The Sunken Goose

By Joseph C. Dovala

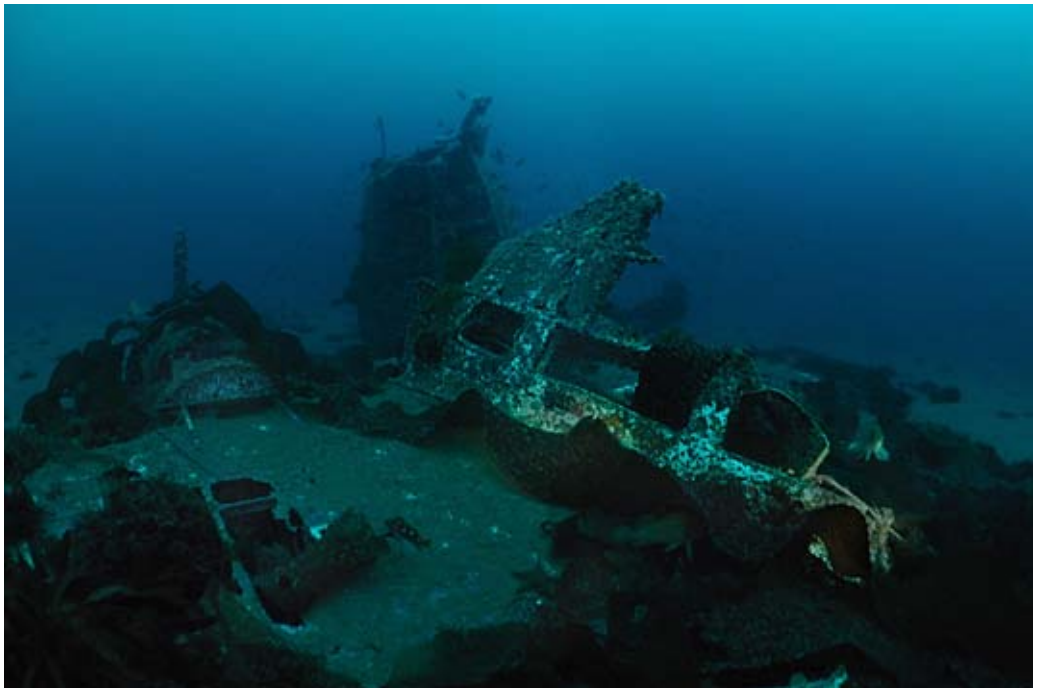
The sun was still high in the California sky as the Grumman Goose Flying Boat revved up for take-off. Onboard were four men, three passengers and the pilot, heading back to the mainland from Avalon, Catalina Island, on September 17, 1979. Conditions were calm, but as the old workhorse reached take-off speed, something gave way and they lost all power. The plane quickly turned upside down and plunged heavily back into the cold Pacific. The Goose nearly broke in two, yet amazingly, no one died initially from the impact.

In a matter of seconds, Larry Gilman, a 27 year old construction worker, pulled his 52 year old father O. T. Gilman from the tangled wreckage. Larry then went back in to yank out the unconscious pilot, Vern McGee, 54, from what was left of the cockpit. Larry then went in a third time to locate the last man in the snarled passenger compartment but was unsuccessful. Both he and his father O. T. then began administering first aid to the badly injured McGee on the amphibian's wing. It was plain to see the mangled former Flying Boat was going down to the bottom quite soon. A private motor yacht sped up to the scene and the three shook up men transferred over just as the plane was swallowed up by the sea. The pilot was airlifted to the mainland and the father/son, who refused medical check ups, retired to a bar in Avalon. A Sheriff's deputy finally found them hours later and "convinced" them to go to the Avalon hospital for a check up.

Only a couple of hours after the crash, divers made the 225 foot plunge to the Goose's remains but did not find the other 33 year old passenger. He was never found. Soon after this tragedy, which was the second fatal crash in less than a year, Catalina Airlines folded up shop and the Grumman Goose Flying Boat era to Catalina Island came to an end. Few people knew about the wreckage, and fewer still, knew exactly where it was.

My connections with the old Goose started with a charter group who wanted to find the plane's whereabouts. As in many places, California is no exception, GPS numbers can be "worth their weight in gold." Some folks had a general idea where it was but the depth made casual searching impractical. Members of the SoCal TecDiver's Club chartered the dive boat Seabass out of San Pedro. They use this tech friendly boat quite often.

