

Aubrey Ray “Sonny” Moore, Class of 1952.



Plane Crash Injuries Prove Fatal to Memphian

On September 8, 1958, two giant U.S. Air Force B-52 Stratofortress's collided while making routine landings at Fairchild Air Force Base near Spokane. Thirteen airmen are killed and three are injured. The incident is the worst disaster in the history of the Strategic Air Command's B-52 bomber operations.

The B-52 Bomber

The Boeing B-52 Stratofortress was America's first long-range, swept-wing heavy bomber. Introduced in 1954, it replaced the World War II era Boeing B-29 Superfortress and was primarily designed to carry nuclear weapons. Prior to the advent of intercontinental ballistic missiles, the B-52s, flown by the U.S. Air Force, Strategic Air Command, were the county's first line of defense against surprise attacks during the Cold War. The Stratofortress, a large aircraft, 159 feet long with a 185-foot wingspan, was powered by eight Pratt & Whitney turbofan jet engines. At cruising speed of 650 m.p.h. and an altitude of more than 50,000 feet, the aircraft could carry 35 tons of bombs approximately 9,000 miles without refueling.

B-52s were used extensively during the Vietnam War, the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and over Afghanistan in 2001. The bomber typically carried a six-man crew consisting of an aircraft commander/pilot, copilot, radar navigator, electronics warfare officer, and tail gunner. But on training and proficiency flights, they often carried more crewman.

The Accident

At approximately 6:20 p.m. on Monday, September 8, 1958, two Boeing B-52D Stratofortress's, No. 60-661 and No. 60-681, from the 92nd Bomb Wing, 327th Bomb Squadron, were returning to Fairchild Air Force Base (AFB), after having spent the day on routine training missions, and were making practice landing approaches to Runway 23 when they collided. Aircraft 661, under the supervision of the control tower, was flying VFR (visual flight rules) on the downwind leg of the normal rectangular landing approach pattern. Aircraft 681, under the guidance of a radar ground control approach unit, was practicing an ILS (instrument landing systems) approach in preparation for Spokane's murky winter weather.

When the pilot of bomber 681 dropped below the glide path of final approach, he was told to pull up, execute a right turn, and go around. "After being advised by the control tower of what the other B-52 was doing, 661 radioed back, 'Roger tower, tell him to turn the other way' and the latter (661) then banked to the right" (Gero). Several seconds later, the two giant B-52's collided above Airway Heights and busy Sunset Highway (U.S. Highway 2), some five miles west of Spokane and two-and-a-half miles northeast of Fairchild AFB. The planes plummeted to the ground from a height of approximately 1,000 feet, disintegrating and burning as they fell.

Seconds after the B-52s collided, six crewmen managed to eject from the planes, their bright orange and white parachutes opening automatically. Hundreds of pieces of the disintegrating aircraft rained down, hitting buildings and dropping on roads. Some pieces landed as far as two miles south of Sunset Highway. The nose section of one B-52 landed only 15 yards from the highway, near Airway Heights City Hall. The bomber that crashed farthest from Sunset Highway landed in a stubbled wheat field owned by the mayor of Airway Heights, Carl Lundstrom. Luckily, nobody on the ground was injured by the crash and damage to property in Airway Heights was minimal.

On the Ground

As debris fell from the sky, Michael Anderson, owner of Airway Heights Shell service station, his attendant, Joseph Martella, and two customers, along with several people from the Baghdad Inn, a nearby tavern, ran for cover in a nearby ditch. A 200-pound piece of landing gear demolished Anderson's large Shell sign, sailed between the gas pumps and came to rest on the shoulder of the highway. Martella, an eyewitness, said: "They were both banking and it looked to me like the wing of one plane hit the other behind the cockpit and just about cut it in two" (Seattle Post-Intelligencer).

Since the B-52s were carrying equipment and documents classified Top Secret, Air Force security officers had the Washington State Patrol and Spokane County Sheriff's Department block all roadways surrounding the crash site to all but authorized personnel. Newspaper reporters and photographers were temporarily banned from the area, but the Fairchild's Public Information Office fed them information as it became available. The good news was that the bombers were not carrying nuclear weapons.

Fire fighting and rescue equipment from Fairchild AFB and Spokane rushed into the area. Although some larger pieces of the wreckage were burning, the fires were mostly confined to areas where thousands of gallons of jet fuel had spilled. The firefighters had to drive through the bumpy, open fields and extinguish the fires before they could attempt rescuing any crewmen trapped inside the wreckage.

Rescuing Survivors

Of the six crewmen who managed to eject from the aircraft, four were found alive in the fields and rushed to Fairchild AFB Hospital. Captain Ernest C. Marker, aircraft commander and pilot of 60-661, suffered third-degree burns and died later at the hospital. Captain David Birdsell, copilot of 60-681, was hospitalized with internal injuries and burns. Second Lieutenant Walter N. McGuire, electronics warfare

officer of 60-681, and Staff Sergeant Lowell W. Younger, tail gunner of 60-6681, were thrown clear of the of the falling bombers and parachuted to safety. The men were held overnight in the hospital and then released after being treated for minor injuries.

Rescue worker and firefighters worked throughout the night, trying to locate the bodies of the other 12 victims. Some had fallen from the aircraft and were found lying in the open fields and others had died trapped inside the burning wreckage. As bodies were recovered, ambulances took them to the morgue at Fairchild AFB Hospital for identification.

Salvaging and Investigating

On Tuesday morning, September 9, the Air Force brought in heavy cranes to lift the nose sections onto flatbed trucks. After ordinance experts crawled through the wreckage, disarming ejector seats mechanisms and destruction devices attached to classified equipment, the pieces were taken to Fairchild AFB for a detailed inspection of the flight instruments.

Meanwhile, Major General Archie J. Old, Commander of the 15th Air Force, arrived at Fairchild from March AFB, California, to take charge of the investigation. Air Force experts and accident investigators worked throughout the day in the Airway Heights area, looking for eyewitness to the collision and studying the wreckage. An accident investigations board was convened, headed by Colonel Roy D. Wathen, 92nd Bomb Wing, Chief of Operations, to study the evidence and determine the causes of the accident.

The Memorial Service

On Wednesday, September 10, the Air Force held a memorial service for the 13 victims of the tragedy in hangar 2020 at Fairchild AFB. Those who drove to Fairchild had to pass the wreckage of the B-52s, clearly visible from Sunset Highway. Upon entering the base, the attendees

passed by the crumpled nose sections of the B-52s sitting on the tarmac, grim reminders of the hazards of the profession. More than 4,000 persons, mostly servicemen in uniform, attended the service.

In his memorial address, Major Jack Moses, base chaplain, extolled the virtues of the airmen who risked their lives daily in the cause of freedom. "We know it is worth the sacrifice as we think of the 10 wives and 23 children and other relatives of the crews who lost their lives" (Spokane Daily Chronicle).

Tragic and Avoidable

In the column "Command Lines" that appeared in the base newspaper, Fairchild Times, Colonel Donald E. Hillman, 92nd Bomb Wing Commander, wrote:

"This accident was caused by a series of errors that compounded to a point where correction was impossible. At several points during these final moments, a correction could have been made and the collision averted. But the compounding of errors continued and the point of recall was gone forever. All of us are deeply aware of our great loss in the recent crash of two of our aircraft. In terms of monetary value, the planes alone represented a \$16,000,000 investment. The loss of so many fine men cannot be measured in any terms. The tragic part is that it was absolutely avoidable" (Spokane Daily Chronicle).

The incident remains the worst disaster in the history of the Strategic Air Command's B-52 bomber operations.