



NIKOS FRAZIER, THE WORLD-HERALD

Higgins boat PA31-17, which saw action in seven World War II battles, is seen 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.

WWII Higgins boat unveiled at Nebraska Guard museum

The troop carrier was salvaged from a California lake

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SEWARD, Neb. — The rusted hulk of the old open-topped boat isn't what you'd call lovely.

But to Jerry Meyer, historian of the Nebraska National Guard Museum in Seward, it's a rare gem.

The museum's new prize is a World War II Higgins boat, the troop carrier invented by a Nebraskan, Andrew Jackson Higgins, that carried tens of thousands of U.S. troops into battle in beach assaults from Normandy to Iwo Jima.

"It is without a doubt the most significant historical artifact we have," Meyer said.

No less an authority than President Dwight D. Eisenhower called Higgins "the man who won the war for us."

The boat, PA31-17, arrived late Sunday by truck from Northern California, where it was discovered in 2021 half-submerged in drought-stricken Shasta Lake.

The museum unveiled it Monday and dedicated it at a public ceremony Tuesday, during Seward's Fourth of July celebration. Wednesday the boat will travel to Columbus — Higgins'



U.S. NAVY, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

A fully loaded LCVP Higgins boat from the USS Darke headed for the amphibious assault on Okinawa in April 1945.

hometown — for an appearance at the Andrew Jackson Higgins Memorial, which Meyer helped to build.

After that, it will remain on display at the museum, in its lower-level restoration bay, until a new display area can be built.

"She's rough. She's seen battle seven times," Meyer said. "We're going to maintain that battle-scarred look."

Andrew Jackson Higgins, who

served in the Nebraska National Guard's Millard Rifles unit from 1902 to 1906, left Columbus for the Deep South to enter the lumber business at age 20.

In 1922, Higgins started a lumber-exporting business in New Orleans and invented shallow-draft boats to haul logs out of the Louisiana bayous. They became popular with Southern oil

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drillers and trappers, as well as the Coast Guard. By the late 1930s, his boat-building business eclipsed his lumber sales.

With the onset of World War II, Higgins developed a number of small landing craft for the military. Perhaps the most famous was the LCVP (landing craft, vehicle, personnel), a flat-bottomed 10-by-36-foot boat with a retractable front ramp that could hold up to 30 soldiers, or a dozen soldiers and a vehicle.

Military contracts allowed Higgins to grow his company from 75 employees in 1938 to as many as 30,000 during the war. More than 23,000 Higgins boats were built, about half of them LCVPs. Fewer than 20 are known to exist today.

The numbers still visible on the hull of Seward's Higgins boat allowed historians to track its wartime history. It rolled off Higgins' New Orleans assembly line in 1942 or '43, Meyer said, and was assigned to the USS *Monrovia* — Gen. George Patton's flagship for the July–August 1943 invasion of Sicily.

That was the first of PA31-17's seven battle stars. The boat also saw action in the Pacific, at Tarawa (where it was sunk in the shallow harbor and then salvaged), the Marshall Islands, Saipan, Guam, the Philippines and Okinawa.

"These were not cakewalks," Meyer said.

How it got to the bottom of Shasta Lake remains a mystery. Meyer said Higgins boats were sold as surplus after the war for \$300–\$400, and many were purchased by private citizens for use on lakes up and down the Pacific Coast, to haul lumber, livestock or cargo. Some were used by the U.S. Forest Service. He speculated that one may have blown away from a dock during a storm.

What is known is that PA31-17 partially emerged on an island in 2021 when the lake's water level receded 200 feet because of a historic drought.

James Dunsdon, who lives in the area, was working in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest as a volunteer firefighter that year when he heard rumors about the "ghost boat" that had emerged in the lake, according to a November 2022 ar-



JAMES DUNSDON

The World War II Higgins boat PA31-17 is loaded onto a trailer Dec. 21, 2021, after being salvaged from Shasta Lake, California. It arrived in Seward, Nebraska, Sunday, to be put on display at the Nebraska National Guard Museum there. The boat's inventor, Andrew Jackson Higgins, grew up in Columbus and served four years in the Nebraska National Guard.

ticle on the Atlas Obscura website.

He wondered whether it might be a World War II landing craft. He had been interested in Higgins boats ever since his childhood in England, where the D-Day invasion is part of local history.

Dunsdon searched videos on YouTube and found one that appeared to show the boat in the background, according to Atlas Obscura. He analyzed it and identified a spot on Shasta Lake's 365-mile shoreline where he thought it might be.

In October 2021, he hiked several miles to the spot, detouring around a burning forest fire. There it was, on the shore of a small island.

"It looked like it had just made a beach landing," he told Atlas Obscura.

Dunsdon knew he had to hurry if he wanted to salvage the boat, because the lake would likely reclaim it once winter arrived. He had no experience in salvage, but he came up with a plan to use divers and airbags to refloat it and bring it to a shore where a truck and trailer could reach it.

Dunsdon initially contacted the National World War II Museum in New Orleans — which, not coincidentally, is near the site of Higgins' former factory.

The World War II Museum already had a Higgins boat. But curators there connected Dunsdon with Meyer, who had an avid interest in

Higgins and some money donated by the family of the late John Cattle.

Cattle had been the president and CEO of Seward's Cattle Bank & Trust, and during World War II he was an infantry officer who made landings in Higgins boats in North Africa, Sicily and Normandy.

"They said, 'Dad rode in one of these. We have to have it,'" Meyer said.

So the Cattle bank and Cattle's relatives — Becky and Van Vahle, his daughter and son-in-law, and his widow, Virginia — paid for the just-in-time salvage effort, and for the cross-country shipment from California.

With the lake rising and heavy snow on the way, Dunsdon's team retrieved the boat on Dec. 21, 2021.

Eric and Viviana Hollenbeck spent months cleaning up PA31-17, which is made largely of mahogany plywood, at their Blue Ox Millworks and Historic Village in Eureka, California. Eric Hollenbeck is a specialist in historic wood preservation and the star of "Craftsman," a television program on the Magnolia network.

The Hollenbecks and Dunsdon all traveled to Seward with the boat and will complete the filming of a documentary about the salvage of PA31-17. The boat was to take part in the city's Fourth of July parade.

Virginia Cattle was scheduled to be the grand marshal of the parade,



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Kenny Dabill of Blue Ox Millworks disassembles the wooden shipping container containing Higgins boat PA31-17, which saw action in seven World War II battles, 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.



JAMES DUNSDON

The Higgins boat PA31-17 — which has seven battle stars from World War II — as it was found by James Dunsdon at Shasta Lake, California, in 2021. The boat will be on display in the Nebraska National Guard Museum in Seward.

Meyer said, and was enthusiastic about bringing the Higgins boat to Seward. But she died June 3 at the age of 102.

He said the museum doesn't plan to restore the boat, which he estimated could cost \$1 million.

"We've decided we're going to maintain a 'ghost' look," Meyer said. "For it to last this long in a lake, it's a miracle."

He is still searching for historical photographs of the boat. He has found photos of virtually every

LCVP assigned to the USS *Monrovia* — but none of PA31-17. He is hoping something will turn up in the handed-down scrapbook of a World War II veteran who served on the ship. Or that someone, somewhere, will shed light on how the boat landed in the depths of Shasta Lake.

Until then, the ghost boat will hold onto its mystery.

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