

Abilene Reporter-News

"Without or with offense to friends or foes, we sketch your world exactly as it goes." — Byron

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Jack Grimm seeks Bush's 'other Barbara'

With the election just hours away, soothsayers still disagree over whether George Bush is history. But "Titanic Jack" Grimm says there's no such doubt about Bush's old World War II torpedo bomber.

It's American history to the core, the globetrotting Abilene oilman says — and that's why he's joining a group to find its watery grave and salvage it.

"Here's a World War II aircraft, and they're rare anyway, but this happens to be the president's aircraft — something he flew as a young man that really ought to go down as a historical treasure of our country," he says.

Mark it down as yet another unusual project to draw Titanic Jack's interest.

Over the past 20 years, West Texas' most colorful oilman has bankrolled searches to solve mysteries such as the Loch Ness Monster, a North American cousin of the Abominable Snowman, Noah's Ark and the famed *Titanic* luxury liner.

The TBM Avenger torpedo bomber young George Bush flew in the western Pacific during World War II might not have the mystique of these other far-flung objects, but



Bill Whitaker

it is lost. Today, it rests on the ocean floor, some 600 miles south of Japan.

Early in the morning on Sept. 2, 1944, Lt. George Bush took off from the aircraft carrier *San Jacinto* to join a raid on the nearby island fortress of Chichi Jima, which lies on the edge of a mammoth underwater canyon known as the Bonin Trench.

During the raid, Bush's aircraft — dubbed "Barbara III" after his then-girlfriend and our future first lady — suffered damage from anti-aircraft artillery fire. Accounts indicate Bush flew the plane out over the ocean and that he and his crew then bailed out.

Bush, the only one to survive, was eventually picked up by a Navy submarine.

Jack

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location of the Japanese island fortress, ocean currents, wind conditions and the Navy submarine's position when it picked Bush up, computer wizardry has narrowed the likely resting spot to one square mile, he says.

As for "Barbara III," it sank into the depths.

Seven years ago, Jim Egan, 35, president of Ferrumar Resources, a foundation dedicated to "historic and commercially viable projects," including finding sunken cargo and lost artifacts, hatched the idea of finding the old torpedo bomber.

He and a colleague, Al Ponnwitz, 48, are trying to raise \$3 million just to launch the search. Before it's done, the entire project, including recovery, will require \$10 million. They insist, too, there's no political tie-in with the current presidential campaign.

"We want to keep this independent of politics," Mr. Ponnwitz said. "The real fact of the matter is he *is* the president and the fact of the matter also is this *does* rate recovery. It's a part of our history, either way.

"But in this case, of course, the pilot's prominence afterward does explain much of our interest."

Mr. Egan suggests finding "Barbara III" should be easier than finding the *Titanic*.

Utilizing aircraft carrier positions, the

Please see JACK, 8A

Mr. Egan believes the warbird may rest deep in what's known as the Bonin Trench, "which is why Mr. Grimm's expertise and his associates with Oceanering Technologies will be of great use. They've already operated at great depths."

Titanic Jack says some computer deductions suggest the torpedo bomber is at about 15,000 feet — a few thousand feet deeper than the *Titanic* he also still



Bill Whitaker/Reporter-News

Avenger-hunting Jim Egan (left) studies ocean maps with "Titanic Jack" Grimm.

hopes to salvage. Plans call for using remote-operated vehicles to assist in search operations.

"If that plane has actually dropped into the Bonin Trench, it could be one of the deepest recovery operations ever performed," *Titanic Jack* said. "With this trench, you're talking about something bigger than the Grand Canyon. But that only adds to the romance of it."

Mr. Egan says another

warplane recently pulled from the depths proved so well-preserved its tires were still inflated.

Although the president has no involvement with the project, he might be brought into a planned documentary to be shot about the expedition. By the time funding is raised, he may have plenty of time, too.

Only Tuesday night will solve that particular mystery.