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# HONOLULU

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**THE NATATORIUM:**  
*Orphan of Waikiki*



## Mystery in the Koolaus

Former KGMB-TV reporter **Rick Fredericksen** realized "a dream come true" when he was hired recently as a reporter for CBS's Bangkok bureau. Yet one of his final Channel 9 reports was his most intriguing story, he says, "because it was like uncovering a piece of history." Fredericksen filed a more detailed report to HONOLULU:

*December 7, 1941. Japanese bombers and escort fighters are pounding Pearl Harbor and other military targets. As A6M "Zeros" roar across the hills and valleys around Schofield Barracks, a gutsy pilot sprints unseen from his protected position to the nearest P-40 fighter. Amid explosions and raging fires caused by countless Japanese bomb bursts and machine gun fire which vaporizes buildings, aircraft and fleeing defenders alike, this pilot readies his warbird and takes off. He is one of a number of American pilots who make it into the sky to challenge the incoming waves of enemy aircraft. His P-40 meets the enemy over the Koolau Mountain Range, and the ensuing dogfight is brief. A severe left bank exposes his fighter's underside to his opponent, who seizes upon this unexpected opportunity and riddles the American's craft with machine gun fire. The hostile ordnance rips through the P-40's port wing and oil cooler. Losing altitude fast, the pilot skims a treeline desperately seeking level ground for his imminent crash-landing. Instead, his plane plummets into the thickest of Oahu's jungles. For years the unsung hero and his fighter lie forgotten.*

February 8, 1985. More than 43 years after this P-40 was shot down **James E. Egan** of Arlington, Va., and his group of warbird hunters trudge up and down remote mountain ridges, sometimes following wild pig trails, but often hacking their way through seemingly impassable jungle. Lifted in to a remote mountain plateau early this morning by helicopters, the group is on an unusual mission to recover buried treasure—the world's only surviving P-40B fighter. There was no simple map that led Egan to his historic find. It took years of painstaking and frustrating research, sifting through piles of military records

and recording the first-hand accounts of those who witnessed the surprise attack.

Egan located the P-40 by helicopter a couple of weeks earlier and is now making his first significant survey of the crash site. The largest sections of debris lie about 150 feet down from the summit. The mountainside is littered with jagged chunks of aluminum, switch, dials, ammo boxes and many other remnants of the classic warplane.



Egan searching for clues at the crash site.

Batches of live machine gun ammunition are discovered under the fighter's port wing by **Randy Ichiyama**. Most impressive is the 12-cylinder engine. Still intact with its short exhaust stacks glistening in the morning sun, it looks as though a simple tune-up could bring the thousand horsepower Allison thundering back to life.

As a camouflage tarp is removed from the main wing section by local warbird hunters **Alan Sklar**, "A.J.," **Steve Wellman**, **Van Smith**, **Joseph Lucero** and **Bob Hofmann**, bullet holes come into view. A tree branch grows through the damaged wing tip where **Olav Holst** points to a patch of red paint. "That proves it's an early model," he says, explaining that the marking was painted over in 1942 because many planes were being shot at by their own ground troops thinking they had a Japanese plane in their sights.

Only 131 of the B-model P-40s were

even built. Some were shipped off to Europe while others were used by Gen. **Claire Chennault** to form the backbone of the famous Flying Tigers squadron in China. This warbird compiled an impressive record during the war, and many pilots who flew the aircraft are still alive with vivid memories of those victorious days. The first P-40B's arrived on Oahu in mid-1941 and were assigned to units at Wheeler, Hickam, Bellows and Haleiwa airfields. In the end, 73 P-40 Bs and Cs were among the 152 Army aircraft destroyed by the Japanese attack.

The precise story behind this particular P-40 crash demands much more detective work. The dogfight theory is one of two possible conclusions. The other possibility, says Egan, is that friendly fire brought down the plane. Just about everything in the air that day was fair game, and historical accounts indicate American gunners did shoot down a good number of their own aircraft. Supporting either hypothesis are the bursts of gunfire that entered the wing and fuselage from below, tearing through the top sections.

More evidence will be uncovered as the vines and ferns that engulf the relic are chopped away. It will be a logistical nightmare for Egan to retrieve the pieces, but he senses the payoff will come when his prize goes on exhibit. Standing on the wing of his museum piece, he says proudly, "This is history revealed for the very first time. This plane had an actual role in combat and was one of the first American air casualties of that historic struggle."

But what happened to the pilot? He might have bailed out or been injured in the crash, then disappeared in the jungle. It's also possible his remains will be found when the recovery team locates the cockpit.

So far, few clues exist to indicate who piloted this mysterious casualty. It is a 43-year-old mystery thriller begging to be solved. Egan says that when his research and cataloging of parts is completed late this summer, the story will finally be told of the P-40B that almost vanished from history forever.