

A TRIP INTO THE PAST

Sunday morning August 1, three Minnesota flatlanders departed Herman MN, bound for the Cloud Peak Wilderness in the Wyoming Bighorn Mtns. to visit the wreck of a WWII vintage B-17 bomber, which crashed in that area in June, 1943.

(<http://www.ultimatewyoming.com/nuggets/bomber112205.html>)

We were Aaron Ray, Tim Ray, and Steve Ray, respectively an 18 year-old backcountry novice with borrowed equipment, and two AARP-aged backcountry camping veterans with limited experience at high-altitude backpacking.

The plan was to drive to Custer State Park in the Black Hills first day, camp overnight there, continue on to West Tensleep Lake campground in Wyoming via Buffalo, Wyoming next day and meet up with Doug and Michael Ray who were coming in from Portland, Oregon. We would then take a couple of days to acclimate to the 9-12,000' altitudes of the area, and proceed on to the wreck site, located at about 12,300' on the west side of Bomber Mountain in an area of car-sized boulders and a few scattered, grassy flat spots.



Tim and Aaron in camp at Custer State Park

After a nice side trip to Devil's Tower and a hike around it's base, the three intrepid travelers proceeded on to West Tensleep campground, met with Doug and Michael and their two dogs Katie and Bandit, and had a nice evening of conversation and cold beer. (Aaron, of course, consumed only iced tea!)



Devil's Tower



Camp at West Tensleep Lake

Tuesday August 3rd dawned misty and overcast, but we decided to keep with the plan and make a 6 mile “warm-up/acclimation” hike to Mirror Lake, altitude about 10,000’. It was at that point that Doug announced words to the effect of “acclimation/schmaclimation, I’m not interested in punishing myself anymore than I have to, think I’ll stay in camp today”, so Aaron, Michael, Tim, Steve, and the two dogs set out in the rain for the first acclimation/warm-up hike.

The hike was difficult in the rain and altitude, the trail was steep at some points and a bit slippery, but we finally arrived at our destination----beautiful Mirror Lake, about half-way up the Lost Twin Lakes trail. As we were enjoying lunch and a refreshing drink of cold water from the lake, we watched the sky slowly clear

to a pure, dry blue, and shortly, were headed back to our base camp on the West side of West Tensleep Lake. We were a bit tired, bug-bitten, but otherwise in good shape. We enjoyed great conversation around a nice campfire that evening, were later awoken to frantic barking of Katie and Bandit when a bull Elk wandered into our campsite. We went to sleep early, and awaited the morning.



Hike to Mirror Lake (Aaron, Tim, Michael)



Hike to Mirror Lake (Aaron, Steve, Michael)



Mirror Lake (well named)

Wednesday morning August 4th: Doug has a major tent malfunction while getting ready to pack up to head up to the wreck, and decided that he'd rather not sleep outside at the mercy of the mosquitoes, so at that point, he and Michael announced a major change in their plans-----they would forgo their visit to the wreck and head in another direction towards Yellowstone Park, do some sightseeing, and return to Oregon

Sadly, we said our goodbyes, and Aaron, Steve, and Tim headed up the Misty Moon Trail, bound for Bomber Mountain and the B-17, with plans for an overnight at Misty Moon Lake before proceeding to the wreck site the next morning.

Misty Moon Lake lies about 7 miles up-trail from our original campsite at an altitude of about 11,000' and is a popular jumping-off point for day-trips to either Cloud Peak or Bomber Mountain. We were anxious to get going, so after registering at the trailhead, we departed about 11:00 AM for Misty Moon with a planned stop at Lake Helen for a light lunch.

We made Lake Helen in about three hours of steady up-hill hiking, were enjoying a nice rest, when into our circle walks "Ranger Bob"

Ranger Bob: Hi, I'm Wilderness Ranger Bob, how are you guys doin' today? Mind if I take a look at your registration form?

Now, Ranger Bob was an interesting guy, about 65 years old, in great shape, quite friendly and dressed in standard-issue Wilderness Ranger attire. After checking our permits and telling us about himself and his job, he departed with the words "I'll probably see you guys again soon", leaving Aaron wondering if he was an apparition or if he really did actually appear!!



Tim and Aaron take lunch break at Lake Helen

We arrived at Misty Moon Lake about two hours later, found a great campsite with a million-dollar view down the valley we had just hiked up, set up camp, had supper and a few brandy nightcaps (instant tea for Aaron, of course) checked out our neighbors with a pair of binoculars because Aaron was looking for female playmates, and got ready to turn in.



