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A Higgins Boat is displayed Tuesday during Seward's Fourth of July celebration. It had recently completed a days-long trip from California to Seward, where it was dedicated in a ceremony at the Nebraska National Guard Museum.

Stories to tell

How a group of people brought a WWII boat found submerged in California mud to Nebraska

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SEWARD — James Dunsdon was on his day off when he decided to go check on a boat he saw in a photo posted online with a caption that read “mystery boat surfacing.”

“It doesn’t look like a mystery to me. I know exactly what that is,” Dunsdon remembers thinking at the time.

He got into his car and drove to Lake Shasta in Northern California, where the boat was reportedly spotted.

This was the summer of 2021, and California was being ravaged by violent wildfires.

Dunsdon, a collector of military vehicles, was working as a volunteer firefighter at the time. He was part of a crew battling Monument Fire, an inferno that burned more than 220,000 acres



COURTESY PHOTO

It's unclear how a Higgins Boat, one of only 16 left in the world, ended up at the bottom of Lake Shasta in Northern California.

in Shasta-Trinity National Forest in just under three months.

Not sure of its exact location, Dunsdon parked his car and

began walking along the shoreline. After stepping over trash strewn along the bank, he crossed over a small bend and there it was

— partially submerged with just a small portion of its ramp peeking

Boat

From A1

of the water. "I was pretty excited when I saw it," Dunsdon said. "There was smoke hanging in the air, the lake was down."

With a keen interest in history, Dunsdon recognized the boat right away. It was a Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel (LCVP) boat, also known as the Higgins Boat, famous for its many beach landings during World War II, including at Normandy, Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima.

During the 1940s and 1950s, a total of 23,000 Higgins Boats were manufactured. Currently, there are only 10 left, and one of them — the one Dunsdon discovered — had recently completed a days-long trip from California to Seward, where it was dedicated in a ceremony at the Nebraska National Guard Museum on the Fourth of July.

Wednesday, the boat will travel to Columbus, the hometown of American businessman and designer Andrew Jackson Higgins and be parked in front of his national memorial before returning to the museum.

But to get the boat to Seward was no small feat. It took a squad of strong-willed people who put in time, money and energy — starting with Dunsdon.

'There's always a risk'

After locating the boat, Dunsdon, a native of Devonshire County in southwest England, snapped several photos of it. Then he faced the obvious question: What now? Dunsdon



Dunsdon

Higgins boats are old. With most being built during the early 1940s, this partially submerged boat could be as old as 80. They are wooden, 36-foot-long and weigh approximately 15,000 pounds. Not exactly a one-man operation.

Besides, Dunsdon was unsure of its condition. He wasn't aware of how long the boat had been sitting there.

How fragile is it? What if it breaks?

"When you try and lift something like that, because of the weight of it, there's always a risk," he said.

Damaging the boat was a real likelihood. This would be "the worst-case scenario," Dunsdon said.

And weather posed a challenge, too: If Dunsdon was to pull the boat out of the lake, he would have to find someone who specializes in wood preservation and seek their advice.

"Once it's out of the lake, you've got ultraviolet light, you've got snow, you've got wind, you've got rain, you've got heat, you've got cold, oxygen — all these things work to take this thing to its natural elements," he said. "I was very aware of that."

Still, after closely inspecting the boat, Dunsdon, who has some carpentry experience, decided he was going to pull it out anyway. "I looked at it and it seemed like it would hold together," he said.

But how? After spending countless hours ruminating at the lake with his dogs by his side, Dunsdon came up with a plan: He would contact a crew who specializes in salvaging boats for insurance companies.

But Dunsdon had to get permission from the U.S. Forest Service first, who had jurisdiction over the boat.

His ties as a volunteer firefighter, knowing some of the rangers and other staff members, helped Dunsdon at the negotiating table with the forest service. After some thought, they agreed to let him take it.

"It gave me an identity," Dunsdon said. "They knew who I was."

It would be a few more months before Dunsdon finally pulled the boat out of the lake, in December, with the help of the salvaging crew and a friend who owned a trailer.

That day — a very cold one — water levels at the lake were steadily rising, and fast. The salvaging crew, Dunsdon and his friend had to quickly prep the boat before the water covered it. Yet at the same time they had to wait long enough for the water to rise and float the boat and then stabilize it on the surface, before hauling it onto the trailer.

Every twist, turn and push posed a risk for the boat's surprisingly preserved condition. At times, a small chip would come off the boat if the wrong move was made — or any move, for that matter, Dunsdon said.

But it came out in one piece and Dunsdon credits the lake with keeping it in its present condition.

"It was like a pickle in a jar," he said.

Meanwhile, back in Weaverville, California, where he resides, Dunsdon was making preparations to house the boat.

To be able to fit the trailer through his driveway, Dunsdon had dug up roughly 50 tons of dirt. Then, on a string he bought at The Home Depot, he hung several water misters in the interior of the boat to keep the wood from drying.

Lastly, Dunsdon purchased between 50-60 wooden pallets to use as an improvised cradle to stabilize the boat and keep it from twisting and getting out of shape, which he managed with the help of a crane he purchased and operated while a piece of rope held the boat in place.

