

60 Years Later, Navy Man and Tragic Plane Crash Remembered

By Dave Trojan, Aviation Historian, davidtrojan@earthlink.net



John (Jack) Staples US Navy, photo courtesy Staples Family



Navy P2V Neptune Patrol Plane

Thanks to the internet, connections with strangers are made, stories shared, and a lost family member is remembered. A message was received via LinkedIn regarding the crash of the Navy P2V Neptune aircraft on Oahu Hawaii in 1954. The message was from Ann Etre regarding her Uncle, John R. Staples. She was interested in learning more about her long lost uncle and wanted more information about the aircraft accident

that claimed his life. I research old aircraft accidents as a vocational aviation archaeologist and I'm fascinated by their histories. I had also visited the Navy P2V Neptune crash site on Oahu several times.

I sent her some information and requested more family history about John R. Staples. Ann then put me in contact with her mother, Gladys Joseph, who was John's youngest sister and sixteen years younger than her older brother. She was also very interested in the research as well and they both shared with me much more information than I had hoped for. I learned John R. Staples was born July 25, 1916 in Belmont Nova Scotia, Canada. John was nicknamed Jack and he was the 2nd son of a family of 7 children. The Staples family grew up in Springfield, Mass. During 1936, in the middle of the depression, Jack left home and moved to San Francisco. In 1940, an older brother, Don, who was in the Navy at the time, convinced Jack to join the Navy. Jack was stationed at Pearl Harbor when it was attacked on December 7th, 1941 and he saw quite a bit of action in WWII in the Pacific. He then continued to serve in the Korean War and survived both wars unscathed. Chief Aviation Machinist's Mate Staples was awarded the Air Medal, Good Conduct Medal, two Presidential Unit Citations, and the National Defense Service Medal. The great irony is that after he survived two wars, he died in a tragic peacetime accident. At the time of his death, Jack was married, but had no children. He left behind 4 brothers, 2 sisters, his mother and a number of nieces and nephews.

In 1954, John R. Staples was assigned to Patrol Squadron Seven (VP-7) and based at NAS Quonset Point, Rhode Island, not too far from his family home. His squadron was the only squadron from the Atlantic Fleet to deploy to the Korean War zone and he arrived there less than one month before the armistice on July 27, 1953. The squadron deployed with P2V-5 Neptune patrol aircraft and operated out of NAS Iwakuni Japan. During his deployment, VP-7 patrolled the Sea of Japan and the Yellow Sea keeping shipping under surveillance. The squadron departed for home in January 1954 and his plane was the last VP-7 plane to leave the area.

Half way home on 21 January 1954, the eight-man crew of BuNo 124874, "HE 10" made a missed approach while trying to land at NAS Barbers Point, Oahu, Hawaii. The aircraft mistakenly turned left into the center of the island, rather than turn right out over the ocean. The Neptune aircraft impacted the Waianae Mountains at approximately 9:30 pm on a dark, moonless night.



1954 US Navy photo of the crash site in the Waianae Mountains of Oahu

You could consider these men to be some of the last casualties of the Korean War. The eight crewmen aboard were:

Walter J. Hanzo, JR., LT. (jg), Pilot
Gerald Martin Hazlett, Ens., Copilot
Wilbur D. Cooper, Ens.
John Robert Staples, ADC, Plane Captain
Joseph Daniel Beczek, AD2
Paul Martin Kohler, AM2
Joseph Michael Maksymon, AT2
Richard Knuton Brown, AT3

The legacy of the men and their aircraft still remains today. The sad remnants of the P2V-5 Neptune still lie in the Waianae Mountain range on Oahu. Due to its remoteness and its inaccessibility the crash site has been little disturbed for decades. The remains of the crew along with the guns and other equipment have long since been removed by the Navy, but much still remains. The aircraft wreckage rests on a steep, thirty-degree slope. A broken tree stands testament to the tremendous impact forces. Many small trees have grown up around and into the crash site and countless twisted and mangled pieces of metal are scattered around. The tail section is the largest piece still remaining on the site. Evidence of the traumatic crash and fire can be seen on the fuselage parts, but a wing section still bears the insignia of a white star on one side. One of the Wright

Cyclone R 3350-30W engines is located next to the fuselage and the other is further down the slope next to a tree.



Star still visible on wing section



Tail Section with engine next to it

The plane wreckage represents the price of war and peace. Many of the people involved have been forgotten and the history lost, but thanks to research and family members we now know much more. The crewmen are not just names in an accident report, they are husbands, fathers, uncles and brothers and we now have a picture of

one of them. The life of John Staples and his service to his country is now remembered. The crash of this P2V-5 Neptune aircraft is an important legacy of the Korean War and acts as a silent memorial for those who served and sacrificed in the “Forgotten War”.

A virtual online memorial web page for John (Jack) Staples has been created using the “Find a Grave” web site. The memorial page can be found here:

<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=115308566>

This story continues with future plans in the works. The plan is to place the picture of John (Jack) Staples while he was in the Navy inside the tail section of the wrecked plane along with information about the accident as a lasting memorial tribute to the crew members. Research also continues in an effort to search for more information about the other crewmen. Hopefully, we can also obtain photographs of them as well. They are not forgotten.