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## Group of divers vow to continue the search

### Diving Lake Sakakawea in search of a fighter jet downed nearly 30 years ago

NEW TOWN — A team of North Dakota divers, including Gov. Ed Schafer, figure they were close to finding the remains of an Air Force fighter jet which crashed in Lake Sakakawea nearly 30 years ago.

However, the wreckage still remains in its shelter deep below the huge lake.

"Apparently, the lake isn't ready to give up its secret," said Randy Kraft, owner of Scuba One diving center in Bismarck, who was among the divers during the

wreck as the ultimate North Dakota challenge, Kraft said. But he said the cold, deep water, lack of visibility and the difficulty of identifying a manageable search area have prevented anyone from locating the wreck for more than 29 years.

On Aug. 31, the team of divers from Bismarck-Mandan's Scuba One dive center dove into the lake to search the site, about five miles northwest of New Town.


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rounded by brush and trees, some still towering 30 feet above the floor of the lake. Visibility in this part of the lake is absolutely zero.

"We were there," said Houdek. "I'm certain we were within a few feet of the wreck — everything fits."

Even so, the divers said the total lack of visibility and very heavy silt made the search extremely difficult.

Reminder of sacrifice



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### Through the ice

On March 10, 1969, the F-106 Delta Dart from Minot Air Force Base's now deactivated 5th Fighter Interceptor Squadron plunged through about 3 feet of ice covering the lake and sunk to the bottom.

The pilot, Capt. Merlin Riley, ejected and parachuted to safety, according to Minot Daily News files. Riley told one of the crash witnesses that the \$3 million plane went into a roll and he couldn't regain control of the aircraft. After the crash, military divers recovered whatever they could of the wreckage.

The sport diving community has long regarded finding the

wreck as the ultimate North Dakota challenge, Kraft said. But he said the cold, deep water, lack of visibility and the difficulty of identifying a manageable search area have prevented anyone from locating the wreck for more than 29 years.

On Aug. 31, the team of divers from Bismarck-Mandan's Scuba One dive center dove into the lake to search the site, about five miles northwest of New Town.

Besides Schafer, a scuba instructor and diver since 1960, and Kraft, the team included Bismarck attorneys Rolf Sletten and Duane Houdek, and Bismarck businessman Hank Albers.

The search was the culmination of more than a year of research and study, Kraft said. He said the group had first planned to make the search during the summer of 1997, however, bad weather on the chosen day forced a delay and Schafer's schedule made it impossible to renew the attempt for more than a year.

### Underwater landscape

Today the wreck lies in 65 feet of water, near the old river channel, according to the Bismarck group. The site is sur-

rounded by brush and trees, some still towering 30 feet above the floor of the lake. Visibility in this part of the lake is absolutely zero.

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Schafer said he hopes that ultimately the discovery of the wreck will serve as a reminder of the difficult and often dangerous mission of North Dakota's military personnel.

Although declassification of the plane's location and modern electronics have theoretically placed the wreck within reach of almost any scuba diver who has the persistence to pursue the necessary search, Kraft emphasized this is a difficult and dangerous dive.

"The F-106 should be explored only by very experienced, highly trained divers who have carefully prepared themselves for these extreme conditions," he said.

The group has vowed to try again.