

HISTORY COLORADO

COLORADO STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES NOMINATION FORM

SECTION I

Name of Property

Historic Name TBM Avenger Aircraft N53503

Other Names _____

Address of Property

[] address not for publication

Street Address 780 Heritage Way (Grand Junction Regional Airport, Commemorative Air Force Museum)

City Grand Junction County Mesa Zip 81506

Present Owner of Property

(for multiple ownership, list the names and addresses of each owner on one or more continuation sheets)

Name Commemorative Air Force, Rocky Mountain Wing

Address P.O. Box 4125 Phone 970-254-0693

City Grand Junction State Colorado Zip 81501

Owner Consent for Nomination

(attach signed consent from each owner of property - see attached form)

Preparer of Nomination

Name David Shepard, Historic Preservation Officer Date 9-25-16

Organization Commemorative Air Force, Rocky Mountain Wing

Address 230 Red Sand Road Phone 970-210-5267

City Grand Junction State Colorado Zip 81507

FOR OFFICIAL USE:

Site Number 5ME.21405

10/3/2016 Nomination Received

1/20/2017 Review Board Recommendation
 Approval Denial

1/27/2017 HC Board State Register Listing
 Approved Denied

Listing Criteria A B C D E

Certification of Listing: Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, HISTORY COLORADO

Date

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SECTION II

Local Historic Designation

Has the property received local historic designation?

no

yes --- individually designated designated as part of a historic district

Date designated _____

Designated by _____ (Name of municipality or county)

Use of Property

Historic United States Navy attack aircraft, World War II

Current museum display, flying historic aircraft

Original Owner United States Navy

Source of Information United States Navy record of acceptance

Year of Construction 1945

Source of Information US Navy record of acceptance, aircraft logbooks, manufacturer's serialized construction plate mounted on aircraft

Architect, Builder, Engineer, Artist or Designer Robert Hall, chief designer, General Motors, manufacturer.

Source of Information U.S. Navy record of acceptance, aircraft manufacture plate, numerous aviation history texts

Locational Status

Original location of structure(s) Norfolk Naval Air Station, Norfolk, Va., June 1, 1945

Structure(s) moved to current location

Date of move: January 17, 1983 Moved to: Grand Junction, CO

SECTION III

Description and Alterations

(describe the current and original appearance of the property and any alterations on one or more continuation sheets.

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SECTION IV

Significance of Property

Nomination Criteria

- A** - property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to history
- B** - property is connected with persons significant in history
- C** - property has distinctive characteristics of a type, period, method of construction or artisan x
- D** - property is of geographic importance
- E** - property contains the possibility of important discoveries related to prehistory or history

Areas of Significance

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture | <input type="checkbox"/> Economics | <input type="checkbox"/> Landscape |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Architecture | <input type="checkbox"/> Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Architecture |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Archaeology –
prehistoric | <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> Law |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Archaeology –
historic | <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment/
Recreation | <input type="checkbox"/> Literature |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Art | <input type="checkbox"/> Ethnic Heritage | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Military |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commerce | <input type="checkbox"/> Exploration/
Settlement | <input type="checkbox"/> Performing Arts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communications | <input type="checkbox"/> Geography/
Community Identity | <input type="checkbox"/> Politics/
Government |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Community
Planning and
Development | <input type="checkbox"/> Health/Medicine | <input type="checkbox"/> Religion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conservation | <input type="checkbox"/> Industry | <input type="checkbox"/> Science |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Invention | <input type="checkbox"/> Social History |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation |

Significance Statement

(explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

Bibliography

(cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets)

SECTION V

Locational Information

Lot(s) _____ Block _____ Addition _____

USGS Topographic Quad Map Grand Junction

Verbal Boundary Description of Nominated Property

(describe the boundaries of the nominated property on a continuation sheet)

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SECTION VI

Photograph Log for Black and White Photographs

(prepare a photograph log on one or more continuation sheets)

SECTION VII

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS TO ACCOMPANY NOMINATION

Owner Consent Form

Black and White Photographs

Color Prints or Digital Images

Sketch Map(s)

Photocopy of USGS Map Section

Optional Materials

Use of Nomination Materials

Upon submission to the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, all nomination forms and supporting materials become public records pursuant to CRS Title 24, and may be accessed, copied, and used for personal or commercial purposes in accordance with state law unless otherwise specifically exempted. History Colorado may reproduce, publish, display, perform, prepare derivative works or otherwise use the nomination materials for History Colorado and/or State Register purposes.

