

REPUBLIC SEABEE, SERIAL NUMBER 317, NC6131K (w/o XXJUL47, CHAMPLAIN LAKE, VERMONT)

In July of 1999 the sonar portion of the Lake Survey Project located an airplane on the bottom of the lake. A number of planes have crashed into the waters of Lake Champlain, several of which remain unlocated, however the one found by the survey crew did not match the descriptions of any of these well-known plane wrecks. The discovery initiated a community wide effort to identify the plane and bring its story to light. With the aid of the MiniRover ROV the survey crew was able to determine that the plane was completely intact and that it had come to rest upside down on the lake bottom. Luckily, the crew was also able to read the registration number located on the tail fin of the aircraft.



Sonar Image of the Republic Seabee.

Research revealed that this number (NC6131K) was given to a Republic Seabee seaplane that was registered with the Federal Aviation Administration until 1955. The plane was registered to Leslie P. McDougal and had been purchased by him in February of 1947. Unfortunately, further record checking revealed that Mr. McDougal had passed away and the story of the plane's demise remained a mystery.

The Seabee, a civilian airplane, was built in the years following World War II by Republic as an inexpensive amphibian aircraft. Its low cost was intended to appeal to returning WWII veterans. Although the Seabee was never commercially successful, it was considered a safe and rugged aircraft. The plane had a wingspan of 37ft 8in (11.5m), a length of 28ft (8.5m), and a top speed of 120mph (193kmph). Many Seabees are still flying today.

With the official paper trail exhausted LCMM historians went to long-time area residents in an attempt to fill out the story of the plane's sinking. After articles about the plane's discovery appeared in area newspapers and stories ran on local news broadcasts LCMM staff received a number of phone calls from local community members who remembered the plane and how it came to be on the lake bottom.

This community effort revealed that Leslie McDougal and his wife (they were just recently married) had taken the recently purchased Seabee for a flight on a crystal clear June day in 1947. It being such a picturesque day the couple decided to land on the lake. Being a relatively inexperienced pilot, McDougal forgot to raise his landing gear before touching down on the lake's surface. With the wheels dragging through the water the plane rapidly became nose heavy and flipped upside down. The newlyweds were able to escape from the cabin of the plane and find refuge on the upturned floats of the plane. They were soon rescued by fishermen who had witnessed the accident, and taken to shore.

In an effort to save the plane, Bruce Crary, former owner of Westport Marina, brought two boats to the crash site and tied onto the plane. They began to slowly tow the aircraft back to shore. However they soon noticed that the Seabee was rapidly taking on water and they were just able to cut their towlines as the plane rapidly sank into deep water. While several plans were formulated to raise the plane, none of them proved viable and the wreck was abandoned.

For further information see:

Kane, A. and C. Sabick, *Lake Champlain Underwater Cultural Resources Survey, Volume IV: 1999 Results and Volume V: 2000 Results*. Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, 2002