

*Unpublished Reedley Area Stories:*

**RECOVERING THE B24 LIBERATOR FROM HUNTINGTON LAKE**

**By Louis Soffell**

The fall of 1955 I had been working as a fuel truck driver on an earth filled dam in Cherry Valley. I was about finished when I was laid off. At the union hall the next day, I misunderstood the clerk. I thought she said to come back that night.

They were having a meeting. A man came out of the meeting and asked “What do you want?” “A job.” “Can you run a cement mixer?” “Sure!” “Be at Huntington Lake tomorrow morning by 7:00 a.m. You will see their sign on the road, Maco Construction Company.”

I asked several people how long it would take to get there. I added an hour to be sure to be there early. We lived in Tivy Valley at the time.

The closest route was through Centerville and north to Humphrey’s Station. I thought that used to be a stage stop between Shaver Lake and Fresno. The next place was Tollhouse, a store and a lumber mill.

People had told me how bad Tollhouse Grade was. It really wasn’t that steep. There were a few switchbacks, but it wasn’t really that bad. Being early, there wasn’t much traffic. A short stretch of road at the top of Tollhouse Grade, that went by a school house, was very steep; they called that section “School House Grade”.

Then I went on through Shaver and down to Big Creek. I remember my uncle working on the generator plant. The water came down from Huntington Lake in a large penstock tube to run the generators. Shutting the water off at the lake would cause the tube to collapse from the weight of the water. This time there was a vent pipe at the top—no more collapsed tube.

The road from Big Creek to Huntington was very steep, narrow and a few switchbacks; also some very sharp turns.

There was the Maco Construction sign. I crossed the dam and went up a dirt road to the office. I found the office, but no one was there. A man drove up in a company pickup. “Good morning, I am Will. Are you here to run our cement mixer?” “Yes, I am.” “Glad to see you. You are early; let’s go in the office. I’ll get you signed up and then I will take you up to the mixer and show you what we have to do done.”

We drove across a bridge and on the top of the dam. Will showed me the side of the dam they were working on. The dam was all rock. On the water side there was concrete.

The company had surveyors to make a straight line from side to side. They marked the dam in squares and then marked the proper length of each rod. Some rods were about 1 1/2 feet, some were about 4 feet. The dam was drilled and the rods were put in solid. The ends of the rods were threaded so they could put on a nut to hold the steel plates. The plates were welded together.

“How do you do that underwater?” “We have a diver that does all the underwater work.”

Will explained how to run the mixer. It was very large and held two yards of rock and sand, and two sacks of cement. They had little carts that would hold a full mix. They would take it to a chute that went between the dam and the steel plates. Oh yes, there was a group that shoveled in to it. I had a couple of handles and a valve. It was really easy.

I looked down the canyon toward Big Creek. There was the vent pipe.

The company put us up at Lake Shore Lodge. The Lodge provided breakfast, packed our lunch pails, and gave us dinner. Breakfast and dinner were served family style.

At dinner I asked about the plane in the lake. A couple of men that seemed to know what they were talking about said the plane went in the lake during WWII. They were not sure if it was from Hammer Field (Fresno Air Terminal). They were very open and said we don't know for sure. They assumed it was a training mission. Possibly the crew might have thought the lake was a meadow; they were guessing about that. In a few days the Company was going to pull it out of the water so the coroner could get the bodies out of it.

The next day, before work started, I leaned on the guardrail and took a good look at the plane. It lay there looking so peaceful. I wondered why the men didn't swim out. I wondered what they thought about when they were in the water. I looked so complete. I wondered what happened. Whenever I had free time I would go look at the plane, always wondering what happened.

A few days later at dinner, they talked about the plane. Enough of the plane was out of the water so they could get the bodies out.

The company diver hooked a cable to the plane and they hooked a D8 Cat on it. As they talked, their voices got louder and were excited. We didn't know that plane was that heavy. It got hooked on some rocks and started to roll over. It didn't stop. It kept going and rolled over, breaking one wing off.

First thing the next morning I went to look at the plane. There it lay, looking so hurt, with one wing broken off. The dual tails were bent over.

Where the mixer was, I could not see the plane. The county coroner came the next day. They got the bodies out and I saw the body bags laying by the coroner's van. There was a grey-haired man and lady standing with the group.

"Will, what's with the older couple?" "Their son is in one of those body bags. They knew their son went down somewhere in the mountains and they have spent every vacation looking for him." They were making arrangements to take their son home.

We were working nine hours a day, seven days a week. It was getting colder with a little light snow. We were getting close to the top of the dam. Will said that Thursday would probably be our last day. I was a little sad, but happy.

My next real job was the U.S. Air Force. They trained me to be a one and two engine and air frame mechanic. The Air Force sent me to Long Beach Airport. It was reserve training. In short, they made me a flight mechanic.

"Here are your orders. You are going to fly tonight." Most of the pilots were veterans of Korea and other things. We talked airplanes, close calls, and emergency landings. Some of their fellow airmen survived and some didn't.

We were flying over the water and I wondered which planes would float. "C54s float really well. High wings do not float; they go down like a rock. This C119 you are flying in has high wings. If you know you are going in, grab your parachute, Mae West and go out the back door."

The B24 has a Plexiglas front. When the plane hits the water, the water goes in very fast. There are two gun ports in front and two waist guns ports in the back, so water fills the back. It floats like a rock because of high wings with the fuel tank.

Over the years several have written about the plane in Huntington Lake, saying the wing was broken off when it hit the water and crashed. The fuselage would have hit first. By the time the wings got to the water, they were going very slow.

I would tell them what really happened. Usually they would say I was misinformed. They would say the tail gunner was still in the plane. Anyone who knows anything, knows at the first sign of trouble he is out of the tail. For a training mission he probably rode in a more comfortable place. All their stories were about the same. They would tell me I was misinformed or really didn't have the facts. I just gave up.

About 2014 they were having a meeting to discuss the facts about the B24. They had some so-called experts. The meeting was at Lake Shore Lodge. The guy in charge said the meeting had to be over at 4:00 p.m.

At the start they talked of a man that had a lot of pictures of the plane. They didn't show a one of them. They talked about how great they were and how he captured the real plane.

Then some sp-called expert talked of bomb bay doors and bulks heads. Every one of the so-called experts said the wing broke off when they hit the water. Something else, if a wing breaks off it goes one way and the plane goes the other.

One expert talked of the bent tail. What he said happened would have bent the whole tail. They spent a lot of time telling each other how great they were.

Like everyone else, their reasons for what happened were not real. Everything was scheduled. Time was up and no one else was allowed to speak.

I feel rather special because possibly I am the only one left that knows and experienced the truth about the plane at Huntington Lake. This is what I saw through my own eyes.

### **B24 Liberator Specifications**

Wing span .....	110 ft
Length .....	66 ft 4 in
Empty weight .....	16+ tons
Height.....	17 ft 11 in
Top speed .....	303 mph
Engine range .....	2850 miles
Engines/horsepower .....	4 Pratt Whitney, R1830, 1200 HP
Crew .....	10
Armament .....	8800 lb bombs, 10-50 in Browning machine guns

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