

Diver tells of WWII

Thunderbolt said to have crashed during test flight

BY JOAN GRALLA
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An underwater diver is revealing his accidental discovery of historic significance: He found the wreck of the sole Thunderbolt prototype, one of World War II's fiercest warplanes, in Long Island Sound.

An Aug. 5, 1942, accident report for the XP-47B, declassified under a broader 2009 executive order, says the plane crashed off Eatons Neck shortly after taking off from Republic Airport. The pilot managed to bail out — and survived.

The diver Kirby Kurkomelis said he first found parts of the warbird in about 50 feet of water in 2012 while searching for the remains of two airmen who crashed in a military training plane in 1947.

“And we came upon a wreck; I had to go down to see what it was,” he said. “That’s scuba diving, you’re looking for something, and you find something else.”

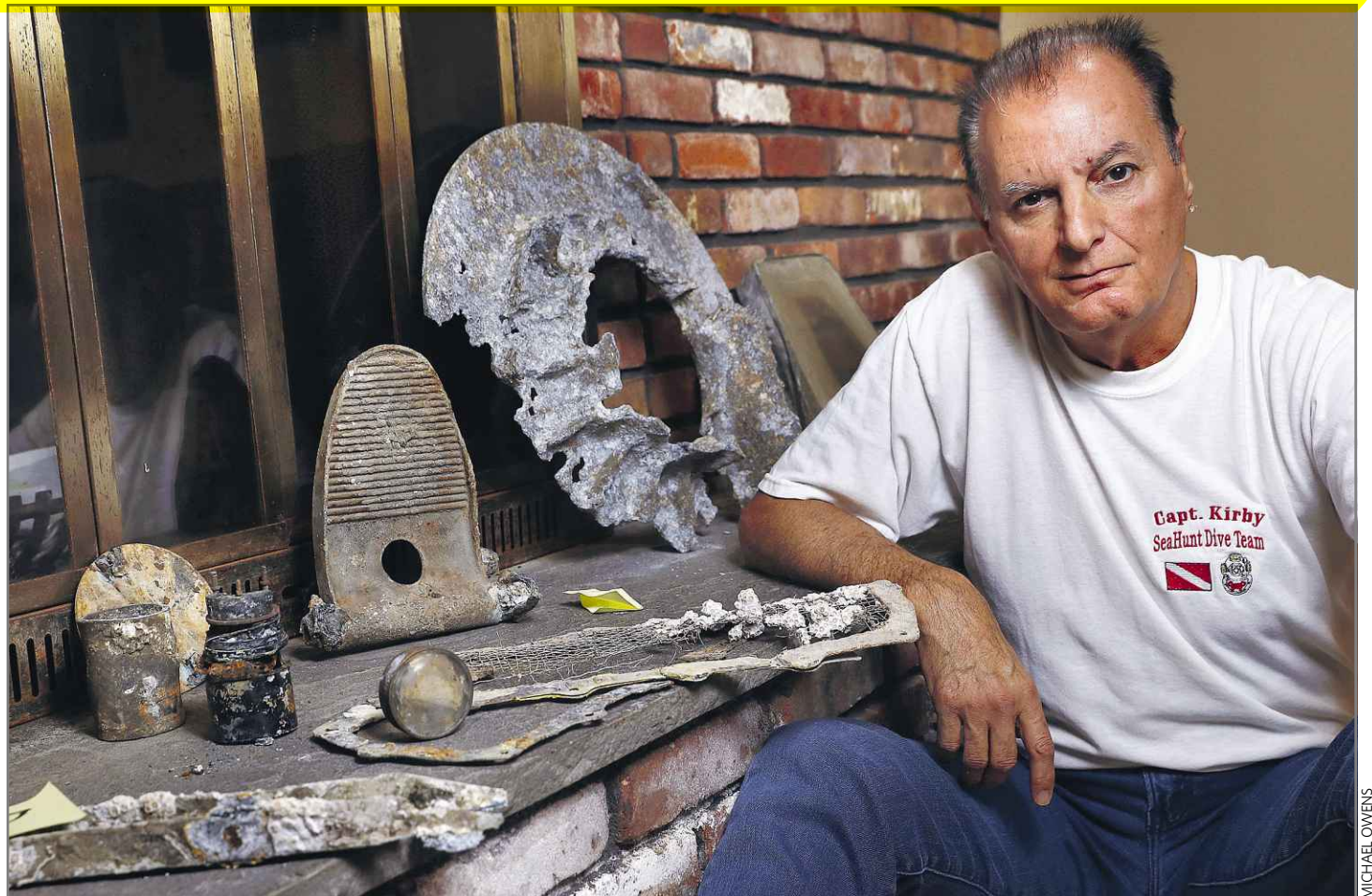
Kurkomelis has kept his find secret, until now. Over the past six years he has worked on other projects while undertaking the necessary and time-consuming research, including obtaining records from the National Archives, to verify his discovery. He has returned to the site nearly two dozen times to recover more artifacts.

