

WASHINGTON — In what could be viewed as a metaphor for President Bush's political future, a Virginia company is trying to finance an expedition next year to raise Bush's World War II bomber from a mile under the surface of the Pacific Ocean.

"It would be a particularly fitting tribute," said James Egan, president of Ferrumar Resources, the Alexandria, Virginia, company that specializes in coordinating such expeditions. "Even if he loses, the aircraft will be a part of the remembrance of his life."

Bush's TBM Avenger torpedo bomber, "Barbara III," was shot down during the 1944 "Great Marianas Turkey Shoot" — a fierce dogfight over the Philippine Sea shortly before the liberation of Guam, Saipan and Tinian.

Flying off the USS *San Jacinto*, Lt. j.g. Bush bailed out of the crippled plane near the Bonin Islands, 615 miles south of Japan. His two crew members didn't survive.

Bush's target was a radio station at Chichi Jima, the largest in a necklace of islands along the Bonin Trench, which extends from Japan to Guam.

Egan created a foundation to coordinate funding for the recovery project that he hopes will begin this spring. He said Ferrumar and the companies that have signed on so far have narrowed the location of Bush's plane to about one square mile just off the island of Chichi Jima.

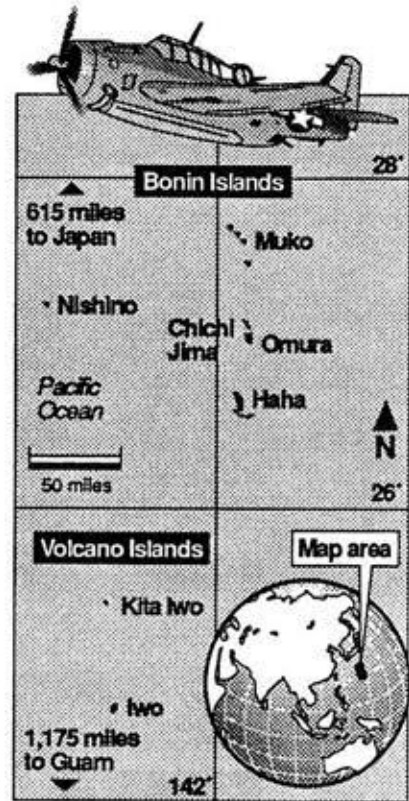
Egan said his Bonin Trench Expedition should have historic, scientific, commercial and educational spinoffs. He said the technology needed to locate, photograph, and retrieve the plane will help future recoveries, which his firm hopes to undertake.

He made it clear the estimated \$10 million project has commercial overtones, "Not only to prove the capabilities of the team we've assembled, but also to move onto bigger game, such as ships we're aware of that have contents worth hundreds of millions of dollars."

Egan said the project can begin on a moment's notice, depending on rapidly changing weather conditions: "We can have the plane on the deck within 120 days of funding commitment."

Once a floating platform is in place, a deep-sea submersible will photograph and examine the plane for the safest retrieval method.

On the surface, the plane would be quickly disassembled, bled of saturating salt water, scrubbed and "pickled" in air-tight containers to minimize the rapid deterioration that begins when it's exposed to the elements.



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What then?

Egan said that's up to those who underwrite the effort, but it's possible the plane could wind up in Bush's presidential library, in a private collection, or in an aeronautics museum. He has mentioned the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum, but the reaction there is lukewarm.

"It boils down to, number one, we don't need that aircraft in particular; we do have a model of the Avenger in our collection," said Smithsonian aircraft expert Michael Neufeld. "Number two, despite its obvious interest, anything fished out of the bottom of the ocean is not going to be in terribly good shape. It's going to be a wreck."

Neufeld called Egan's effort "interesting," and said the plane "should be in a museum," but said the Smithsonian wouldn't go to great lengths to acquire it.

"It's possible it might be something we'd want to exhibit temporarily," said World War II ace Don Lopez, the Smithsonian's curator for World War II aircraft. He called the effort "a feat of aviation archeology," but added the plan "was shot up quite a bit."

Lopez said it's also possible the plane could be in reasonably good shape, given the lack of corrosive oxygen at such depths.

"These aircraft, metallurgically, tend to be not that badly corroded," said Egan, who has consulted with experts from the Australian War Memorial, which has worked on planes fetched from the ocean.

He said negotiations are under way with such governments as nearby Guam, as well as Japan, Taiwan and Singapore, which are interested in serving as the expedition's base.

Minnesota-based Control Data Corp., which served as a consultant to the National Geographic Society to help plot Christopher Columbus' voyage, has pieced together Bush's flight path to pinpoint the plane's location.

Another firm, Maryland-based Oceaneering Technologies, a deep-sea recovery firm that helped retrieve parts of the Space Shuttle Challenger, is negotiating with Egan for the undersea work.

While the project is designed to allow scientists and others to conduct unrelated experiments and gather deep-sea information, Egan said Bush's plane is the headline act.

"Historically, this is an important relic of American history. In one sense, it's an aeronautical sword wielded by a future president in a distant field of battle so long ago."

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