

# Wreckage of Missing Coast Guard Aircraft Discovered

Story by PA3 Sondra-Kay Kneen, PADET St. Petersburg, Fla., with contributions by PA3 David Schuhlein, PADET Houston.

CLEARWATER, Fla. -- What began as an afternoon of scuba diving with friends turned into a discovery of heroism, honor and bravery. In July 2006, a recreational diver and explorer, Michael Barnette, came across the wreckage of the missing Coast Guard HU-16E Albatross aircraft, CGNR-1240, that crashed during a search and rescue mission 40-years ago in the Gulf of Mexico.



CLEARWATER, Fla. -- The G-1240 Albatross was a 60-foot aircraft with an 80-foot wingspan. The aircraft was able to operate from land or water and with skis, from snow and ice. The 1240 had a speed of 240 mph at 7,600 feet and managed to operate in more than 4.5-foot seas. The CG-1240 crashed March 5, 1967 with six Coastguardsmen onboard during a search and rescue mission in the Gulf of Mexico. Photo by Michael C. Barnette, Association of Underwater Explorers.

The HU-16E Albatross was a 60-foot aircraft with an 80-foot wingspan, capable of operating from land or water and with skis. The Albatross had a speed of 240 mph at an altitude of 7,600 feet and managed to operate in more than 4.5-foot seas.

On the night of March 5, 1967, the 40-foot yacht *Flying Fish* became disabled and took on water. The CGNR-1240 was dispatched from Coast Guard Air Station St. Petersburg, Fla., to assist the vessel. Despite a heavy blanket of fog, Coast Guard crewmembers located the *Flying Fish* just before 9 p.m. The aircraft made a low pass over the distressed vessel, dropped a dewatering pump and disappeared into the foggy night. The Albatross, with its crew of six Coast Guardsmen, crashed sometime later that evening 22-miles east of Apalachicola, Fla.

All six aircrew members perished. At the end of an exhaustive 13-day search, three of the men's bodies remained missing.

Lt. Clifford E. Hanna, Lt.j.g. Charles F. Shaw, Aviation Machinist's Mate First Class Ralph H. Studstill, Aviation Electronics Technician First Class Eckley M. Powlus Jr., and Aviation Electronics Technician Third Class Arthur L. Wilson lost their lives while in the service of saving others.

The discovery of the CGNR 1240's wreckage, and its place in Coast Guard history, was the result of two important finds made by the same person – Barnette. The diver was researching other maritime accidents when he came across an archived newspaper article detailing the loss of the Albatross.

“Having dived the wreck a few months prior, something just clicked, and I started to investigate more thoroughly, which resulted in the identification,” said Barnette. “It was

quite exciting to stumble on the answer when I previously thought any identification would be unlikely after my initial exploration dive on the wreck.”

Barnette provided the Coast Guard a precise position of the wreckage along with numerous photographs and documentation of months of research correlating the wreckage to the missing rescue plane.

Believing that Barnette’s information would bring closure to the case, the Coast Guard enlisted the Florida State University Underwater Crime Scene Investigation (UCSI) dive team to validate the discovery of the aircraft and to analyze the condition of the wreckage. The identity of the CGNR-1240 was confirmed, however, no human remains or personal effects were found with the wrecked aircraft.

“It was great to answer some basic questions on this previously unidentified wreck,” said Barnette. “For someone who spends a great deal of time on the water, and who appreciates the service history and ongoing efforts of the U.S. Coast Guard, it was a wonderful but tragic discovery.”

Recognizing the aircrew’s dedication and sacrifice, the Foundation for Coast Guard History and the Coast Guard Aviation Association sponsored the placement of two bronze plaques to memorialize the crew of CGNR-1240.

One plaque was fixed on a monument at Air Station Clearwater during a memorial ceremony held by the air station. Coast Guard Seventh District Commander and “Ancient Albatross” (Senior Aviator) Rear Adm. David W. Kunkel presided over the ceremony. Family members of the deceased aircrew and Congressman C.W. Bill Young were among the special guests for the ceremony that honored the six fallen flight-crewmembers and their bravery.



CLEARWATER, Fla. -- Coast Guard Air Station Clearwater, in Clearwater, Fla., held a ceremony in honor of the six fallen crewmembers of the Albatross 1240 Coast Guard plane that went down the evening of March 5, 1967 during a search and rescue mission. Two plaques were dedicated to the men; one is permanently mounted at the air station and the other at the crash site. Coast Guard photograph by PA3 Sondra-Kay Kneen.

The second plaque is permanently attached to a cement marker at the underwater site of the CGNR 1240. Coast Guard Cutter *Joshua Appleby*, home ported in St. Petersburg, Fla., lowered the plaque into the water using the cutter’s 70-foot crane. Divers from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and FSU’s Underwater Crime Scene Investigation dive teams fixed the plaque to the site. Family members of the deceased crew watched the ceremony from aboard the Carrabelle, Fla., based Coast Guard cutter *Seahawk*. The *Seahawk*’s crew executed three-rifle volley and performed a wreath laying ceremony to honor the fallen aircrew.

"I told my brother I loved him today, I don't think I ever told him that when we were young," said Richard G. Powlus, brother of deceased Aviation Electronics Technician First Class Eckley M. Powlus Jr. "Today the Coast Guard showed great respect, I thought the ceremony was appropriate and showed concern and compassion, it gave closure to the family."

**USCG**