For Office Use Only

Property Type: building(s) district site structure object area

Architectural Style/Engineering Type: Aircraft

Period of Significance: 1945

Level of Significance: Local State National

Multiple Property Submission: n/a

Acreage n/a

P.M. UTE Township 1N Range 1E Section 31 Quarter Sections SE1/4 NE1/4 NW 1/4

UTM Reference: Zone 12 Easting 713955 Northing 4332765 NAD83

Site Elevation: 4,820 feet

Property Name TBM Avenger Aircraft N53503

DESCRIPTION and ALTERATIONS

The Torpedo Bomber M (TBM) Avenger Aircraft N53503 is a World War II single engine torpedo bomber in flying condition. The military aircraft was manufactured by General Motors' Eastern Aircraft division in the late winter of 1945, and accepted for service by the United States Navy's Bureau of Ordnance (BuOrd) on June 1, 1945, with BuOrd number 53503.¹ The aircraft is housed in a hangar located at the Grand Junction Regional Airport.

The body and wings of the aircraft are made of aluminum. Parts that control the aircraft's movement have an aluminum frame covered with fabric. The cockpit canopy is an aluminum frame with Plexiglass. All are original. The aircraft was designed to attack enemy submarines, naval ships, and ground targets, and as such, was deployed from aircraft carriers stationed in the Pacific Ocean during World War II. Character-defining features include its folding wings, which allowed for efficient storage on the aircraft carrier deck between deployments, and the tail hook arresting gear, which allowed the plane to stop within the short amount of space on the deck when landing.

N53503 is characterized as a TBM-3, with the following general characteristics:

Dimensions: Wing span 52'2", (with wings folded, 16'), length 40'

Height: 16' 5"

Empty weight: 10,843 lbs.

Maximum gross weight with fuel, ordnance: 18,250 lbs.

Power: Wright Twin cyclone R-2600-20 engine, 14 cylinders in two banks of 7, producing 1900 horse power

Maximum speed: 265 mph at 16,000'

Ceiling: 23,400'

Range: 1,130 miles

Fuel: 325 gallons

Oil: 32 gallons

Crew: three, consisting of pilot, gunner, plus radio operator

Armament: three .50 caliber machine guns, with two wing mounted and one turret mounted; one torpedo or four 500 pound bombs

Electronics: Voice and morse code communication radios, ASB search radar (airborne radar for detection of ships and surfaced submarines).²

Visual Markings, N53503

N53503 is currently painted with markings used by TBM Avengers assigned to VT-84, the so-called "Wolf Gang Squadron" assigned to the U.S.S. Bunker Hill aircraft carrier, CV-17. Although the exact

¹ BuOrd was responsible for the procurement, storage, and deployment of all naval weapons from 1862-1959, and became involved with the development of aerial weapons in the early twentieth century. *Bureau of Ordnance*, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bureau_of_Ordnance, accessed November 10, 2016.

² ASB radar was installed "almost universally" in U.S. naval aircraft during World War II and became known as the "Workhorse of Naval Aviation." It was the first radar to be used in carrier-based aircraft. *Airborne Radar*, U.S. Naval Research Laboratory. <https://www.nrl.navy.mil/accomplishments/systems/airborne-radar/>, accessed November 28, 2016.

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unit the plane was assigned to is unknown, anecdotal information provided in a pilot's oral history interview indicates that he believes that it was based on this carrier during the war.³

The aircraft has a historically accurate ocean camouflage paint scheme, with dark blue above, and lighter blue-grey underneath. It bears the distinctive white "stars and bars" of United States Naval aircraft employed after June, 1943. The vertical white arrow on the tail is characteristic of TBM aircraft assigned to the Bunker Hill prior to July, 1945, and aided in identification by ground forces. Similarly, the yellow nacelle (outer casing of the engine) markings around the perimeter of the engine cowling is intended to aid identification and reduce "friendly fire" accidents.

Although the internal airframe structure and its coverings remained unchanged, TBM aircraft underwent continual modification throughout World War II as they operated under extreme conditions. Two types of modifications were the most typical: the upgrading of avionics as radar became more sophisticated, and replacing parts subject to continual wear from repetitive movement, especially engines, but also parts such as shock absorbers and engine mounts.

Alterations

In 1950, N53503 was removed from U.S. Navy service and transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy. While in Canadian service, the aircraft was repainted with Canadian markings, and additional radio equipment was added to support the aircraft's primary postwar mission of anti-enemy submarine patrol in the North Atlantic.

