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Frontlines

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Left behind?

Navy, families debate recovery of bodies from '46 Antarctica crash

The Navy and families of three sailors killed in a 1946 plane crash in Antarctica are clashing over whether to repatriate the men's remains.

Aviation Motor Machinist 1st Class Fred Williams, Ensign Maxwell Lopez and Aviation Radioman 1st Class Wendell Hendersin died when their PBM-5 Mariner flying boat went down in a snowstorm Dec. 30, 1946, on Thurston Island.

More online
Learn more about the plan to recover the remains of the three crewmen at navytimes.com/georgeone_crash

The six survivors of the flight designated "George One" wrapped the sailors' remains in parachutes and buried them under a piece of the aircraft's wing tip used to mark the site.

Betty Jean Hendersin Spencer, 83, of Mundelein, Ill., took up

the fight to recover her brother after years of hearing about veterans being repatriated from far-flung places. It upsets her to know the Navy and other government agencies have done research in the area but made no effort to recover the bodies. "I can't understand it," she said.

Kate Williams Beebe of San Antonio said she has tried for six years to talk the Navy into bringing her uncle home.

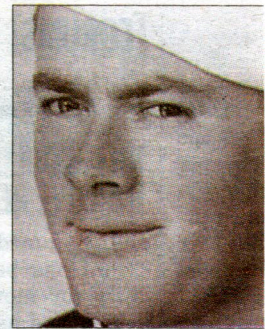
"There's a plot between grandma and granddaddy that's been saved for him for a number of years," Beebe told the San Antonio Express-News. The Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command has offered up to \$200,000 to pay for a flight to pinpoint the crash site. Seattle photographer Lou



Hendersin



Lopez



Williams



GLORIA FERNIZ/AP VIA SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

Above, Kate Williams Beebe and her son, Air Force Reserve Lt. Col. James Beebe, are fighting to repatriate the remains of her uncle, Frederick Williams. At right, wreckage photographed by the George Two on Jan. 11, 1947. Survivor James Robbins painted the names of the dead on the wing to indicate to rescuers the dire situation.

Sapienza, who's helping plan a recovery mission, said the site is now buried beneath 90 to 150 feet of ice. He said time is critical because glacial movements have moved the site to within three miles of the sea, and that part of the glacier could break off.

But successive Navy secretaries concur that the site is a "final resting place." Capt. Beci Brenton, spokeswoman for Navy Secretary Ray Mabus, said "the position of the department is that they were rendered appropriate honors by their crew."

Sapienza said the families are forming a nonprofit group to raise funds for a recovery mission.

James "Robbie" Robbins, 83, a crash survivor, criticized Mabus' response. Robbins said the Navy sent young men on a dangerous mission and owes the families a proper burial.



NAVY