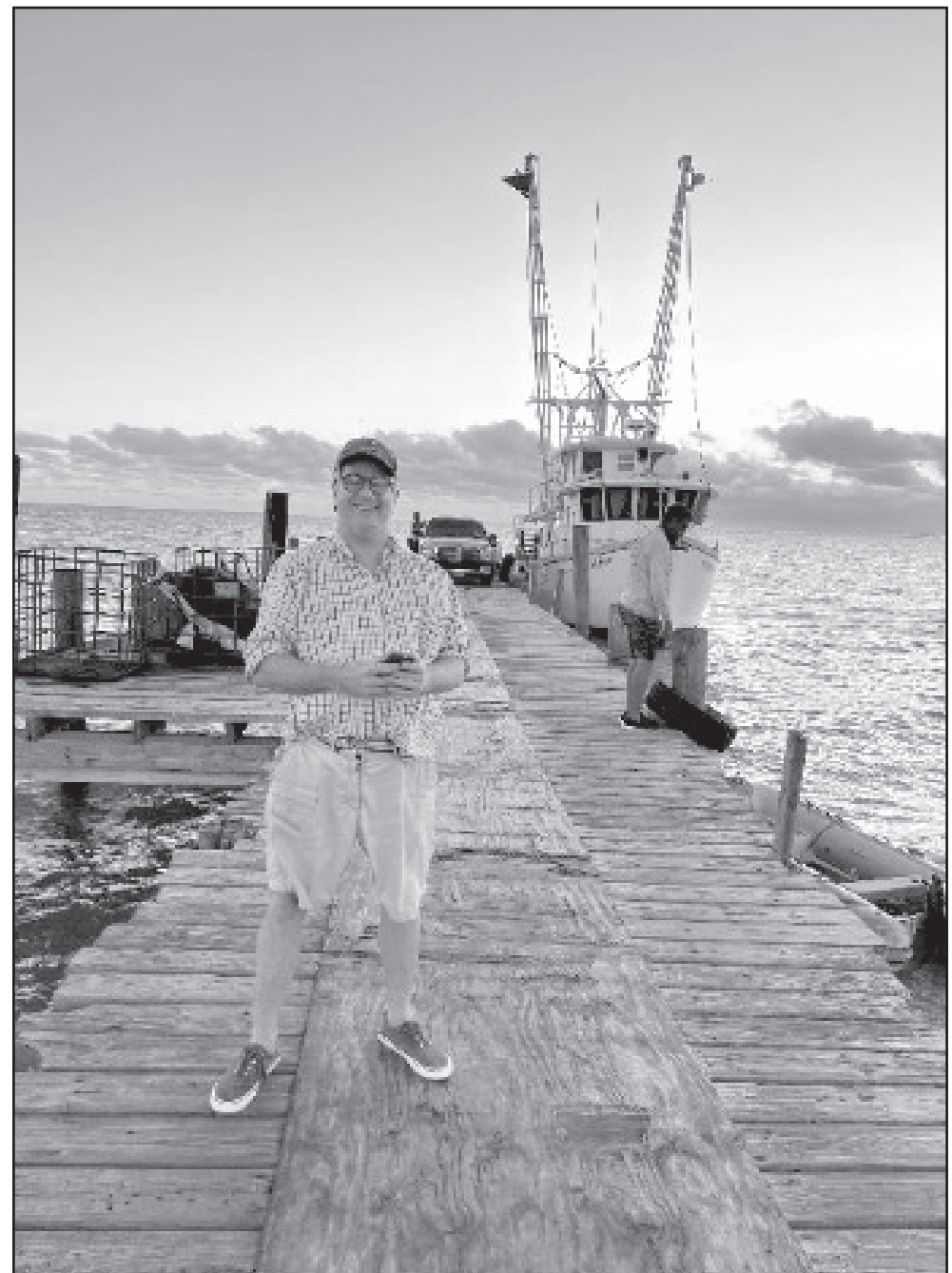
The following day after six hours the search was called off as at 4.31pm "the FM-2 from NAS Sanford had crash-landed on March 8 in Marsh Harbour at Abaco, and requested RAF Nassau to transfer the pilot by boat to Nassau, where a plane will pick him up. The pilot will be picked up by a JRF [Grumman amphibian]

on the morning of March 10 and will arrive at Nassau at 3pm." This was corrected at 4.50 pm to say the RAF made arrangements to safeguard the IFF [an identify friend or foe beacon]. At 5.26 pm ComGulf informed RAF Nassau that the plane had actually crash landed at Moores Island, and that the pilot was then at Marsh Harbour.

Jonathan Dean corroborates this, as he saw the schooner carrying young Fyfield from Moore's Island to Marsh Harbour; it went around the northern tip, then northeast the marls, a distance of about 35 miles. The flight to Nassau was 90 miles, and some 400 nautical miles for Fyfield to fly back to base and

contemplate his future in the navy. He did survive, and his children Herbert S Fyfield, Jr, and Joy have much to be joyful about that he did.

Back in Hard Bargain, the patrons of the Talk of the Town bar were accommodating, and fortunately for us it was a national holiday to celebrate women's suffrage in The Bahamas. Without a doubt the rediscovery of the aircraft was and is a team effort; without assistance on the ground, I am convinced that we would not have found the plane. And no one asked for anything in return - in fact we were offered fresh fish and lobster brought out to our boat the following sunrise before we sailed.



ERIC Wiberg returning to the public dock at Hard Bargain, Moore's Island after 32 years.



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