In 1958, the aircraft passed into civilian hands and operated as an aerial insecticide applicator. In this capacity, the original bomb-bay doors were removed, as were the military markings.

In 1970 the Commemorative Air Force (CAF), an organization dedicated to preserving historic military aircraft, acquired N53503. By that time the aircraft had been effectively abandoned; CAF moved it to an indoor facility in Midland, Texas, where it underwent clean-up and restoration, primarily the installation of the missing bomb-bay doors as well as electrical wiring and hydraulics. In 1985 CAF headquarters assigned N53503 to the Rocky Mountain Wing based in Grand Junction, Colorado.

Since its arrival in Grand Junction, members of the CAF Rocky Mountain Wing have invested in excess of \$250,000 in an ongoing effort to maintain the aircraft in flyable condition, and to restore the aircraft to its original World War II condition. Major efforts centered on undoing civilian modifications, and included replacement of the turret and bomb bay doors with parts of World War II provenance. In addition the aircraft is painted in a historically accurate paint scheme, as documented by historic photographs.

As to be expected with any seventy-year-old flying aircraft, N53503 demands continual attention and regular maintenance to maintain safety of flight, and to comply with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) mandates regarding airworthiness. To that end, cracked or fatigued metal parts have been replaced whenever possible with World War II vintage replacements; in some instances however, replacement parts have been manufactured using original blueprints, and with FAA approval. CAF

³ David Shepard, interview with E. Warzel, November 21, 2016.

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Rocky Mountain Wing members estimate that 90 percent of the aircraft is original.⁴

N53503 is unusual in that the Rocky Mountain Wing has the original radios, including the World War II ASB search radar. Some of this radio equipment has been temporarily removed and stored to make room for modern communication equipment required by the FAA. What remains is a substantially unaltered World War II vintage aircraft, with original airframe and a World War II-vintage engine.

Integrity

The TBM Avenger Aircraft N53503 has a high degree of integrity, maintaining its historic design, materials, and workmanship. Its current home at the Grand Junction Regional Airport has a high degree of integrity of setting, association, and feeling and is in keeping with its historic and current function as a an operable aircraft. Integrity of location is minimally compromised in that the aircraft is no longer owned by the U.S. military and is therefore kept at a civilian airport facility.

⁴ David Shepard, interview with E. Warzel, November 21, 2016.

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SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

The TBM Avenger Aircraft N53503 is locally significant under Criterion A for Military, as an increasingly rare example of the carrier-based torpedo bomber aircraft that had a prominent role in U.S. naval operations during World War II. The period of significance is 1945, the year this airplane was built and in service during World War II.

Development of U.S. Military Air Fleet during World War II

At the beginning of World War II, the United States was a third-tier military power with an army smaller than Portugal. Similarly, the air forces of the United States consisted of only 1,700 aircraft. While there was no national consensus for intervention when the war began in Europe in 1939, both interventionists and isolationists found common ground in the notion of preparedness, with airpower viewed as an essential cornerstone.

According to a National Register nomination for a TBM Avenger in New Jersey, "In early November 1939, the US Navy approached a number of aircraft manufacturers with regard to designing and building a replacement torpedo bomber for the ageing [sic] Douglas TBD-1 Devastator. The Navy sought a new aircraft that had to be as easy to use from a shore base as from an aircraft carrier; they also wanted a more potent torpedo bomber—one with a greater range, larger payload, faster speed, and tougher resistance to battle damage."⁵ After rigorous testing of designs by Vought Aircraft Company and Grumman Aircraft Company, the U.S. Navy accepted the lighter, faster, and greater range design by Grumman, and ordered two prototype torpedo/attack aircraft. The first prototype flew on August 1, 1941. Naval acceptance quickly followed; the original contract for 286 aircraft became an open-ended order in November 1941. Ironically, Grumman scheduled December 7, 1941, as the date for the dedication ceremony of a new factory in Bethpage, New York, where the new torpedo bombers would be built. News of the Pearl Harbor attack disrupted the ceremony and the plant was quickly closed and searched for saboteurs before reopening.