Kurkomelis, a Nassau County resident, declined to reveal the fighter-bomber’s specific location as he continues his research.

‘Relevant’ piece of LI history

The Thunderbolt, designed and built at Republic in Farmingdale, foreshadowed modern fighters with its speed, heavy armor and armament, historians say. More Thunderbolts were built in World War II than any other U.S. warplane.

Ken Neubeck, author and vice president of the Long Island Republic Airport Histori-



Kirby Kurkomelis with parts he recovered from what he believes is a prototype Thunderbolt that crashed in the Sound in 1942.



The prototype Thunderbolt XP-47B, in Farmingdale

cal Society, said that, judging by photographs of parts recovered from the plane, they appear to be from the Thunderbolt prototype, missing for more than 75 years.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure it is; there really weren’t many other planes that fell into the Sound that were an XP-47B,” he said. “It’s a very relevant piece of Long Island history.”

Joss Stoff, the curator at Garden City’s Cradle of Aviation, who has compared the relics with the museum’s P-47, agreed with Neubeck’s assessment.

“This is the granddaddy of all P-47s,” he said. Referring to the diver, Stoff said: “Some parts he showed us were definitely identifiable as P-47 parts,” including a rudder panel and an intake cover.

“The most interesting part that positively identified it — he found the bulletproof glass” from the windshield. “It’s a different shape from all other P-47s.”

At the time, Republic Aviation Corp., which created the Thunderbolt, was competing with other airplane makers for U.S. military contracts, including Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corp., which itself lost a test plane in the Sound in 1941.

While both pilots survived the crashes, both pinned on turbocharger problems, production of Grumman’s XP-50 Skyrocket was canceled afterward, though its design heralded the XF7F-1, the first World War II plane to land on carriers with tricycle landing gear, and the F7F Tigercat, which shot to fame in the Korean War.

“Those are the two most rare airplanes in the Long Island Sound,” Stoff said. “Now

one’s been found, maybe the other will be.”

Pilot: ‘No choice but to let go’

The Thunderbolt’s civilian test pilot, Fillmore Litton Gilmer, at the time 31 and a Huntington resident, survived what Newsday reported was a “plunge almost straight downward, possibly faster than any plane has ever flown before.”

After climbing as high as 11,000 to 12,000 feet, Gilmer told Army Air Corps investigators the stick became “light and useless.” He smelled burning rubber, and realized that heat from the turbo was burning the tail and melting the elevator rod, the accident report said.

The hub of the turbo supercharger was highly flammable magnesium, which probably sparked flames, historians say. That supercharger — part of which Kurkomelis found — is one reason this warbird was

find in LI Sound

Pilot's children recall 'he had the "it" factor'

BY JOAN GRALLA

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Test pilot and Navy aviator Fillmore Litton Gilmer was not one to brag, so his children learned of his exploits from relatives and artifacts, including an oil painting of a Thunderbolt presented to him by a Royal Air Force pilot.

His son and daughter recalled him as a man with many strengths and passions who loved working with his hands and taking things apart to see how they worked — including their home's forced air heating system, the first of its kind in Big Stone Gap, a small southwestern Virginia town.

A skilled woodworker, Gilmer repurposed military shells and crafted the cover of a photo album from a plane's aluminum shell, said his son, Fillmore Litton Gilmer Jr., 72, of Birmingham, Alabama.

"He was an extremely smart and talented man," who had charm and charisma to boot, his son said, speaking on a conference call Friday with his sister. "He had the 'it' factor."

As for the day their father's prototype Thunderbolt went down in Long Island Sound in August 1942, he kept at least one artifact from that day, said his daughter, Barbara Lucille Phelps, 78, of Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. Her dad was



Pilot Fillmore Litton Gilmer

31 years old at the time, and lived in Huntington.

"I remember that Daddy . . . had the parachute," Phelps said.

The pilot's son said he has studied his father's warplane, and he was astounded when he came upon a Thunderbolt while visiting the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

"I was just in heaven," his son said.

Gilmer's military records from the National Archives were sparse — and have a gap. A lieutenant junior grade, he served in the U.S. Naval Reserves from Aug. 15 to Sept. 11, 1936, and then from Nov. 29, 1936, to Jan. 30, 1942.

No dates or locations for the three ships he served on — the USS Nevada, the USS Enterprise, and the Yorktown, which

all fought battles in the Pacific — or any honors, awards, or crashes, are revealed.

His children carefully noted they cannot vouch for all the heroics and family lore.

Phelps recalls hearing her father survived a tropical island crash because of the unusual verb he used: "All he had to eat later was coconuts or pineapple, or something like that, and he said he 'foundered' on them."

She also remembers a Royal Air Force pilot gave her father an oil painting of a Thunderbolt diving through lightning.

