

Contributed by Bob Canchola

SYNOPSIS - BIOS - INFO



Narrated by
BILL KURTIS

BACKGROUND

In 1988 Director John Davies made a short film about an extraordinary Naval training operation that took place just off the Chicago shoreline during WWII. It told the amazing story of young aviators who trained to fight in the Pacific by learning to land on and take off from makeshift aircraft carriers operating in Lake Michigan. Davies interviewed several pilots, and using old newsreels and stills, his film ran locally to critical acclaim.



That effort didn't include digital recreations, declassified footage, a recently discovered photo archive, or underwater recovery footage of priceless warbirds on the bottom of the lake. Davies and his seasoned producing partners Harvey Moshman and Brian Kallies, believed it was time to revisit this little known chapter of World War II history in a new documentary for National Public Television. Naval and World War II historians consider the Lake Michigan Carrier Qualification program to be a key

event leading to victory in the Pacific. **HEROES ON DECK** is a story told by some of the brave men who were actually there.

OVERVIEW

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the US Navy was desperate for pilots who could take off from aircraft carriers, strike the enemy, navigate their way back to the ship and land safely...no easy task in the vast Pacific. With only seven real carriers left in the entire Navy, none could be spared for training. In order to quickly train thousands of aviators, Commander Richard F. Whitehead proposed a radical idea. He suggested that two coal-fired, side-wheeled, passenger steamers, the SS Seaandbee and SS Greater Buffalo, be converted into makeshift aircraft carriers.



The Great Lakes passenger ship
SS Seaandbee



...is converted into aircraft carrier
USS Wolverine in 1942



...then joined by USS Sable
in 1943



USS Wolverine anchored off Chicago

It was an inspired solution to a huge problem. These “freshwater carriers” were commissioned the **USS Wolverine** and **USS Sable**. The two “oddball flattops” would facilitate pilot and crew training in the safety of Lake Michigan.

Between 1942 and the end of the war, Whitehead’s ambitious year-round program qualified over 15,000 aviators including 41st President, George H.W. Bush. Eight successful takeoffs and landings, usually completed in a single day, were enough to guarantee a young pilot a trip to the Pacific. Landing on the pitching decks of these lake-based carriers proved too much for some. Onboard crashes, navigational errors, and “water landings” often led to serious injuries and occasionally death. As a result, more than 100 classic WWII fighters and dive-bombers sank to the bottom of the lake.



FM2 Wildcat crashes aboard USS Sable



Crashes on board USS Wolverine and USS Sable were common



TBM Avenger water landing

Today, swimmers, pleasure boaters and fisherman have no idea the number of historic warbirds resting beneath them. Many of these rare aircraft are in remarkable condition, preserved



Submerged TBF Avenger

unmolested in the frigid, oxygen-deprived depths. For decades these classic planes remained undisturbed because neither the interest, nor the will existed to recover them. In the late 1970's that began to change.



A Corsair emerges from Lake Michigan.

For more than 30 years, with the US Navy's blessing, a skilled team of professionals have been identifying and recovering these forgotten warbirds, using deepwater divers, side-scan sonar, and ROV's. To date, over 40 aircraft have been brought to the surface. A few have been restored to their former glory and are flying again, but most are on display in museums and airports under the supervision of the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Florida.

Grumman F6F Hellcats, the dominant fighters in WWII, as well as Wildcats, TBM Avengers, F4U Corsairs, SBD Dauntless Dive Bombers, and a rare SB2U Vindicator are among the planes on display around the country. Our cameras captured some of the key recoveries and restoration efforts. These heroes were witness to history and they've shared their stories with us.



A Hellcat is maneuvered onto a dock



Wolverine pilot Downey (L), and Sable pilot Young (R) witness an aircraft recovery.



Pilots Chuck Downey and Gene Popma revisit their training grounds at Glenview Naval Air Station.