For the next several months, keeping the boat in good condition became for Dunsdon a daily routine. But now he had to find a proper home for it.

After reading a biography about Higgins, Dunsdon contacted the author, Jerry Strahan, who directed him to Jerry Meyer, a historian at the Nebraska National Guard Museum.

"He was so enthusiastic," Dunsdon said of his conversation with Meyer. "He's pretty driven."

That was when Meyer contacted Greg and Terri Whisler.

'Doesn't get forgotten'

In 1995, Greg and Terri Whisler founded Whisler Aviation, a Seward-based company that specializes in the maintenance and repair, disassembling and transporting of non-flyable airplanes.

Whisler Aviation had transported their first airplane in 1986, before they were incorporated — the impetus of their business, which grew out of a garage in Lincoln, where they live.

To date, the Whislers have transported a total of 450 airplanes across the globe. But this is the first time they had transported a boat.

After Dunsdon recovered the boat, it was sent to Eureka to be cleaned up by Eric and Viviana Hollenbeck.

The Hollenbecks own Blue Ox Millworks, a company that produces custom-made architectural millwork. They built a plywood box to encase the boat.

Once the boat was loaded onto the trailer and secured, the Whislers set off on a 1,750-mile road trip from Eureka to Seward.

Over a four-day period, and through one particularly challenging stretch of 150 miles on a two-lane mountainous road that took four hours, the Whislers transported the boat with the help of a pilot car.

"I think we did like 27 to 30 mph through most of it," Terri Whisler said. "My fingerprints were on the arm rolls of the chair from squeezing it."

They arrived at the museum late Sunday.

Unlike their many other moving jobs throughout the year, where they transport an average of 15-20 airplanes, moving this boat to Seward was different — it was personal.

Both Greg and Terri have military backgrounds. Greg was an aircraft mechanic and crew chief who served in Operation Desert Storm and Terri served in an administrative role. Their son, a helicopter pilot, was deployed in Iraq four times.

The fact that the boat was used during World War II, the Whislers said, means a lot to them.

"We need to make sure that doesn't get forgotten," Greg Whisler said.

On Monday morning, their semi was parked in front of the museum as crews began unscrewing and removing the plywood box.

With the help of Andy Hartmann from Hartmann Construction and Dave Geis from Geis Steel Tech, the Whislers unloaded the boat.

Greg Whisler said that getting the boat to Seward was one thing. Unloading it and physically getting it inside the building, is another. "That's a feat in itself," he said.

'Over the finish line'

The labor it took to bring the boat to Seward, and to



NIKOS FRAZIER, OMAHA WORLD-HERALD

Kenny Dabill of Blue Ox Millworks (right) hands a sheet of plywood to Gary Roff and Steve Hamtek as they work to uncover Higgins boat PA31-17, which saw action in seven World War II battles, from its shipping container outside the Nebraska National Guard Museum in Seward on Monday. The LCVP (landing craft, vehicle, personnel) was discovered in 2021 half-submerged in drought-stricken Shasta Lake in Northern California.

Nebraska — where Higgins was born — was a team effort.

Higgins produced more than 20,000 boats during his lifetime. The boats were instrumental in winning the war, Meyer said, calling Higgins "probably the most famous, forgotten figure of World War II."

To honor the Nebraska native, who worked "24 hours a day" to help the Allies win the war, according to Meyer, it was obvious that Seward would band together for a project of this magnitude.

"This community will do what it takes to get over the finish line," Meyer said.

The boat found at the lake has the marking PA31-17 across its stern, which means it was assigned to the USS Monrovia, a flagship used in the invasion of Sicily, and which also was Gen. George S. Patton's flagship during the war.

Meyer, a former public school teacher in Columbus for 15 years, called the

home-front production during the war "the most under-told story of World War II."

Tanks, airplanes, boats, rifles — these were as crucial to winning the war as were the soldiers at the top of the spear, he said.

"I think the overall thing we need to remind people of is American production was huge," Meyer said. "We overwhelmed the Axis with production."

The campaign to bring the boat to Seward was initiated by Dr. Van and Becky Cattle Vahle, along with the Cattle Bank & Trust in Seward. They were instrumental in funding the entire operation of salvaging the boat and bringing it home.

"They didn't flinch," Meyer said.

Maj. John Cattle was Becky Cattle Vahle's father. During World War II, he rode a Higgins Boat to the shores of North Africa, Sicily and Normandy. Cattle's wife, Virginia, also a major donor to the project, died

recently at age 102. Back in 2000, there were reports of a boat in a lake in California, Meyer said. At the time, it was unclear whether it was a Higgins Boat or what lake it was in.

In 2014, dock workers discovered the boat that Dunsdon had in 2021, which was upside down at the time. Out of curiosity, Dunsdon said, they rolled it over using a winch and then left it there before water levels rose back up and resubmerged it.

That's how Dunsdon found it. Only this time, he was not about to leave it there, and a determined military vehicle collector and volunteer firefighter set his goal on salvaging it.

"To me it's like a time warp," Dunsdon said. "(In) 2021 it decided, 'OK, I'm coming back. I got to tell these stories.'"

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