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# Sunken WWII Fighter Plane Found in Waters Off Miami Beach

28-foot Grumman F6F Hellcat found 240 feet below ocean surface

By Brian Hamacher and Willard Shepard | Tuesday, Nov 27, 2012 | Updated 7:19 PM EST

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The 28-foot Grumman F6F Hellcat was discovered in June in the waters off Miami Beach during a dive by OceanGate Inc. The company's co-founder and CEO, Stockton Rush, spoke about the historic find.

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A World War II-era fighter plane has been discovered some 240 feet below the surface in the waters off Miami Beach, officials with an exploration company said Tuesday.

The 28-foot Grumman F6F Hellcat was discovered back in June during one of several dives by OceanGate Inc. The company had been using high-frequency sonar and high-definition photo and video equipment to gather data on artificial reefs in Miami-Dade County waters.

"The discovery of this artifact is significant because it helps us reflect on and learn more about our country's heritage, but also because it highlights the key role that direct observation plays in undersea exploration," Stockton Rush, co-founder and CEO of OceanGate, said in a

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statement. "Our sonar technology and ability to observe the undersea environment firsthand ultimately led to the discovery of this plane."

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Initial scans provided by NOAA showed a 100-foot long object that was believed to be a sunken ship. But the team in OceanGate's Antipodes submersible discovered something else at the site.

"It looked like a 100-foot-long wreck of some type. And we picked it up on the sonar of the sub and approached, and as we got within visual range we could tell that it was an aircraft," Rush told NBC 6 South Florida.

Officials at the Smithsonian Institution and the U.S. Navy confirmed the distinctive fighter plane was a Hellcat.

Dive teams have been back to the site to collect data, photos and videos of the plane wreckage, which were donated to the Naval History & Heritage Command in Washington, D.C.

Sunken U.S. Navy ships and aircraft are protected from unauthorized disturbance under the Sunken Military Craft Act.

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The Hellcat was flown by both Navy and Marine Corps pilots during World War II, when Florida was an active training center. Some 79 Hellcats were lost off of Florida's Atlantic Coast between 1943 and 1952, with only eight of the losses after 1945.

"You start to think back to that history, and then to see it in front of you and see how it's aged, it's quite a moving experience," Rush said.

Not all of the losses were fatal, as some of the pilots managed successful water landings and bailouts.

"In the course of its production run, 12,275 Hellcats were delivered to the Navy," Bob Rasmussen, director of the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, said in a statement. "During peak production one each hour, 24 hours per day, rolled off the Grumman line. Of these only a handful exist today and the discovery of one more, even under 240 feet of Atlantic Ocean, is important to Naval Aviation History."

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