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HistoryLink File #8803

U.S. Air Force C-54G Skymaster crashes in Tacoma, killing 37 people, on November 28, 1952.

On November 28, 1952, a U.S. Air Force Douglas C-54G Skymaster, en route from Fairbanks, Alaska, carrying 39 people, crashes in South Tacoma while attempting to land in thick fog at McChord Air Force Base. The pilot decides to abort a ground-controlled approach to the runway and divert to Malmstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls, Montana. The aircraft, however, strikes the tops of two tall fir trees, crashes into a field and bursts into flames, killing 37 persons. A young airman and an 8-year-old boy, who lost five family members in the mishap, are the only survivors.

The Douglas C-54 Skymaster was the military version of the DC-4 passenger aircraft, developed in 1938. The C-54s began service with the U.S. Army Air Corps (now the Air Force) on February 14, 1942, shuttling passengers across the North Atlantic between the U.S. and Great Britain during World War II (1941-1945). The transport, considered large in its day, was approximately 94 feet long with a 118-foot wingspan, and was powered by four 1,450 hp Pratt & Whitney R-2000 "Twin Wasp" engines. At a cruising speed of 207 m.p.h., the Skymaster had a range of 4,200 miles and could accommodate up to 80 passengers. Douglas C-54 Skymasters were finally retired from military service in 1975.

The Crash

On Friday, November 28, 1952, an Air Force C-54G, assigned to the Military Air Transport Service (MATs), 1701st Air Transport Wing at Malmstrom Air Force Base (AFB), Great Falls, Montana, was inbound from Ladd AFB, Fairbanks, Alaska, carrying 32 American servicemen and their dependents, and a crew of seven. At 12:30 a.m., the pilot, Captain Albert J. Fenton, radioed the McChord air traffic control tower for field conditions and was informed that visibility was approximately three-quarters of a mile. Captain Fenton was directed to execute a wide left-hand turn and descend for a ground-controlled landing from the south. As the aircraft neared the field, a thick fog bank, rising 300 feet high, suddenly developed, reducing visibility to near zero. At 12:48 a.m., Captain Fenton, now on final approach, decided to abort the landing and radioed the control tower that he was proceeding to Malmstrom AFB instead. Minutes later, witnesses telephoned the control tower and the Pierce County Sheriff's Department to report a downed aircraft.

The Skymaster crashed into an open field (now Wards Lake Park) approximately one mile north of McChord AFB and one-half mile east of S Tacoma Way between S 84th and S 88th Streets in the unincorporated community of Lakewood. It barely missed the Edgewood Park apartments, 35 four-family units built to ease the military's housing shortage during the Korean War (1950-1953), and other nearby homes.

Several people who saw the accident said the Skymaster was on fire before it crashed. Upon impact, the aircraft broke in two and exploded into flames. Bodies, personal belongings, packages and luggage were scattered around the crash scene for 200 yards. Most of the fire was in the forward section of the fuselage, the tail and aft section remaining almost intact. Some witnesses said they could hear the cries of people caught in the burning wreckage, but were helpless to render assistance.

Meanwhile, fire and rescue teams from McChord AFB, Lakewood, and Tacoma rushed to the crash site and extinguished the fires in the fuselage and scattered debris. Using magnesium flares and flashlights, police and sheriff's officers, firemen, and military personnel searched the smoldering, twisted wreckage, looking for victims. Of the 39 people aboard the C-54G, they found only three survivors: Airman Bobby R. Wilson, age 20, a member of the plane's crew, Airman Curtis Redd, age 23, and Joseph M. Iacovitti, age 8, both passengers.

Wilson, who had third-degree burns, internal injuries, and multiple skull fractures, died at Pierce County Hospital on Saturday, November 29. Redd was taken to St. Joseph Hospital in Tacoma in critical conditions with third-degree burns, but survived. Iacovitti was taken to Pierce County Hospital in serious condition with burns, broken legs and a fractured neck. He lived through the ordeal, but his parents, two brothers, and a sister died in the mishap, leaving him an orphan and the only surviving member of his family. Three other families were wiped out entirely.