TBF/TBM Avenger Aircraft

Technology completely changed naval warfare in World War II. The aircraft carrier eclipsed the battleship of World War I as the primary weapon of naval warfare; the Avenger, simply stated, was the dominant naval attack aircraft of World War II. The Avenger represented a huge leap in aviation technology; it was the largest single-engine aircraft of the war, carrying one 2,000 pound torpedo, or four 500 lb. bombs. Grumman Aircraft built 2,291 Avenger aircraft during the war, while General Motors (GM) built 7,546, for a total of 9,837. Aircraft produced at the Grumman plant were given the acronym TBF, with "F" as the U.S. Navy's designated letter for that plant; those produced at the GM plant were TBMs, with "M" indicating the GM plant.⁶

The Avenger's first combat action in World War II occurred in the Pacific war's decisive battle of Midway in 1942. It was also the type of aircraft operated by President George Herbert Walker Bush

⁵ Joan Berkey, *TBM-3E "Avenger" Torpedo Bomber Warplane*, National Register of Historic Places nomination form. June 17, 2002; listed February 11, 2003 (NRIS.03000019). On file with New Jersey Historic Preservation Office. Sec.8, p.3

⁶ Berkey, Sec.8, p.4.

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when he was shot down near Iwo Jima. While the TBM N53503 is a late-war example, manufactured in early 1945, it is representative of all TBF/TBM aircraft operated in World War II.

The Avenger's method of attack was dive bombing, or diving vertically toward the target, thereby requiring only a direct line of sight for a successful hit. The earlier method of horizontal bombing, by contrast, consisted of dropping a bomb while the aircraft continued on its horizontal trajectory, thereby requiring complex calculations accounting for variables such as speed, wind, etc., that often did not lead to a successful hit. By the end of World War II, the Avenger distinguished itself as the most successful naval attack aircraft type of the war, flying more missions (over 45,000), and sinking more Japanese ships than any other aircraft. The Avenger sank the world's two largest battleships, Yamato and Mushai, and four additional battleships, eleven aircraft carriers, and ten cruisers. By contrast, none were lost to horizontal bombing by Army planes.

In the post-war era, TBM aircraft continued an important role; in fact, Naval Air Station Denver, (the "world's highest naval air station" also known as Buckley Air Force Base, located at the eastern edge of Aurora) operated a squadron of TBM aircraft in an effort to maintain flight-ready crews during the Cold War era.

TBM Avenger N53503

TBM N53503 was manufactured by GM's Eastern Aircraft division at its Trenton-Ternstedt plant outside of Trenton, New Jersey, in the late winter of 1945, and accepted for service by BuOrd on June 1, 1945. After the end of World War II the aircraft was one of several thousand for which the U.S. military no longer had a direct need. N53503 was rotated between several collection points until it was one of 117 Avengers transferred from the U.S. Navy to the Royal Canadian Navy in 1950 as authorized by the Mutual Defense Assistance Program. The aircraft participated in the Royal Fleet Review following Queen Elizabeth's coronation (see Historic Photo 2). N53503 left Canadian service and passed into civilian hands in 1958 for the purpose of aerially applying crop pesticides by Simsbury Flying Service based in Simsbury, Connecticut. The Commemorative Air Force, a non-profit organization dedicated to "preserving in flying condition a complete collection of aircraft flown by all military services of the United States," acquired N53503 in 1970 and kept it in a facility in Midland, Texas. The aircraft appeared in the first five minutes of Steven Spielberg's "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." In March 1985, N53503 arrived in Grand Junction and was placed under the control of the Rocky Mountain Wing of the Commemorative Air Force.

Other TBM examples are located at the National World War II Museum and George H.W. Bush Presidential Library. Less than 200 TBM aircraft are estimated to exist today, and fewer still, less than twenty, are in original, flyable condition. At the end of World War II, the United States destroyed tens of thousands of military aircraft, rendered obsolete by the advent of the jet age. They were scrapped or dumped into the deep ocean. Only later did historians and aviation enthusiasts come to the realization that something of great significance was disappearing. Today, World War II aircraft are prized historic artifacts.

Unlike many historic objects, the provenance of aircraft is easily established. Military and civilian maintenance records document every oil change, every repair, and every modification. Hundreds of pages of records relating to Avenger N53503 exist in the CAF museum in Grand Junction; these

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records include decades of logbooks and maintenance records, as well as memoirs of pilots who flew this exact aircraft.

Future Restoration Efforts

Future restoration efforts include restoration of the original radios to their World War II appearance. CAF wishes to reinstall this vintage equipment so that the pilot's compartment is visually identical to the 1945 aircraft, with required modern equipment moved to less visually obtrusive locations. The organization wishes to use the TBM Avenger N53503 as the cornerstone for a continuing program of outreach and education on aviation and World War II history.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berkey, Joan. *TBM-3E "Avenger" Torpedo Bomber Warplane*, National Register of Historic Places nomination form. June 17, 2002; listed February 11, 2003 (NRIS.03000019). On file with New Jersey Historic Preservation Office.

