



INL's Cultural Resource Management Office worked with Project Remembrance's Pocatello office to locate the crash site of a 1944 B-24 Liberator bomber.

INL archaeologists work to preserve WWII B-24 Liberator crash site

By Keith Arterburn, *INL Communications & Governmental Affairs*

The great expanse of Idaho National Laboratory's 890 square miles is home to both prehistoric and modern history. Some of that history is mournful, deserving of special protection and preservation.

"While we estimate that INL may have as many as 75,000 prehistoric sites worthy of preservation, this year we identified and began safeguarding the crash site of a World War II B-24 Liberator bomber," said Julie Williams, technical lead for INL's Cultural Resource Management Office. "Seventy years ago, the aircraft crashed in the southeast portion of INL's desert Site during a training flight and sadly, all seven crew members died."

In January 2014, Williams was contacted by Marc McDonald of Project Remembrance's Pocatello office. He was conducting historical research on the Army aircraft crash that happened on Jan. 8, 1944, but could not be certain the site was located on INL property.

"It was a coincidence that a month or so before, I was doing some research and ran across an Arco Advertiser article on that aircraft crash dated Jan. 14, 1944," Williams said.

Used during World War II by several Allied air forces and navies, the B-24 still holds the distinction as the most-produced American military aircraft with more than 18,400 planes delivered. During its service, the aircraft earned a distinguished war record with operations in the Western European, Pacific, Mediterranean and China-Burma-India theaters.



A ring belonging to one of the crew members was found among the crash debris.



The search team also found the aircraft engine's manufacturing data plate.

McDonald provided additional information gleaned from the U.S. Department of Defense in the training flight accident report. Williams, and her co-worker, INL archaeologist Hollie Gilbert, combined this new information with what was in the records to begin a process of pinpointing the location to organize a search.

"At Project Remembrance, our volunteers often get requests from families interested in learning more about fatal aircraft accidents in the American West," McDonald explained. "Sometimes they want to place a marker, but most often they are interested in the details of what happened."

"For the January 1944 crash in Idaho, we were uncertain whether the accident occurred on what was property within the Naval Proving Ground and now is Idaho National Laboratory."

Williams and Gilbert combined the new information with data from their research and then used satellite imagery technology to identify three potential locations on the INL Site.

"We were not sure how accurate our calculations were from the available information, but Marc McDonald joined us in a trek out to the desert during March 2014," Williams said. "INL archaeologist Brenda Pace and Dan Mahnami, CH2M-WG Idaho GIS analyst for World War II ongoing ordnance cleanup, also went along to provide their expertise. We walked to our first location with no results, then a second location delivered the same. We walked toward the third location and quickly realized that we had found the site."

McDonald was pleasantly surprised, saying "I was quite impressed with Julie Williams and the rest of the team. They had calculated very well and we found the crash site within about 90 minutes of arriving in the general area. Usually, it takes days or weeks of searching."

The search team found a narrow swath of debris and some concentrations that included, for example, fragments of the aircraft frame, the aircraft engine's manufacturing data plate, a door

handle, a bomb release mechanism and some other small items.

"What gave all of us pause was when Hollie found a ring belonging to one of the crew members," Williams recalled. "This item represents the people who perished in this accident and makes this tragedy personal in a way that we'd not experienced at other archaeological sites."

The Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 prohibits the release of exact locations of such sites, plus some other important restrictions. INL's Cultural Resource Management Office is careful to preserve and protect archaeological sites and events that have occurred on the Site. The office has a team experienced in surveying and inventorying prehistoric and historical cultural resources working with communities and special interest groups. The team also works to promote awareness and sensitivity to the value of the cultures represented on the Site.



The technical lead for INL's Cultural Resource Management Office ran across a Jan. 14, 1944 Arco Advertiser article on that aircraft crash.



The search team found a narrow swath of debris at the crash site.

McDonald is working with the Department of Defense to identify the ring's owner, which may be offered to next of kin.

"This is one of the most satisfying parts of volunteering to help family members learn more about what happened in aircraft accidents during war or peace," McDonald said. "Returning personal items often means so much to these families, our fellow citizens."

Learn more about Project Remembrance by visiting [its website](#).

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[Feature Archive](#)

The story was covered by the Idaho Falls Post Register on May 22, 2014, and [reprinted widely](#) around the West throughout Memorial Day weekend.