

Diving into Bush's past

WASHINGTON — Back in the summer of '44, three young U.S. Navy fliers bailed out of a crippled torpedo bomber over the Pacific. Two of the crew members died, but the pilot was picked up by a patrolling American submarine and went back to active service.

There was nothing particularly special about the incident at the time; similar things happened throughout World War II, wherever there were bombing runs or aerial combat.

But there was something special about the 20-year-old pilot. He was Lt. George Herbert Walker Bush . . . and he went on to become the 41st president of the United States.

His airplane, a Grumman TBM Avenger nicknamed *Barbara III* in honor of his girlfriend, now Mrs. Bush and America's First Lady, sank into the deep waters off the island of Chichi Jima, about 600 miles south of Japan.

And there it has lain for nearly half a century, another forgotten relic of the bloody conflict.

Well, not totally forgotten.

An enterprising American named James Egan has figured that an aircraft once flown by a kid who went on to become the most powerful man in the world could have significant historical and commercial possibilities — and he's setting out to recover it.

But diving into the deep costs money — big

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money. And the U.S. economy is not exactly thriving.

When you're looking for sponsors to cough up a few million dollars, timing is everything — just like it is in politics.

So it sure helps to have that former pilot running for his second term in the White House — and using his wartime heroism almost daily to boost his ratings with patriotic voters.

"We are all commercial creatures," says Egan, "so it is logical to take advantage of the climate."

Egan, who heads a group called Ferrumar Resources, based in Alexandria, Va., is pulling together an impressive international group of companies for the project, which will include the filming of a documentary on the recovery.

A Canadian company, Alias Research of Toronto, will be involved in developing software to drive computer graphics for the made-for-television documentary.

If you saw the movies *The Abyss* and *Terminator II*, you saw some of Alias' software at work in creation of the "pseudopod" sea creature and the "chrome cyborgs" which were featured.

In the documentary, the Canadian software will be used to give a graphic explanation of how the aircraft sank and how it was recovered.

Egan says he believes the Avenger, which Bush abandoned 48 years ago Wednesday (Sept. 2), is lying about one mile deep in an area called the Bonin Trench.

Because of the depth of the water, the icy temperature and the lack of oxygen and light down there, the plane is likely to be in good condition.

The first phase of the venture, using a deep-sea remote-control vehicle to locate the plane, will cost about \$3 million and take a year or so.

The second, recovery and restoration, will cost another \$7 million.

Egan is still looking for sponsors but says he'll have an announcement on those "pretty soon."

Egan says President Bush is aware of the recovery effort and would like to see his old aircraft.

And, he says, several museums would love to have the restored relic, including the Bush Library at Texas A&M University, near Houston, and the U.S. Naval Museum.

Egan agrees his project would get a bigger boost if Bush is re-elected.

But with the polls showing that likelihood open to doubt, he's philosophical.

"No matter what happens on election day, this will still be a memorial . . . it will harken back to a time when nothing was too tough for Bush and his generation," says Egan.

"This is an aircraft of historic significance."

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