



History lesson. Big Creek fourth-graders are hoping to solve the mystery.

Warplane's icy death brings new life to f

■ The last flight of a World War II bomber has taken Big Creek students, their teacher and community to new educational heights.

By Gene Rose
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BIG CREEK — Of the hundreds of military aircraft that crashed in the Sierra during World War II, the saga of the B-24 that went down in Huntington Lake is the story that refuses to die.

This month, the tragic Dec. 6, 1943, crash of the famed Liberator has given wings to the education of 17 fourth-graders at Big Creek School.

Teacher Bob Crider said the crash has become an unprecedented class research project, the likes of which he has not experienced in 27 years in the classroom.

"It's unbelievable," he said. "The parents can't believe what the kids are learning."

The regular curriculum has been pushed aside. "They are acquiring writing and language

skills far above the fourth-grade level," Crider said. "It's really turned the kids on to education."

Pete Swanson, the principal-superintendent of schools, agreed: "It's amazing, the feelings and emotions from this project have created a feeling of reality for these kids."

Mysterious crash

Class interest took off after the children learned Huntington Lake would be lowered.

They visited the actual crash site, then wrote 31 letters of inquiry, seeking survivors and information about the incident.

They learned that the plane, dubbed the "The Exterminator," carried six crewmen to their deaths when it crashed and sank into the lake.

Two other crewmen parachuted to safety. The wreckage was not found until 1955, when the lake was lowered to allow repairs to the Huntington dam.

Searching for others

The children also contacted Sam Bogoshian of Fresno, historian and writer on aircraft accidents.

Bogoshian's research indicates

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four of the big bombers from the 461 Bombardment Group at Fresno's old Hammer Field crashed within a few days of each other, just before being sent overseas for combat.

The Huntington plane went down while searching the Sierra for another B-24 that had gone down the day before. It crashed after it ran into a storm and then encountered mechanical trouble.

"They had total hydraulic failure and they couldn't get back to Hammer Field," said Bogoshian. "Two parachuted out and they survived. But what the crew thought was a frozen meadow was snow-covered Huntington Lake. As soon as the plane hit the lake it broke into

three parts and sank ... and it wasn't discovered until 1955."

Accounting for bodies

Student efforts to find the two survivors have been unsuccessful. However the postmaster at Wilkesboro, N.C., responding to the students' inquiries, has found a relative of Marion C. Settle, the co-pilot, with whom the students are corresponding.

The class also received a response from a sister of the pilot, Capt. William H. Darden, at Portsmouth, Me. The packet contained several photographs of the pilot, along with a 1955 telegram relating to the recovery of his body.

The students are concerned about the bodies in the plane, so they wrote the Fresno County



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es of the B-24 that crashed into Huntington Lake in 1943.

Fourth graders' lessons

coroner, Dr. Dave Hadden, to find out if all six bodies were removed in 1955.

Crider, their teacher, said the fate of two bodies remains in doubt. That question touched the hearts of the youngsters. Most feel that if the bodies haven't already been recovered, they should be, and final arrangements should be made.

Bogoshian believes all six bodies were removed but he is not certain. He was working with a newsreel crew when the wreckage was first discovered in 1955.

Besides resolving that issue, the students hope to publish a book on the crash, install some kind of marker or monument to those who perished, and then have President Bush personally dedicate it.

In many respects, the crash has taken the fourth-graders to places and people they would never encounter otherwise.

Even Crider has been consumed by the project.

The 'before' picture

Recently the class visited the air museum at Castle Air Force Base, where they were able to view one of the few remaining B-24s.

Arrangements are also being made for the students to inspect the collection of World War II German aircraft owned by Clovis rancher Harold Kindsvater. Another local pilot has also offered to take each student up for a short flight.

'Learned a lot'

Student Ian Kellogg said he has learned a lot from their investigation. "I would like it to go on for a long time." Ian especially liked the field trip to the crash site at the frozen lake.

Student Sarah Horton, who found the study "fun and interesting," believes the research project has provided an unusual opportunity to connect with local history and landmarks.

Parents of the fourth-graders have also recognized the benefits of the crash course.

Nancy Vanlandingham, whose son, Nicholas, is involved, said it has raised her son's interest in school.

"We think it's great," she said. "It teaches the child a real sense of history, and it has encouraged him in writing and research. It's made him very interested in school."