Aaron in camp at Misty Moon Lake with view down that valley

Just about then, we were again paid a visit by Ranger Bob,

Ranger Bob: Hey, see you made it, congratulations!! If you're goin' to the wreck site, I'd suggest you get going as early as possible, don't want to get caught on the mountainside late in the afternoon if you see any clouds building in the West"! We assured him we would indeed "get going early", and he bid us good night. At that point, Aaron decided he was "real" and exhausted from the hike and the altitude, went to bed at about 8:00 P.M. ready to head to the wreck site next morning.



Evening at Misty Moon Lake camp

Thursday morning dawned bright, warm and clear, and after a quick breakfast of instant oatmeal, we filled our water bottles, made certain we had trail mix and rain-ponchos in the daypacks, and headed for Bomber Mountain at about 7:00 A.M.

Three hours later, after a nice, gentle hike, passing by Fortress and Gunboat lakes, marveling at a beautiful field of purple wildflowers, we arrived at the base of Bomber Mountain, paid our respects to the plaque commemorating the 4 officers and 6 enlisted crew of the ill-fated B-17, and picked a tentative route up the approximately 1000' climb to the wreck site.



Fortress Lake



Wild flowers



Aaron in snowfield at Florence Pass



Florence Lake and Bomber Mountain



Memorial to crew lost in B-17

The climb, although not “technical” in mountaineering terms, was nonetheless a challenge.

We picked our way through the boulder field, crossed a beautiful mountain stream that was fed by the still-melting snowfield just a few feet above us, and started looking for evidence of the B-17. We noticed “something” shiny in the rocks above us, headed for it, and discovered an approximately 4’ by 4’ piece of aircraft aluminum that someone had affixed in the rocks to serve as a kind of reflector to point out the way to the debris field.



Aaron and Tim with 1st piece of wreckage spotted

Shortly, Tim spotted a large, round object about 100 yards to our East. We headed towards the object, soon to discover that it was indeed a large, radial aircraft engine, wedged in the rocks.



Tim and Aaron at one of the B-17 engines

By that time, we were exhausted from the climb, discussing whether “this was enough, we found some parts anyway”, when Steve looked to his left, shouted “there it is”!!, and sure enough, there, about 200 yards to the West, in a slight depression, was the remains of the once proud, graceful B-17 bomber.



There it is!!!!

We headed for it, “bouldering” our way over and around giant rocks, to the main wreckage site.



Climbing (bouldering) Bomber Mountain

Most obvious, of course, were the large, shiny aluminum remains of the fuselage, wings, and cockpit. We found and examined the other three engines, the jumbled hodgepodge of wires, cables, some wooden pieces, some remains of electronics gear, and the large main landing gear. We took numerous photos, discussed the tremendous amount of energy it must have taken to hurl the fourth engine about 300 yards from the main debris field, and about then it slowly hit us-----that we were at a site where 10 men in their late-teens and early twenties had met a violent and untimely death while themselves preparing to be shipped overseas to inflict violent and untimely death on the citizens of Nazi Germany.





Various pictures of wreckage

I could not help but wonder at the futility of it all, and sobered by these thoughts, we bade our farewells to the crash site, began a descent back to the memorial plaque, paid one last respect to the memories of:

Lieutenants: Leonard H. Phillips, Charles H. Suppes, William R. Ronaghan, Anthony J. Tilotta;

Sergeants: James A. Hinds, Lewis M. Shepard, Charles E. Newburn, Jr., Lee V. Miller, Ferguson T. Bell, Jr., Jake E Penick.”

We refilled our water jugs, and headed back to our beautiful campsite on the shores of Misty Moon Lake. That evening, we had two more visits from Ranger Bob (he seemed somewhat surprised but pleased that we found the wreck). We began to wonder if he was keeping an eye on us for some reason. Steve had found a large tooth at the bottom of Misty Moon Lake while swimming and Bob said it was a moose tooth.

Next morning early we packed our gear, headed back down the Misty Moon Trail, ran into Ranger Bob again, and bade our farewell to Bomber Mountain and the Cloud Peak Wilderness.

This was a beautiful hike with some real adventure, we shared some great family time, had a few laughs, shed a few tears, saw some new and interesting sites, met great guy in Ranger Bob, and returned to Minnesota with some lifelong memories.