Bureau of Ordnance, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bureau_of_Ordnance, accessed November 10, 2016.

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Geelen, Janic. *The Topdressers*. Auckland: NZ Aviation Press, 1983.

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Jackson, B.R. and Thomas E. Doll. *Grumman TBF/TBM Avenger (Aero Series 21)*. Fallbrook, California: Aero Publishers, 1970.

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Kinzey, Bert. *TBF and TBM Avenger in Detail and Scale*. Carrollton, Texas: Squadron/Signal Publications, Inc., 1997.

Pelletier, Alain. *Grumman TBF/TBM Avenger*. Paris: Ouest France, 1981.

Prange, Gordon William. *Miracle at Midway*. New York: Viking, 1983.

Scrivner, Charles L. *TBF/TBM Avenger in Action*. Carrollton, Texas: Squadron/Signal Publications, Inc., 1987.

Shepard, David. Interview with E. Warzel, November 21, 2016. Transcript on file with History Colorado's Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Denver.

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Tillman, Barrett. *Avenger At War*. London: Ian Allan Ltd., 1979.

_____. *TBF/TBM Avenger Units of World War 2*. Botley, UK: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 1999.

Wheeler, Barry C. *The Hamlyn Guide to Military Aircraft Markings*. London: Chancellor Press, 1992.

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GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The aircraft is located at the Commemorative Air Force Museum, at the Grand Junction Regional Airport in Grand Junction, Colorado. The Grand Junction Regional Airport is located approximately six-tenths of a mile north of Interstate Highway 70, on Horizon Drive. The Commemorative Air Force Museum is on airport land, at the intersection of Navigator's Way, and Heritage Way.

PHOTOGRAPH LOG

The following information pertains to photograph numbers 1-19 except as noted:

Name of Property: TBM Avenger Aircraft N53503

Location: Commemorative Air Force Museum, Grand Junction Regional Airport

Photographer: David Shepard

Date of Photographs: August 2016

Digital files on file with Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Denver

Photo No. Photographic Information

- 01 Front view of TBM Avenger N53503 with wings folded. Mechanic in foreground provides a sense of scale.
- 02 Side view of TBM Avenger N53503 with wings folded.
- 03 Rear view of TBM Avenger N53503 with wings folded.
- 04 Side view of TBM Avenger N53503 with wings folded.
- 05 Front view of TBM Avenger N53503 with wings unfolded, ready for flight.
- 06 Side view of TBM Avenger N53503 with wings unfolded.
- 07 Rear view of TBM Avenger N53503 with wings unfolded.
- 08 Side view of TBM Avenger N53503 with wings unfolded.
- 09 Detail of historically accurate naval star and bar identification marking on rear of fuselage.
- 10 Detail of tail hook arresting gear deployed, for landing on aircraft carrier.
- 11 Detail of bomb bay.

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- 12 Detail of landing gear.
- 13 Identification plate located in landing gear recess, with original World War II markings of "Naval Air Station Norfolk."
- 14 Detail of ball turret.
- 15 Cockpit detail.
- 16 Detail of closed canopy.
- 17 Detail of restored engine and propeller, with historically accurate World War II markings.
- 18 Detail of identification plate on engine: "Wright Cyclone."
- 19 Underside of wing with historically accurate World War II colors, with identifying naval star and bar.

