

Secret WWII pilot training on Lake Michigan chronicled in new film

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Photo # 80-G-354753 FM-2 fighter after barrier crash on USS Sable, May 1945



A General Motors FM-2 "Wildcat" fighter upended after a barrier crash on board USS Sable (IX-81), during WWII pilot training on Lake Michigan, May 1945. Another FM-2 is flying past in top center. Between 1943 and 1945, two U.S. Navy aircraft carriers stationed at Navy Pier in Chicago functioned as training platform for about WWII 17,000 pilots, signal officers and other personnel (Courtesy | National Archives).

KALAMAZOO, MI — *Heroes on Deck*, a one-hour documentary featuring secret WWII pilot training missions on Lake Michigan, will have its world premiere Tuesday, Feb. 16 in Kalamazoo.

The film, written, executive produced, and directed by Emmy Award-winning and Kalamazoo College alumnus John Davies, will show at 7 p.m., in Dalton Theatre in the Light Fine Arts Building, 1140 Academy St. It's free and open to the public through a partnership between Kalamazoo College, the Kalamazoo Film Society, and the Air Zoo.

Heroes on Deck tells the story of a little known chapter of United States involvement in World War II that took place on Lake Michigan.

Between 1943 and 1945, two U.S. Navy aircraft carriers stationed at Navy Pier in Chicago functioned as training platforms for about 17,000 pilots, signal officers and other personnel. Former President George H. W. Bush was among the pilots who learned to take off and land on the 500-foot long carrier decks.

The carriers, the USS Sable (IX-81) and USS Wolverine (IX-64), were converted Great Lakes paddle-wheel passenger steamers.

Lake Michigan was chosen for the secret training during the war because it is the largest body of water within the contiguous United States, and the Navy wouldn't have to provide destroyer and submarine escorts. About a dozen pilots died during the training and perhaps over 100 planes ended up on the lake bottom after training crashes and failures.

More than 40 aircraft have been brought to the surface and a few have been restored to flying condition. Two of the aircraft are at the Air Zoo, Kalamazoo's aviation history museum.

A fully restored attack aircraft, the Douglas SBD-3, is on display at the Air Zoo's main campus. It crashed after missing a landing on the USS Wolverine on Sept. 19, 1943 and was recovered from the bottom of Lake Michigan, where it rested for 50 years. The restoration by Air Zoo volunteers took nine years.

Presently inside the Air Zoo's east campus, volunteers can be seen reassembling a FM-2 "Wildcat" fighter recovered after 68 years sitting on the bottom of Lake Michigan, 200 feet under the surface.

Piloting the Wildcat at the time of the crash was aircraft carrier pilot trainee Ensign William Forbes, who was on his third take-off from the USS Sable on Dec. 28, 1944. Engine failure caused the plane to roll overboard and the fighter plane was cut in two pieces by the carrier's bow.

Forbes survived the crash and eventually completed his carrier qualification training in Lake Michigan before becoming a Navy aviator. He died at the age of 85 in 2008.

The Wildcat arrived at the museum August 2013, and is budgeted to take five years to rebuilt, said Gary Sibert, a restoration volunteer. The goal of the 30-member volunteer team is to use at least 70 percent of the original parts for restoration -- everything else is being meticulously remanufactured by the volunteers.

"Not every pilot landed successfully on the pitching decks of the USS Wolverine and USS Sable and many aircraft went to the Lake bottom," the Heroes on Deck filmmakers write on their website.

"This is the story of the recovery of those rare warbirds and the ingenious training program that changed the course of the war in the Pacific."