

Salvage team wants to raise Bush's bomber

OSU oceanographer to play key role

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WASHINGTON — Japanese artillery fire flecked the sky with thick, black smoke as Lt. George Bush throttled his Avenger bomber toward its target, an enemy communications center on the Pacific island of Chichi Jima.

"Suddenly there was a jolt, as if a massive fist had crunched into the belly of the plane," Bush would recall later. "Smoke poured into the cockpit, and I could see flames rippling across the crease of the wing, edging toward the fuel tanks."

The 20-year-old Navy pilot completed the bombing mission, bailed out of the burning aircraft and was later res-

cued by a U.S. submarine. His crippled Avenger sank into the Pacific, becoming another lost relic from the latter days of World War II.

Until now.

While Bush fights the Battle of 1992 — trying to win re-election as the nation's 41st president — a consortium of scientists, salvage experts and entrepreneurs are laying plans to retrieve and restore the plane that was shot down over Chichi Jima nearly 50 years ago.

Charles Herdendorf, an oceanographer from Ohio State University, will serve as scientific coordinator of the deep-sea expedition.

"This is really hunting big game with a novel twist to it," said James Egan, a 35-year-old Alexandria, Va., businessman who is organizing the mission.

Egan, president of Ferrumar Resources, is assembling a team that includes undersea explorers who recovered the fragments of the Challenger space shuttle and a group of scientists who were commissioned by the National Geographic Society

to find the likely location of Columbus' first landfall in the Americas.

The search for the Avenger could cost up to \$10 million and will explore the perilous Bonin Trench, one of the world's largest and deepest underwater canyon systems. The single-engine bomber, say scientists, settled onto the canyon floor more than a mile below the surface after it went down Sept. 2, 1944.

If all goes as planned, the international expedition will employ high-tech underwater gadgetry that even Jules Verne didn't envision. An un-

manned vehicle, attached by cable to a 200-foot ship, will scour the undersea terrain for the aircraft while crew members monitor the search from a

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TV-equipped console.

A shipboard crane will then haul the Avenger to the surface after it is secured with nets by the remote-controlled vehicle.

Egan hopes to launch the expedition in 1993 after he lines up funding. The plane — which technically is Navy property — will be donated as a presidential artifact to a reputable museum, such as the Smithsonian Institution, or the Bush presidential library to be built on the Texas A&M campus at College Station, Egan said.

He acknowledges a profit motive, centered largely around the marketing of a documentary detailing the expedition and retracing the president's bombing mission.

There are also potential scientific rewards. Herdendorf envisions the discovery of new aquatic species as the underwater investigators probe unexplored Pacific terrain.

Neither Bush nor administration officials are associated with the project.