The Investigation

An Air Force crash-probe team, commanded by Brigadier General Richard J. O'Keefe, was immediately dispatched from Norton AFB, San Bernardino, California, to begin sifting through the wreckage for clues to the accident. They wanted to determine why the aircraft was so low as to clip the tops of two fir trees before crashing. One of the aircraft's four propellers was found 100 yards from the wreckage, sitting upright in the field. The condition of the blades indicated the propeller had stopped turning before it hit the ground. Twelve witnesses, who saw the Skymaster just prior to the crash, said the right wing or an engine was on fire. Captain Fenton had been in constant radio contact with the tower until the final moment, but never reported a mechanical difficulty or fire. Just before announcing his decision to fly to Malstrom AFB, the pilot inquired about weather at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport and was told conditions were clear.

The Air Force Board of Inquiry determined that as Captain Fenton was on final approach to land at McChord AFB, he boosted power to regain altitude, but the Skymaster's number three engine failed. In the thick fog, the pilot was unable to see, much less avoid, a line of towering fir trees immediately north of the base. The aircraft sheared off the tops of two 100-foot tall Douglas firs, slammed into an open field and exploded into flames.

November 1952 had been a disastrous month for the U.S. Air Force. The crash of the Douglas C-54G Skymaster in Tacoma brought to seven the number of big transport airplanes to crash or disappear in the Pacific Rim area and raised to 199 the number of persons dead or missing. Just three weeks later, December 20, 1952, one of the worst air disasters in Washington history occurred when an Air Force Douglas C-124A-DL Globemaster II crashed at Larson AFB in Moses Lake (Grant County), killing 87 of the 115 persons aboard.

Casualty List

U.S. Army

- Coons, Robert F., 22, Corporal
- Galloway, Calvin, 18, Private First Class
- Hockenberry, Denny L., 22, Sergeant
- Hockenberry, Elda M., 21, spouse
- Hockenberry, Susan E., 2, daughter
- Hockenberry, Denise M., 1, daughter
- Lebonitte, Joseph T., 23, Private First Class
- Zeravich, Christoph, 24, Corporal

U.S. Air Force

- Alsbury, Jack R., 21, Airman Third Class
- Cook, Robert H., 20, Airman First Class
- Farley, Donna L., 20, (spouse of Farley, Glen D., Staff Sergeant)
- Iacovitti, Anthony R., First Lieutenant
- Iacovitti, Dorothy E., 31, spouse
- Iacovitti, Anthony F., 6, son
- Iacovitti, John A., 4, son
- Iacovitti, Barbara, 2, daughter
- Johnson, Dwight P., 23, Airman Second Class
- Morris, George E., 33, Master Sergeant
- Morris, Anna D., 28, spouse
- Morris, George E., Jr., 3, son
- Morris, Geraldine A., 5, daughter
- Niemi, Edwin, 35, Staff Sergeant
- Parlett, Federick D., 18, Basic Airman
- Pickerel, Robert L., 22, Airman First Class
- Smith, Raymond D., 24, Staff Sergeant
- Swan, Marion E., 41, Major
- Weikum, Elmer, 23, Airman Second Class
- Wells, Samuel R., 35, Master Sergeant
- Wells, Margaret A., 33, spouse
- Wells, Samuel R. III, 3, son

USAF Crew Members

- Benedict, John H., 20, Airman Second Class
- Bentley, Patricia, 24, Airman Third Class
- Bokinsky, Joseph H., 24, Staff Sergeant
- Childers, Wilber C., 21, Airman Second Class
- Fenton, Albert J., 29, Captain, pilot
- Harvey, James D., 27, First Lieutenant, copilot
- Wilson, Bobby R., 20, Airman Third Class

Survivors

- Iacovitti, Joseph M., 8, (son of Dorothy and Anthony Iacovitti)

- Redd, Curtis, 23, Airman Second Class

Sources:

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Douglas C-54G Skymaster, ca. 1950

Courtesy US Air Force, Charleston AFB, South Carolina



Front page, *The Tacoma News Tribune*, November 29, 1952

Tacoma News Tribune



Emblem of the Military Air Transport Service

Courtesy U.S. Air Force



Douglas C-54 Skymaster

Courtesy U.S. Air Force National Museum

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