Using interviews, de-classified film and stills, underwater recovery footage and computer generated recreations, **HEROES ON DECK** brings to life a vital chapter of American history. As Naval Historian John Lauder milk stated, "These were the heroes that shot the Japanese air force out of the sky. These pilots were the Top Guns of 1943". Narrated by legendary CBS and A&E newsman **Bill Kurtis**, **HEROES ON DECK** is a perfect Memorial Day, Veteran's Day or July 4th Special, but it's also evergreen for audiences that love history, aviation and stories of heroism. **Presented by WTTW National and American Public Television, HEROES ON DECK will premier on Public Television stations across the United States on Memorial Day weekend 2016.**



Hellcats aboard the *USS Sable* on Lake Michigan - 1944

PRODUCERS



JOHN DAVIES - Exec. Producer/Writer/Director

John Davies is an Emmy® Award winning writer/producer/director who spent the first decade of his career on documentaries (**TOP GUNS OF '43, THE FIRST JETLINER**) and National series (**SNEAK PREVIEWS**) at WTTW-Chicago. Moving to Los Angeles in the 90's, John created series and specials for almost every network and cable outlet including NBC, ABC, FOX, AMC, TRU-TV, BRAVO and COMEDY CENTRAL. He's also produced episodes of **BIOGRAPHY** for A&E, **INTIMATE PORTRAIT** for LIFETIME, and documentary specials for SHOWTIME, COURT TV and ESPN. His reality series **RUN'S HOUSE** was an MTV hit and his feature length documentary **PHUNNY BUSINESS**, about Chicago's first black owned comedy club, was hailed as "one of the best documentaries of 2012" by film critic Roger Ebert. John's most recent documentary, **THE 25,000 MILE LOVE STORY**, has won film festivals around the world and premiered on Public Television in 2015. He is currently developing **CARSON THE MAGNIFICENT**, an NBC mini-series about the life of Johnny Carson.



HARVEY MOSHMAN - Exec. Producer/ Recovery Photography

Harvey Moshman is a multi-Emmy® Award winning producer and editor, having worked at Chicago Network affiliates for NBC, CBS and PBS, as well as WGN. During his tenure at WTTW/Chicago, Moshman produced documentaries on topics ranging from thrill killers **LEOPOLD & LOEB** to maritime tragedies. His film **THE EASTLAND DISASTER** was called "one of the best documentaries ever produced for local television" by the Chicago Sun-Times. His more recent documentary **LOST & FOUND: THE LEGACY OF USS LAGARTO**—the search for, and eventual discovery of, a missing American WWII submarine "overdue from patrol, presumed lost" – aired nationally on Public Television. Moshman is an accomplished diver and has worked on projects documenting the discovery of shipwrecks, aircraft, and even a WWI German submarine that rest on the bottom of Lake Michigan.



BRIAN KALLIES - Producer/Editor

Brian Kallies is an independent documentary producer and editor. He began his career at WTTW-Chicago, where he was associate producer for the Emmy© Award-Winning documentary series **CHICAGO STORIES**, and produced and edited **THE SEVEN WONDERS OF CHICAGO** and **THE NEW RIVER TOUR**. Brian directed the PBS documentary, **EVERGLADES OF THE NORTH**, the story of a lost ecosystem, which inspired a national wildlife preserve. Brian co-produced, shot and edited the SHOWTIME documentary, **PHUNNY BUSINESS**, which received critical acclaim from **ROGER EBERT**, **RICHARD ROEPER**, **NY TIMES**, **HOLLYWOOD REPORTER**, and **THE ONION**. Brian's most recent documentary, **THE 25,000 MILE LOVE STORY**, has won film festivals around the world and premiered on Public Television in 2015. He is currently editing and co-writing the environmental documentary, **SHIFTING SANDS**, which will premiere on Public Television in 2016.

HEROES ON DECK Information:

for DVDs, Downloads & Streaming

www.heroesondeck.com

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TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Format: HD 1920x1080 (ProRes HQ) – (NTSC & PAL)

FPS: 29.97

Audio: Stereo Mix

TRT: 56:46