


[Print Page](#)

## Pilot's remains found

By KATHERINE HEAD  
Bigfork Eagle

For 46 years the body of Marine Corps Captain reservist John F. Eaheart has rested at the bottom of Flathead Lake, far from the light of day and the progression of time. But it took just a short matter of time for searchers to discover Eaheart's remains after looking for less than two weeks.

On March 21, 1960 at about 7 p.m., a U.S. Navy fighter jet--a F9F Cougar--crashed into Flathead Lake. After doing a second flyover Yellow Bay and while setting up for a third pass, the pilot of the aircraft developed catastrophic engine failure over Wild Horse Island resulting in the crash. Eaheart was just 32 years old at the time of his death.

On Friday at about 4 p.m., searchers John Gisselbrecht, and Gene and Sandy Ralston from Idaho made an important discovery. Using a submersible video camera, the team was looking along the lake floor at about 276 feet below the surface when a black spot caught Gisselbrecht's eye. After blowing off some silt, the black spot turned out to be a military boot.



Katherine Head photos/Bigfork Eagle

A Neptune aircraft performs a ceremonial flyover where Marine Corps Captain reservist John F. Eaheart's plane crashed into Flathead Lake 46 years ago. The memorial was held Wednesday in conjunction with a search for the plane's wreckage and the pilot's remains. Eaheart's body was discovered Friday afternoon.

"It was an absolute shock," Gisselbrecht said. "It was literally a needle in a haystack. The plane I expected, but it is beyond all belief that we saw that."

According to Gisselbrecht, a search dog that specializes in locating submerged cadavers was brought in earlier last week to investigate an area about one square mile in size. From a raft, Ruby continually signaled a hit in a particular location. Turns out, "The strongest area that the dog hit was right above the spot," Gisselbrecht noted.

Eaheart's body was submerged under a few inches of silt. Nearby, his deployed parachute was also buried under a fine layer of sediment. Although some peripheral parts of the aircraft have been found, as of Friday the main part of the wreckage, including the cockpit, has yet to be discovered. The search team is awaiting military decision before proceeding with the search or the recovery of the remains.

"You treat it kind of like a crime scene--once you find it , you don't step on it," Gisselbrecht said.

In memory

Even though Eaheart's body was yet to be found, a memorial and ceremonial fly over took place last Wednesday on the middle of Flathead Lake near the scene of the crash. Among the attendees was Viola Lewis, who was engaged to Eaheart when the accident claimed his life. The couple met while he was a pilot for Western Airlines and she was a stewardess.

"He was caring and fun," Lewis said. "He loved to fish, that was one of his favorite things."

Lewis was in Denver at the time of the accident. Her parents, however, lived in Yellow Bay and witnessed the plane crash into the water.

In the years that passed after Eaheart's death, Lewis was able to find love again. She married Escoe Lewis in 1970.

"This all happened so long ago. Now I have a new life and I've been very happy," she relayed. "I am very glad John is doing this. Living out here on the lake I realize he is out there. This will put a kind of closure to it all. I am glad John is putting to rest some of the rumors as well."

Lewis lives on the water in Yellow Bay. She said she advocates the recovery of Eaheart's remains.

"It's cold, dark and lonely down there. He needs to come home and be buried with his family," she said.

After the body was located, Lewis said Monday she wasn't surprised at the discovery.

"I knew he was out there, it was a relief to know exactly where," she said. "It made it a little more definite. I would still like them to be able to bring the body up to be buried with his family."

Remaining members of Eaheart's immediate family have had a difficult time reaching the same conclusion. Two nieces initially requested that their uncle's remains not be moved. According to the two women's cousin, Bill Picinni of Woods Bay, the family has decided that the body should be recovered. The family fears that with technological advances, "scavengers" could reach the site. Gisselbrecht said that is a valid fear.

"The newest generation of fish finder can find an aircraft if its still intact, so it is a very legitimate fear," he said. Gisselbrecht added that there are also several dive schools that explore the depths of Flathead Lake.

Cause of the crash

So what caused Eaheart's F9F Cougar to crash into Flathead Lake? There has been a lot of speculation through the years, but Gisselbrecht said the question can now be answered with some certainty.

"It was most likely a compressor stall," he said.

Gisselbrecht said that type of aircraft was notorious for such a problem, and it could have happened "anytime or anyplace." He did note that Eaheart was able to restart the engine, as witnesses described a mile-long rooster tail on the water's surface after impact. Because of the angle of entry into the water, Gisselbrecht believes the wreckage is nearly complete.

"There is a lot of evidence that would tell us that the aircraft is relatively intact," he said.

It is also believed that Eaheart tried to get out of the plane, but was unable to do so.

"The injuries sustained during the failed ejection and impact with the canopy probably caused the death," Gisselbrecht said.

The Navy is reviewing the circumstances and a decision is pending about whether they will send a team to recover Eaheart's body or if the search team will be assigned the task.

"We may end up being the ones to do the recovery. It would just be a whole lot less redundant and a whole lot more convenient," Gisselbrecht said. "We have what it takes to get the job done and bring him home."