1948 LAKE MEAD B-29 CRASH

SUPPER FORTRESS UNDERWATER FOR 75 YEARS

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Divers examine the B-29 at the bottom of Lake Mead. (National Park Service)

HISTORYNET

SEPTEMBER 28, 2022

On 13 September 1945, "Lake Mead's B-29," serial number *45-21847*, was put into service. In 1947 it was stripped of armaments, re-classified as a reconnaissance B-29 (F-13), and moved into the Upper Atmosphere Research Project. The purpose of this project was to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile guidance system that used the sun for direction and positioning. *The system was known as "Sun Tracker",* and to test it a plane capable of high-altitude flight followed by a rapid low-level flight was needed. The B-29 was a useful test platform as it was the first mass-produced aircraft with a pressurized cockpit*, and after World War II there were many surplus B-29s available.*

On 21 July 1948, after completing a run to 30,000 feet (9,100 m), east of Lake Mead, Captain Robert M. Madison, and the crew began a descent and leveled out just over 300 feet (91 m) above the surface of Lake Mead. The crew described the lake as looking like a mirror, with the sun reflecting brightly off the surface. Along with a faulty altimeter, the pilot lost his depth perception from the glare of the lake's surface. These conditions make judging height above a surface considerably more difficult. The aircraft then slowly began to descend below 100 ft (30 m) until it struck the surface at 230 mph (370 km/h) and started skipping along it. *Three of the aircraft's four engines were ripped from its wings and the fourth burst into flames*. The aircraft managed to gain around 250 ft (76 m) but then settled back onto the water's surface in a nose-up attitude and slowly skied to a stop. The five-man crew then evacuated into two life rafts and watched the aircraft sink. *Though most of the crew was uninjured, the scanner, Sgt Frank Rico, broke his arm*.

The crew was rescued from the lake six hours later and was instructed not to disclose any details of the flight, its mission, or its loss. ***As the mission was classified, these details were not released until fifty years later.***

In 2001 a private diving team found the wreck of the B-29 in the Overton Arm of Lake Mead, using side-scan sonar. *Because the bomber lay inside a National Recreation Area, responsibility for the site fell to the National Park Service*

The bomber itself is listed on the *National Register of Historic Places*. In July 2007, the National Park Service started a six-month trial on the B-29 Lake Mead Overton site to allow private companies to conduct Guided Technical Dives.

One company was Scuba Training and Technology Inc. / Tech Diving Limited based in Arizona.

Despite being pleased with the overall preservation of the site by the two commercial use authorization (CUA) operations, the NPS closed the B-29 site for diving in 2008 for further conservation efforts. In December 2014 NPS solicited applications for private dive companies to resume guided dive operations.

Scuba Training and Technology Inc. / Tech Diving Limited was awarded the Commercial Use Authorization again and diving resumed beginning in April 2015.

In 2017, the NPS closed the B-29 site for diving, for further conservation efforts. On May 30, 2019, the Park Service opened a public comment period (through June 30, 2019) to assess the allowance of commercially guided trips to the site. Commercial tours are now available through Las Vegas Scuba, LLC and Scuba Training and Technology Inc for 2020-2022

This is an image of a place or building that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places in the United States of America. (It is the window that was used to escape from the plane)

REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE

B-29 Serial No. *45-21847*
(Heavy Bomber)

U.S. National Register of Historic Places

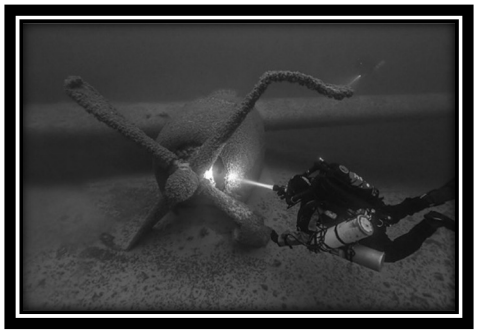
Nearest city Overton, Nevada

NRHP reference No. 11000212

Added to NRHP 20 April 2011

The bomber's cockpit remains intact

The B-29's large tail would be the first part of the airplane to break the surface. (National Park Service)



Decades of marine growth coat the Superfortress engine. (National Park Service)

These days, Lake Mead is emptying as the American Southwest undergoes an extended drought. The retreating waters have revealed cars, boats, and even bodies entombed in oil drums, and eventually, the B-29 will also surface. *As of this writing, it rests under sixty feet of water and is expected to emerge in about a year if the drought continues.*

What then? The National Park Service is the wreck's official custodian and it will have to guard it against looters. It's doubtful that any private warbird salvor/restorer will offer to take on the project. *The NPS has nominated the site as a National Historic Landmark,* and if that is approved, *the Lake Mead B-29 will become untouchable. (It has already been approved)*

Outspoken underwater-recovery expert Taras Lyssenko, who has exhumed World War II Navy aircraft from Lake Michigan, is dismayed. "If a historic aircraft is allowed to stay in a water environment, it will deteriorate and crumble to nothing," he told *Aviation History*. "The people who manage national parks are the wrong people to manage this project if they can't understand that. *That aircraft should be recovered and stabilized and put on public display.* I wish our government cared more about its history, but they don't seem to, and I don't know if there's anybody else out there who does."

THE SUN TRACKER

Many of the World War II-era B-29s were scrapped after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. However, Lake Mead's B-29 was retrofitted with observation windows, making it a suitable candidate for research on cosmic rays in the post-World War II years.

The B-29 bombers were beneficial for this research due to their ability to travel upwards of 30,000 feet in altitude and their ability to carry heavy payloads of over 20,000 pounds.

Aboard the Lake Mead B-29 was the Sun Tracker, *otherwise known as Project 288*, which was tasked with measuring light intensity at varying altitudes. John Simeroth, one of the crew members aboard the plane during the crash, was responsible for calibrating the Sun Tracker. The Sun Tracker, when calibrated correctly, would allow intercontinental ballistic missiles to navigate using these cosmic rays from the sun. The way it was able to track the specific wavelengths of the cosmic rays was through a gyroscope and a spectrometer.

The Sun Tracker would rotate around the gyroscope and capture the varying rays from the sun. The spectrometer would measure the variations between the different intensities and calculate the overall changes.

One of the reasons for the development of this technology is that the United States sought missiles that could not be jammed from the surface, unlike radar and radio-guided missiles.
The Sun Tracker is one of the reasons today's cruise missiles can fly accurately.

Other research using the Sun Tracker technology yielded a substantial amount of data on the general makeup of the upper atmosphere, which was beneficial for many different types of applications such as space travel, and improvements.