



Pieces of History on The Peaks

by Sabrina Carlson

On September 24, 2016 25 members of the Rim Country Middle School Outdoor Adventure Club set out on the Humphrey's Trail near Flagstaff.

The original plan was that some students would make a summit attempt, while those who didn't want to do that could look for the B-24 bomber crash off switchback 7. As we assembled and got organized for the day, two gentlemen from the Coconino Natontal Forest, who had a booth set up at the trailhead, came over to advise us against a summit attempt. The winds were gusting to 65 mph on the ridge, and wind chill had dropped the temperature to 12° F. While the students were dressed warmly enough for the base of the mountain, few had the layers necessary to safely withstand such temperature. So, it was decided that the saddle was the highest we would allow anyone to go.

We set off up the Humphrey's Trail to see what the day would bring. We hiked through mixed conifers and some aspen that were just beginning to turn yellow. I had the chance to learn about several of the students and their current passions. One young man told me all about his love for playing Pokemon Go and how he and his Dad would run around their neighborhood trying to catch the digital creatures. Another young lady talked excitedly about her upcoming birthday party. I got the scoop on a mountain bike race one of our Peaks to Parks participants had not only competed in, but won. Unfortunately, I had more opportunities than I would have liked to talk about Leave No Trace ethics as plastic water bottles, granola bar wrappers, and windrows of toilet paper littered the sides of this popular trail. We did what we could to remove the trash that didn't present a biohazard.



Hiking through the forest!



When the day began, most of the students were eager and excited to try hiking to the saddle. But the farther we hiked, and the higher the elevation got, the more people decided that going up to the first scree field was high enough. Six students and two adults made it to the saddle. They were bummed that they couldn't make a summit attempt, but agreed that it had been pretty cold and windy up there.

Checking out the wreckage.

Four of the saddle hikers decided to take the detour with me to check out the old B-24 bomber crash off of switchback 7. The B-24 was on a night training mission on September 15, 1944, heading for Camp Navajo when a combination of poor visibility and malfunctioning instruments led the plane to fly straight into the side of the mountain. It is one of five plane crashes in the San Francisco Volcanic Field from the WWII period.

When we finally found the wreckage, we were astonished at how widespread it was! I suppose we shouldn't be surprised that an airplane that crashed full speed into a giant rock would scatter pieces ¼-mile or more, but we had been imagining a smashed up and fairly contained wreck. We could have spent hours exploring up and down the scree field over which the wreckage was spread, but with the rest of the group waiting for us below we only had a few minutes. We were amazed looking at pieces of wing, what appeared to be a bomb or gun cover, metal that was nothing more than a melted pile of goo.



Slade examines a piece of melted metal.

It was time to head back soon than we would have liked.

Since the B-24 is not on any trail, we had to route find a bit to get there. I showed the students how to set up a phone based GPS to lay a track on our way out, so we could follow it on the way back onto the trail.

No matter how far each person hiked, we all had a great time, challenged ourselves, and learned a few things along the way.



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