

Wendy M. Coble

The Navy and the Protection of Pacific Cultural Resources

A Unique Challenge

The U.S. Navy is responsible for more than 350 of its shipwrecks and 4,200 aircraft wrecks now resting in Pacific territory. The great majority of these underwater resources were involved in World War II and are currently under the most threat. The Naval Historical Center's Underwater Archaeology Branch (NHC-UA) is the office tasked with the inventory, study, and preservation of these wrecks. This is a daunting responsibility as the Navy has more than 3,000 shipwrecks and 12,000 aircraft wrecks worldwide.

Often by the time NHC-UA is notified of a discovery, the site and many of its features have been stolen or damaged, leaving scattered bits as the only reminder of what was once an important artifact. World War II artifacts are increasingly targeted by commercial salvors. Even small pieces of wreckage can net large profits, and this business is thriving.

Because of these threats, the U.S. Navy has implemented permitting procedures and policies to help protect these fragile resources. The Navy has limited resources for on-site protection in the Pacific due to distance and limited staffing and funding. These limitations create an opportunity for creative management and cooperation between the Navy and local cultural resource managers.

This article outlines the Navy's congressionally mandated duties, details its policies, and calls for cooperation in protecting U.S. Navy historic cultural resources in the Pacific. Although the article will concentrate on aircraft, U.S. Navy historic shipwrecks are similarly managed.

Naval custody of its sunken cultural resources is based on the property clause of the U.S. Constitution and international maritime law. It is consistent with Articles 95 and 96 of the Law of the Sea Convention. Abandonment of Navy wrecks requires specific congressional action. The Navy retains custody of its wrecks regardless of their geographic location through sovereign immunity provisions of admiralty law. The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, directs all federal agencies to manage their cultural resources emphasizing preservation, and shunning activities that might adversely affect the resource. The Navy further emphasizes the respect due a war grave and the potential volatility of unexploded ordnance that may be associated with these wrecks, in its management plan.

Visitors to these sites are invited to look but not touch, alter, enter, or disturb these remains without permission from the NHC-UA. In the Pacific, however, WWII naval sites are frequently visited and often disturbed. In some cases the visitor has no idea what is and is not allowed, although this is not always the case. Nonetheless,

Dan Bailey standing beside a Navy Corsair in Palau that he helped document. Photo by Patrick Scannon.



many of these assets are being destroyed by a number of unusual sources.

Many who threaten these sites may be unaware of what they represent and how historically valuable they remain. World War II affected not only its own generation but also the generations that followed. People remain fascinated with stories of the war's epic battles. Aircraft hold particular interest and even the most circumspect, when faced with their remains, may feel compelled to own a piece of this history. Few casual collectors realize that by taking pieces, moving objects, or altering their environment they severely damage an investigator's ability to understand the story the site holds.

Often, the average sightseer does not realize that someone's family may be waiting for answers to what happened to a father, brother, or son. The casual collector is not the only threat to these resources.

World War II dramatically altered many Pacific Islander's lives. Islanders were introduced to new technology, new sources of supplies, new foods, and some had to build new lives on new islands as their own islands had been destroyed. After the war, aircraft crash sites littered the islands and islanders were left alone to rebuild. It is little wonder that many aircraft crash sites were salvaged by islanders to rebuild their homes, villages, and towns. It seemed this material was scrap, left behind and certainly viable for re-use. Island life requires the use of all resources for survival, but while understandable, these actions have damaged site integrity. Ideally, local islanders should be educated in how to study and protect these sites. Realistically it is a difficult if not impossible task.

Ironically, it is these same islanders who are the best resource for educating a researcher about the site's original features, where the resources are now, or how they have been used. Usually islanders are happy to assist a researcher by showing the visitor to the area and assisting in the

research. This cooperation ensures that as much information as possible is extracted from a site. It should also be noted that many Pacific islanders respect these crash sites and have left them untouched, often going out of their way to avoid the site.

A third and more serious threat is the commercial salvor or professional collector. Many of these individuals are aware of the historic and emotional value attached to a crash site, but are more concerned with the monetary value these isolated parts represent. The historic aircraft parts business is thriving and very lucrative. A few commercial salvors state they are desperate to save these aircraft for museums rather than personal gain. They cite the long hours required for restoration, resulting in little profit from their work as an example of their good intentions. While this may be true for some, others do profit, handsomely, and seem to thrive on the