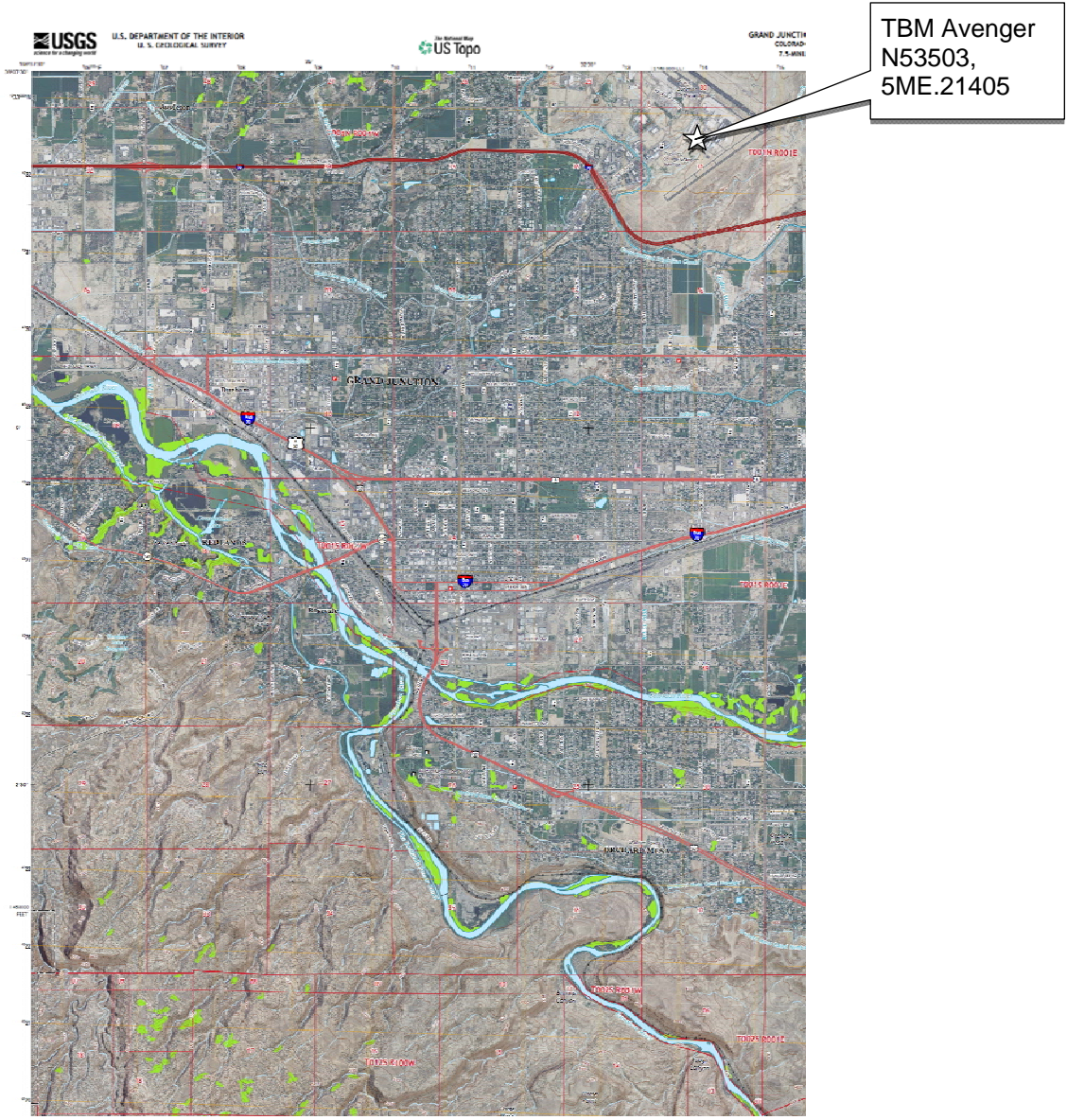
HISTORIC PHOTO LOG

1. A TBM aboard aircraft carrier in 1945, photograph by United States Navy. Note wings in folded position. Original photo located in Still Picture Branch, (NNSP) records, Department of the Navy, Record Group 80, (RG80), National Archives of the United State, Washington, D.C.
2. TBM N53503, flying over Her Majesty's Canadian Navy vessel HMCS Magnificent during Royal Fleet Review by newly coronated Queen Elizabeth, June 15, 1953. Photo by Royal Canadian Navy, original located in Library and Archives of Canada, Military Section, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.
3. TBM N53503, aircraft exterior prior to restoration of exterior paint to World War II markings, Grand Junction, Colorado, 1989, photograph by Robert Duncan. Note wings in folded position.
4. TBM N53503 taking off from Grand Junction Regional Airport, Grand Junction, Colorado, March, 2014, photograph by Kent Taylor.
5. TBM N53503, interior of fuselage, undergoing safety inspection of structure, Grand Junction, Colorado, April, 2015, photograph by Kent Taylor.
6. TBM N53503, after aircraft was painted to match World War II paint scheme of VT-84 squadron, assigned to U.S.S. Bunker Hill. Photo by Robert Duncan, 2016.

