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Missing Bizjet Wreckage Found in Lake Champlain

Jet's location has been a mystery since it crashed in 1971



A photo from the remotely operated vehicle that helped identify the wreckage of a jet that crashed into Lake Champlain in 1971. © Garry Kozak

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By **MATT THURBER** • Editor-in-Chief

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The wreckage of an [Aero Commander Jet Commander 1121A](#)—registered as N400CP—that went missing shortly after takeoff from Burlington, Vermont, on Jan. 27, 1971, has been found by a team led by underwater sonar expert Garry Kozak. N400CP disappeared from the Burlington tower radar over Lake Champlain, and initial search efforts stopped when the lake froze over.

The NTSB accident report cites the jet's “missing location” and lists “undetermined” as the probable cause. The two pilots and three passengers onboard were presumed dead and the wreckage was “believed to be in Lake Champlain, New York,” the inconclusive NTSB report states.

According to Kozak, during the following spring, wreckage was found on the shore of the lake at Shelburne Point. Undersea search company Ocean Systems spent two weeks searching for the jet, and although nothing was found, the company concluded from the radar and other information that it must be south of Juniper Island and West of Queneska Island, which are near Shelburne Point. Additional searches took place over the years, the last in 2014 when a search team looked for the jet with an autonomous underwater vehicle equipped with side scan sonar but had no success.

Kozak first learned about the missing jet mystery in the 1980s and said he “was convinced the plane was within the searched areas, but that it had been overlooked by all the previous searchers.”

It turned out that in 1997, Middlebury College professor Tom Manley and Lake Champlain Maritime Museum executive director Chris Sabick had done a “side scan sonar survey to map the locations of archeological shipwreck resources in the lake. It was low-resolution sonar data.” Kozak thought the data “might be sufficient enough to detect possible anomalies” so he contacted Manley and Sabick and asked if he could view the data.

“They agreed as long as the data was kept confidential to protect historical resource locations,” Kozak explained, adding that he found four suspicious anomalies and noted their approximate locations.

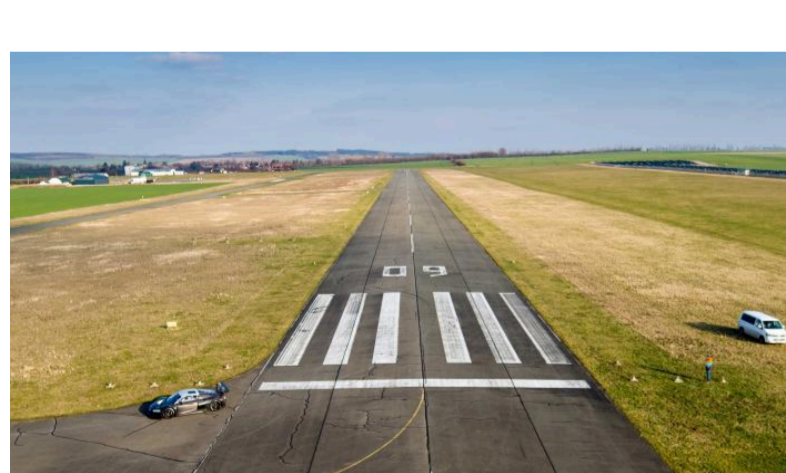
These ended up not being the location of the missing jet’s wreckage, confirmed during 2022 and 2023 dives using a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) provided by Sonar Search and Recovery. In one of the searches of the anomalies on July 6, 2023, the team found some shredded aluminum with rivet holes, wing sections, and airplane structural elements, but this wasn’t N400CP.

Finally, Kozak went back to the 1997 sonar data and found another anomaly about 200 feet deep west of Juniper Island. “This location agreed well with the radar data and observations from shore sightings,” he noted. On May 19, Kozak and Sonar Search and Recovery owner Hans Hug used an EdgeTech 4125-P side scan sonar system with high-resolution capability to scan the new anomaly. They found a large debris field and hired Tim McDonald of Marine Solutions to drop an ROV on May 25 over the site.

“The ROV was dropped to the lake floor and the real-time video transmitted to the surface showed a broken plane fuselage, painted white with a red and black accent striping, the same custom paint scheme as N400CP. Nearby were the remains of two turbine jet engines along with broken wing structure. A section of the instrument panel was located along with wire bundles from the cockpit area. The video and pictures left zero doubt that N400CP had finally been located and a 53-year-old mystery solved. Only video and pictures were recorded and the wreck site was not disturbed since it is a grave site of five people.”

According to a CBS News story about the find, “The relatives of the victims plan to hold a memorial now that they know where the plane is located.”

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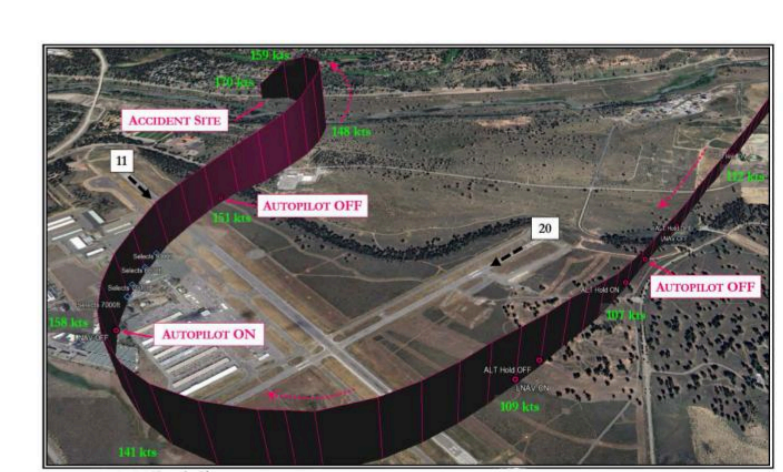
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