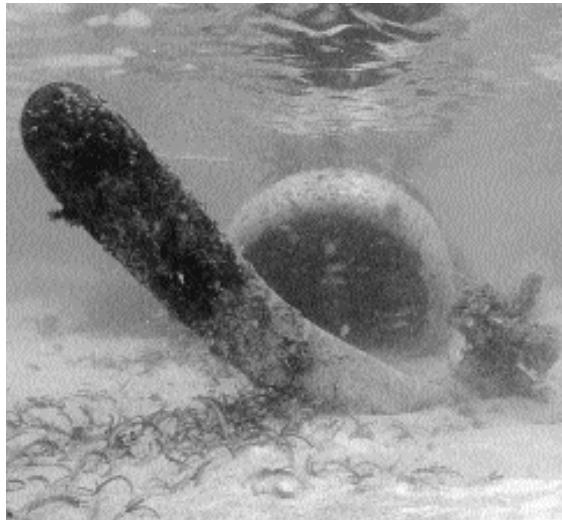
"adventure" of wreck hunting. But rather than accepting some of the responsibility for the destruction of rare resources, many blame government bureaucracy as the biggest threat.

According to many professional salvors and collectors, the government, especially the Navy, is doing more harm than good by restricting access to historic aircraft crash sites.

Salvors claim the continued ravages of saltwater on aluminum components and the imminent decay of aircraft sites are due to inaction by the U.S. Navy. These individuals seem to believe that if they do not retrieve the aircraft components, these rare aircraft will disappear within the next year or so. These claims are overly exaggerated.

While it is true that saltwater is corrosive to aluminum parts, sunken aircraft have been in the saltwater for more than 50 years. Experience has shown that objects reach a stasis in their new environment after a certain time period. Unless the environment changes, the object will likely maintain its structural integrity for hundreds of years. Most would agree that wood is much more fragile than metal and yet wooden shipwrecks

Navy Corsair on a reef in Palau. Photo by C. Lambert and Pat Scannon.



Winch assembly and nose gun turret of a Navy PBY-5 Catalina sunk on Oahu December 7, 1941. Photo by the author.

have survived their underwater environments for hundreds of years. Ironically, it is salvors' activities that put the object at risk. Increased human activity around a site will affect its environment and accelerate the decomposition process. Rarely do humans look but not touch. Often divers attach anchors or marker buoys to the wreckage, which wears on or breaks off portions of the wreckage. Even more disastrous have been some attempts to raise aircraft or remove them from a beach for restoration and display without following accepted conservation procedures. When not properly conserved, these objects quickly crumble to dust. Advances in the conservation of aluminum and other 20th-century materials are being made daily, and will only improve over time.

Therefore, the Navy feels it is in the best interests of the artifact to leave it in its stasis environment unless properly trained professionals oversee the removal and conservation of the artifact. Because of the need to regulate activity around U.S. Navy historic cultural resources, NHC-UA has written and recently published a permitting policy (32 CFR 767) and guidelines for work involving U.S. Navy cultural resources. This policy requires anyone wanting to conduct research and/or recovery on U.S. Navy historic cultural resources to obtain a permit from the NHC-UA. Upon written request applicants are given guidelines and an application form. Included in the permit application must be proof of professional ability for the project's principal investigator, proof of funding to cover the project, and a feasible research design among the considerations. When submitted, the application is reviewed, and a decision regarding approval sent within 180 days. Permits are issued for intrusive archeological research, non-intrusive archeological research, or artifact removal and conservation, are valid for one year, and are renewable. All proposed projects must begin with research of the site and its history by a qualified archeologist. The office encourages professional investigation and research on the U.S. Navy's historic cultural resources.

Due to staffing and fiscal constraints, NHC-UA must rely on the assistance of fellow cultural resource professionals to help manage its resources. This assistance may take the form of a request to physically protect a site. Assistance might mean a request for information regarding a site and its environment, or it could mean a



request to quickly document a site before it is destroyed.

Often Pacific cultural resource managers feel ill equipped to document a site or undertake a research project involving these resources. For this reason NHC-UA is consistently updating and improving resource material available through the Naval Historical Center's web page. An electronic copy of the Navy's Policy Fact Sheet can also be found at <<http://www.history.navy.mil>> under the heading "Underwater Archaeology Branch." The site is filled with information regarding U.S. naval history and provides an excellent resource for researchers. These materials can provide training for cultural resources managers unable to travel off island.

To maintain and preserve the Navy's cultural resources, NHC-UA has enacted policies and guidelines geared toward these goals. But they cannot fulfill their mandated tasks alone. The NHC-UA staff enjoys working closely with Pacific cultural resource managers to create innovative and useful solutions to mutual problems. Cooperation is the only way to ensure that these resources can be protected and interpreted. With great appreciation for assistance in the past, we look forward to more cooperation in the future, as it is in everyone's best interest to appropriately manage these precious pieces of our collective past.

Wendy M. Coble is a contract archeologist for the Naval Historical Center, Underwater Archaeology Branch, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, DC <Coble.Wendy@nhc.navy.mil>.