Tailplane. Nikon D700, Aquatica Housing, Sigma 15mm FE, f/11, 1/60sec, ISO 2500, Ikelite DS-125 strobes @ full power (Inset) The Goose in her former days



The wing and part of the cabin windows. Nikon D700, Aquatica Housing, Sigma 15mm FE, f/9, 1/15sec, ISO 2500, Ikelite DS-125 strobes @ full power.

Both engines. 01- Nikon D700, Aquatica Housing, Sigma 15mm FE, f/9, 1/15sec, ISO 2500, Ikelite DS-125 strobes @ full power

The skipper had a general idea where the plane might lie but not specifics. With the more or less known depth, search teams used a simple depth contour search and within 20 minutes discovered the Goose's resting place.

With the GPS numbers now in hand it was an easy jaunt at will to the site. For a deeper dive off California you couldn't ask for a better location. It's very close to shore and just east of Avalon Harbor, next to the heliport. In fact, you can count on a Bell jet turbine helicopter making a loud low pass right over you during their landing. The water conditions are almost always outstanding. Good visibility at depth; maybe dark because of plankton in the surface layers but clear water on the bottom. Currents can be a problem, as well as a fair amount of boat traffic, so getting blown off and having to do a free wheeling deco isn't the best idea in these parts. Nevertheless, I've always had very good diving here.

When the Goose materializes out of the blue-green murk, my first thought is, no way could anyone have survived this crash. The passenger compartment is completely folded over back on itself. It looks like an angry child grabbed his model fore and aft and then broke it in two. Even with helium it takes awhile before you mentally can straighten out the tortured aircraft. Though separated from the fuselage, the wing is somewhat intact with the propellers unbent - proving they weren't spinning. Many of the surfaces still have red and blue paint on them. The tires are still recognizable, as are some of the stabilizer control surfaces. Airplane parts are scattered to and fro, and there's a small section of fuselage off the main wreckage that could've been part of the cockpit.

It generally takes two dives to fully explore the crash site. While on a sandy bottom, the few rocks and plane components now provide substrate for kelps, especially Laminaria. These large bladed algae can partially obscure the radial engines depending on bottom currents. Other detritus

Topside support checks divers. Nikon D700, Aquatica Housing, Sigma 15mm FE, f/13, 1/250sec, ISO 400, Ikelite DS-125 strobes @ half power.

builds up periodically against other sections as well. Photographically, she's a tough one. Other than the propellers, there isn't much that looks "aircrafty." The fuselage is so badly twisted that only a very small angle looks like she once belonged in the air. Even though the water is usually clear, the darkness makes for considerable difficulty to get anything other than strobe-lighted-black-background "night" pics. Long exposures and the new high ISO cameras rule on this one.

As underwater photographers we have little time to set up shots; on these extra deep immersions the clock is ticking even faster. Any work with a model has to be talked out in detail before the dive. You also don't get much of a chance to mess around with camera settings. I try to anticipate f-stops and shutter speed on the surface. Admittedly, this takes experience but with digital the learning curve is less steep. It took three dives on this flying boat to get several shots I liked. Much of the effort was trying to get clear images without the night background look. The other issue was primarily dialing in the right amount of ISO. While the high ISO cameras do extremely well in air, water physics throws a lot of curves at you; so it isn't just a matter of cranking up the sensitivity. Image noise is a function of many variables underwater besides available light. Type of suspended particles, temperature, and "color" of the water all seem to play a role.

Whenever I dive on "artificial reefs," even small ones like this, it always amazes me how many marine critters are cruising around. The wreckage is now home to blacksmith, rockfish, and lingcod. None of the fish are that big so hopefully the clowns with the spear guns will stay away. Due to the depth, this old air jalopy enjoys a fair amount of anonymity. It's quite fragile though, and can be heavily damaged by careless or greedy individuals. There's no need to dig around as nothing remains to salvage. One also has to be careful when anchoring or dropping a down line. The old Goose does make a fine extended range dive. The relatively easy diving conditions along with a bit of colorful history make it well worth the gas.

Joe Dovala
www.jcdovala.com