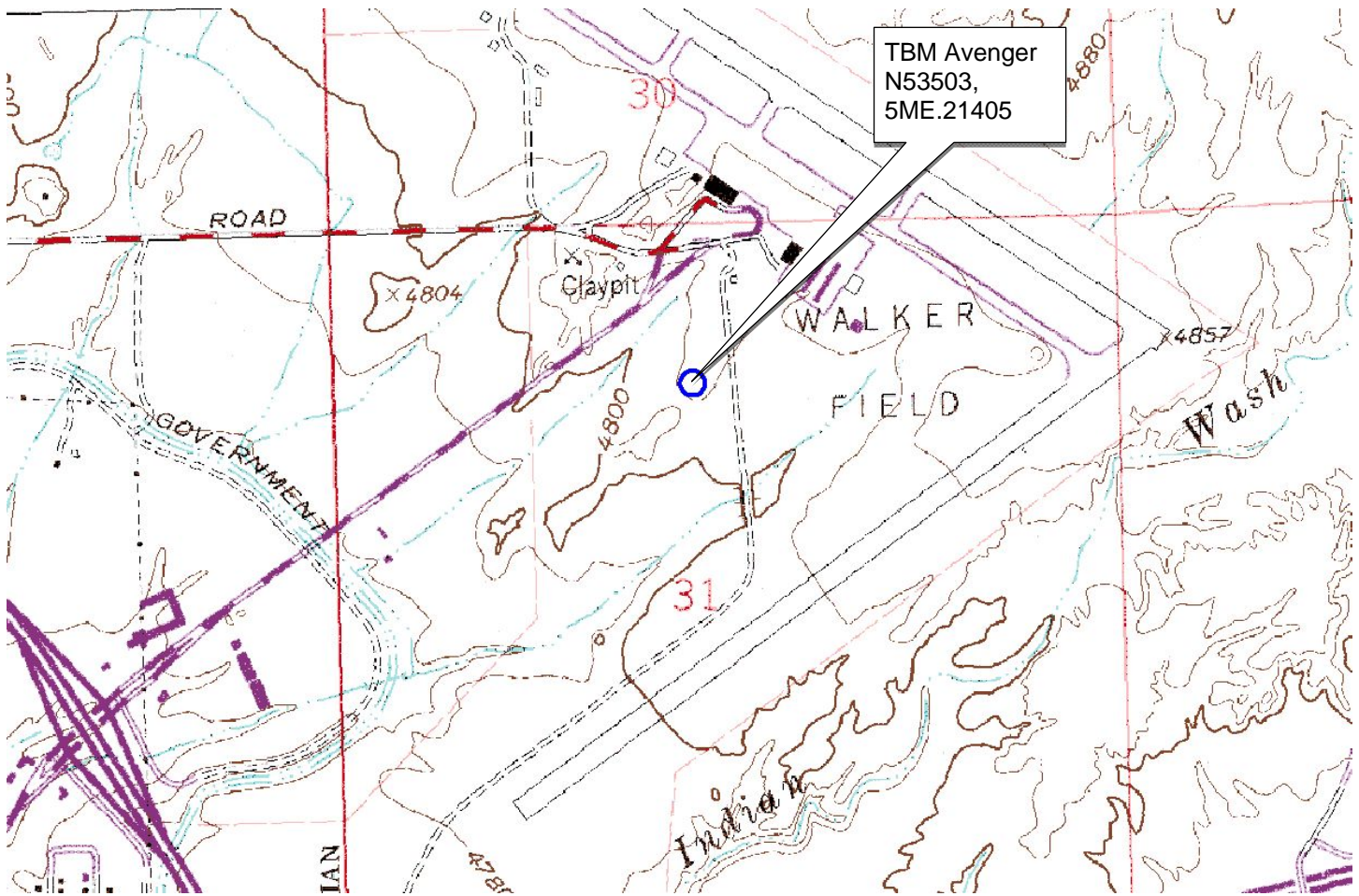
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USGS TOPOGRAPHIC MAP
Grand Junction Quadrangle, Colorado
7.5 Minute Series