Ultimately, Gilmer's battles with alcohol would lead their parents to separate, and their mother moved with her children to Birmingham.

Little is known about his death at 44 on Aug. 7, 1955, in Big Stone Gap. A man who objected to Gilmer calling on his daughter shot and killed the pilot, according to local newspaper articles.

As for the family stories, such as his having competed with Chuck Yeager to set speed records: "How much can I say is the absolute fact?" Phelps asked rhetorically. "I just know things like that are a possibility."

The Aug. 5, 1942, article in Newsday on pilot F. L. Gilmer, who survived the crash of a prototype Thunderbolt fighter.

Test Pilot's 'Chute Rips As He Leaps From Plane

Northport—A Republic test pilot released the canopy of his diving plane yesterday noon over Northport Harbor, loosened his safety belt and was flung out into thin air, 10,000 feet up. He saw his fighting ship plunge almost straight downward, possibly faster than any plane has ever travelled before. Then he pulled the rip cord of his parachute.

The pilot, F. L. Gilmer of Prospect Dr., Huntington, had no idea of the speed of his ship, although published figures on Republic fighter planes have been upward of 400 miles an hour. His own downward speed at the time he left the ship must have been far more than that. When he pulled the rip cord he heard a sound like a pistol shot and saw one complete triangular panel rip out and float away, a useless bit of white silk. He had pulled the rip cord too soon.

Pilot Stunned

The shock of the impact of the opening 'chute temporarily stunned the pilot. When he came to he was drifting downward somewhat faster than he should have been, but it was his first parachute jump and he didn't realize it.

He landed in the water, not far from where his plane had landed, with a great splash. Fortunately a rowboat with a fisherman aboard was not far away, and

Gilmer was pulled aboard. At the Port Jefferson Hospital it was found that he wasn't injured.

"I don't think I'll fly for a couple of days," he said last night. "That jerk when my 'chute opened sort of stiffened me up."

Couldn't Stop Dive

Gilmer had but one parachute. He was in his shirt sleeves, test-flying a new ship at an altitude much greater than 10,000 feet when he first experienced trouble. His plane was in a dive and he couldn't bring it out. Only a jump would save his life.

He explained last night that if he had waited a few seconds until his downward speed had lessened, due to air friction, he probably would not have ripped the 'chute. He said that he had his hand on the rip cord when he was thrown from the ship, and was afraid that he would not be able to bring it up again if he let go. He was aware of the danger of opening a parachute when travelling at such a speed.

It is believed to be the first recorded instance of a parachute —Continued on Page 55.

such a high-altitude star, though it was a true heavy-weight, thanks to its eight large machine guns and pilot-shielding armor plating.

By November 1942, demand for the "flying tank" led the United States to approve a second Thunderbolt factory in Evansville, Indiana, in addition to the one at Republic, which quadrupled in size, according to "Aviation Darwinism — The Republic P-47 Thunderbolt," on the Cradle of Aviation website.

That was just three months after the prototype went down. Gilmer, a former Navy lieutenant junior grade, told Air Corps investigators he was un-

able to power out of a 20- to 25-degree glide, adding that his airspeed had reached 420-430 mph when he released the canopy.

"I gripped the after part of the canopy with my hands and hooked my right toe under the forward section of the windshield. I had no choice but to let go. I did not see the plane again after leaving it. I saw where it hit," he said.

The Newsday article said that when Gilmer "pulled the rip cord, he heard a sound like a pistol shot and saw one complete triangle panel rip out and float away, a useless piece of silk. He had pulled the rip cord

too soon." Temporarily stunned on what was his first parachute jump, Gilmer landed in the water near the plane, it said.

A sailboat retrieved him and brought him ashore, the Eatons Neck Coast Guard told the investigators for the Air Corps, predecessor of the Air Force.

"We shot ahead and had an ambulance down here waiting for him," a Coast Guard officer said in the Newsday report. "He just had a few burns on his body, from the chute cords, I guess. He's walking around, he's feeling good."

A buoy was placed over the wreck's oil slick and debris,

he added.

The accident report listed the Thunderbolt prototype as "a complete wreck." Explained Stoff, it broke up when it hit the water because it was at "flying speed."

Dangerous dives

The debris field Kurkomelis found is scattered; even the engine fell out, he said.

And much of the plane's metal frame and parts have corroded in the salt water.

Another problem is that diving down to the warbird is arduous and exceptionally dangerous.

"The Long Island Sound consists of very, very dark water in the last few feet; everything is basically by touch," Kurkomelis said, explaining that sunlight-blocking pollution also has turned the bottom into a treacherous and quicksand-like mud.

"You can get trapped there," he warned. Divers also contend with strong currents.

His confidence that he has the ability, knowledge and training to handle the perilous dives in the Sound's cold and dark depths, he says, partly explains what impels him.

"What motivates me the most," he said, "is the mysteries of our oceans and lost history."