

Big Creek School Pupils Honor WWII Fliers Who Died in Huntington Lake, California

By Charles Beal



Big Creek School 5th grade teacher Bob Crider (standing) beside the 5th grade class, reads the inscription on a plaque honoring the crew of the 461st Bomb Group B-24 that went down Dec 6, 1943.

A group of Big Creek Elementary School pupils have established a memorial to six World War II American airmen who died when their B-24 Liberator bomber, nicknamed the "Exterminator," crashed in Huntington Lake.

Teacher Bob Crider's fifth graders, most of them sons and daughters of Edison employees, recently held dedication ceremonies, complete with taps and a color guard, to unveil a bronze memorial plaque set in a rock. It's located at the John S. Eastwood Visitors Center at the lake entrance and bears the names of the crew of the bomber.

The tragedy occurred on Dec. 6, 1943, after the aircraft left old Hammer Field in Fresno and suffered complete hydraulic failure. Ironically, it was searching for another B-24 that had disappeared in the mountains. Mistaking the snow-covered lake for a meadow, the pilot tried to land on it after asking his crew to decide whether to stay aboard or bail out. Two parachuted to safety. The rest perished at the bottom of the lake.

Several former members of the Exterminator's 461st Bomb Group attended the memorial unveiling. Nearly a half-century earlier they, too, were stationed at Hammer, training for missions over Europe and the Pacific.

They remembered losing many buddies from training crashes that occurred as

the heavy, lumbering, prop-driven Liberators floundered in the swirling Sierra winter skies. The Exterminator was but one of three to go down in a 48-hour period.

Also attending the ceremony were Jeff McPheeters, Edison Northern Hydro manager, and other company employees. "What these kids have done is really heartwarming," McPheeters said. He recalled that the bodies of the crew were not recovered until 1955 even though extensive efforts were made to find them after the crash.

Former Sgt. George Barulic one of the pair who bailed out, and the only living survivor of the ill-fated plane, telephoned from his West Palm Beach home to thank the Big Creek School pupils.

The most you can do for anyone is give your life, and that is what these people did," he said. "Up to now, nobody had been interested in what happened at Huntington Lake. And for these young people to show this compassion is so touching."

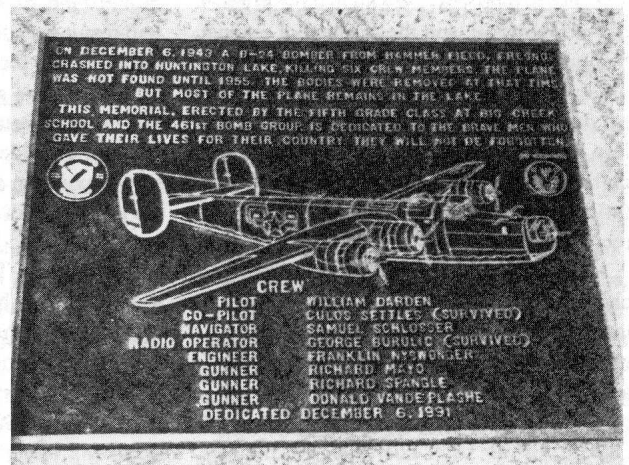
There has been interest, though, including several salvage attempts and abundant media cov-

erage. A wing and part of the fuselage of the plane, including the distinctive twin tails of the B-24, are still under water. McPheeters said another salvage project was begun last spring when the water level was lowered for dam repairs. But, unexpected rainfall during California's prolonged drought washed out those plans, he said.

The End

This story is reprinted from the Southern California Edison News

(See "Letters to the Editor" section for a letter from Big Creek school students).



Memorial to lost B-24 Crew