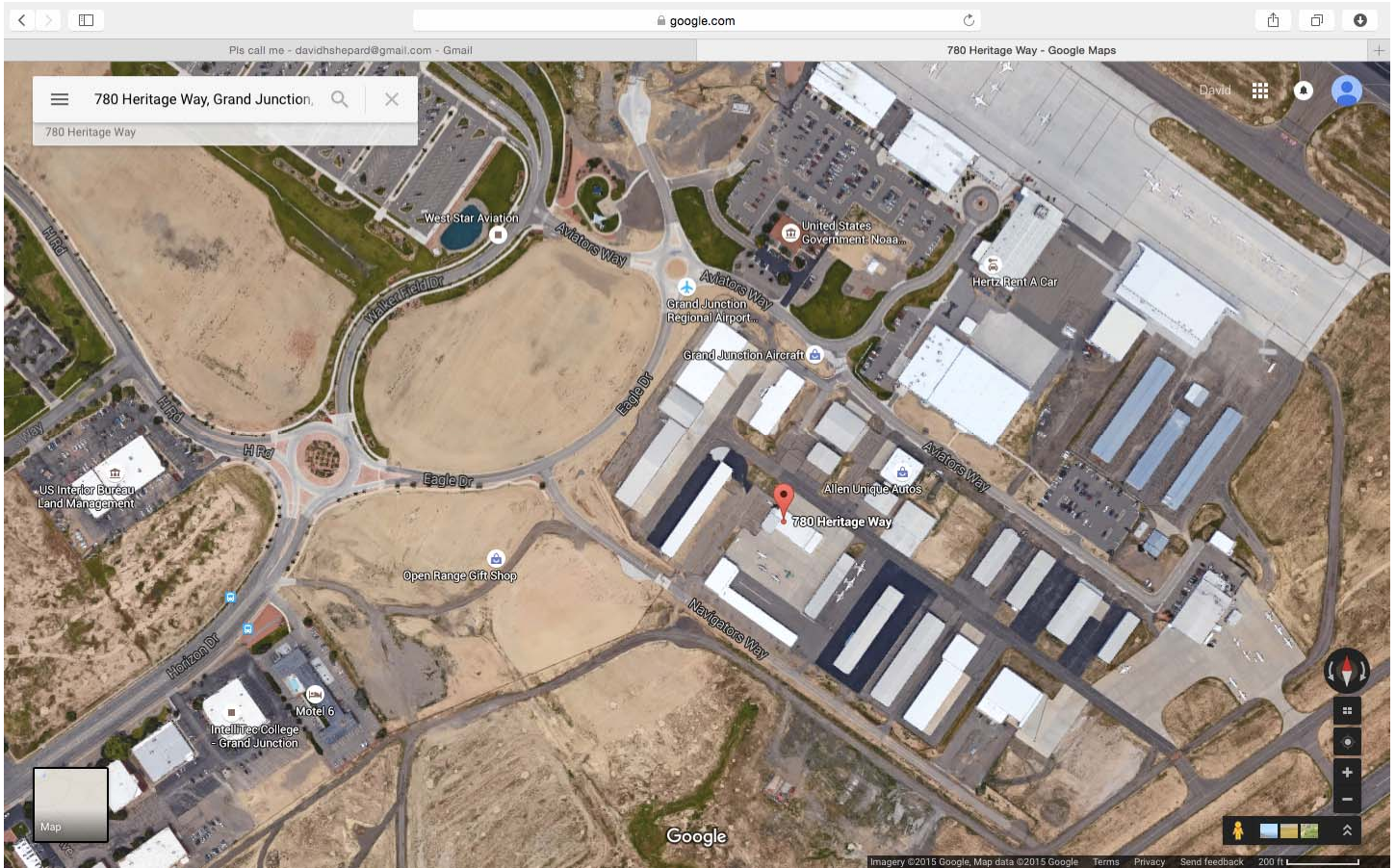
7.5 Minute Series denotes location of runways and airports at Grand Junction Regional Airport, at upper right, but does not contain street level detail. Street level detail defined on following map, and satellite image.



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HP1. A TBM aboard aircraft carrier in 1945, photograph by United States Navy. Note wings in folded position. Original photo located in Still Picture Branch, (NNSP) records, Department of the Navy, Record Group 80, (RG80), National Archives of the United State, Washington, D.C.

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HP2. TBM N53503, flying over Her Majesty's Canadian Navy vessel HMCS Magnificent during Royal Fleet Review by newly coronated Queen Elizabeth, June 15, 1953. Photo by Royal Canadian Navy, original located in Library and Archives of Canada, Military Section, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

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HP3. TBM N53503, aircraft exterior prior to restoration of exterior paint to World War II markings, Grand Junction, Colorado, 1989, photograph by Robert Duncan. Note wings in folded position.



HP4. TBM N53503 taking off from Grand Junction Regional Airport, Grand Junction, Colorado, March, 2014, photograph by Kent Taylor.

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HP5. TBM N53503, interior of fuselage, undergoing safety inspection of structure, Grand Junction, Colorado, April, 2015, photograph by Kent Taylor.



HP6. TBM N53503, after aircraft was painted to match World War II paint scheme of VT-84 squadron, assigned to U.S.S. Bunker Hill. Photo by Robert Duncan, 2016.