

A Night to Remember

THREE STATES AND TWO COUNTIES IN THE WESTERN MARYLAND REGION WILL NEVER FORGET THE WINTER STORM OF '64, WHEN A MASSIVE B-52 BOMBER CRASHED IN THE NIGHT.

Written by **Dan Whetzel**



THE WESTERN MARYLAND MOUNTAINS HAVE WITNESSED HISTORICAL EVENTS FOR MORE THAN TWO CENTURIES. From the construction of Fort Cumberland during the French and Indian War in the 18th Century, to strategic transportation initiatives of the National Road, Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, and the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal in the 19th Century, nationally significant events placed Allegany and Garrett Counties at the center of newsworthy happenings. While those initiatives were the result of careful planning, one of the more recent newsworthy stories was not intended because it involved the crash of a nuclear-laden United States B-52D StratoFortress bomber on January 13, 1964.

The startling news that a nuclear-laden B-52 StratoFortress and its five man crew were officially missing during its flight from Westover, Massachusetts Air Force Base to Turner Air Force Base in Albany, Georgia, set in motion activities at the local and national levels. Within hours of

the aircraft's disappearance from communications channels, it was determined the bomber crashed during a blizzard in the Appalachian Mountains of Western Maryland, not far from the town of Lonaconing.

The B-52 incident must be placed in the context of the Cold War. Deteriorating relations between the United States and Soviet Union following World War II caused both sides to produce and stockpile weapons of mass destruction. The B-52's were a strategic part of America's deterrence plan against a surprise Soviet attack, and 12 of the aircraft were airborne at all times; each one containing thermonuclear weapons. The giant bombers were formidable weapons' carriers capable of delivering massive conventional or nuclear payloads. From wing to wing the aircraft measured 185 feet, from front to tail, 156 feet, while the giant tail fin soared four stories in height.

The cause of the B-52 crash near Lonaconing was directly related to the convergence of two storm systems,

one from the west and a more violent one from the southwest that caused “the worst ever turbulence,” according to experienced co-pilot, Captain Parker Peedin. Increasing turbulence prompted the pilot, Major Thomas McCormick, to request a lower altitude at 29,000 feet. Minutes later the request was granted, but weather conditions continued to rapidly deteriorate as the B-52 slammed into the storm fronts. Returning to a higher altitude did not alleviate the problem either. As the aircraft encountered violent turbulence, the tail fin snapped off hurling the massive metal bulk into the left horizontal stabilizer and tail gunner’s pod. Now unbalanced, the plane’s right wing rose causing the aircraft to roll onto its back and descend in a lopsided spiral. A Mayday and then bailout call was issued by Major McCormick at 1:30 A.M. on January 13th.

he could see the lights of Salisbury, Pennsylvania, only a half mile in the distance. But injuries prevented Sergeant Wooten from covering that distance; his body was recovered at the edge of Casselman River.

Navigator Major Robert Payne successfully parachuted from the doomed aircraft but was injured in the process. His decision to walk to safety that night included an unsuccessful attempt to build a fire. After failing to climb a creek embankment, Major Payne slid backward into the partially frozen stream where he tragically perished before rescuers could locate him.

Bombardier Robert Townley apparently could not eject himself and perished in the plane.

Search and rescue efforts caused Cumberland, Grantsville, and Salisbury to be centers of activity as federal, state, and local officials quickly organized. Volunteer fire departments and veterans organizations offered their services. Five



This B-52 is not the bomber that went down, but is the same size, era and type.

Key events of the terrible night are known. Captain Peedin ejected into the frigid air, falling at the rate of 120 miles per hour. A fortunate landing caused him to strike a small tree located on a farm about two miles south of Grantsville, Maryland. A Civil Air Patrol plane later spotted Captain Peedin and directed rescuers to his location.

Major Tom McCormick, likewise, ejected and found himself landing at the base of a tree nearly three miles from where his co-pilot struggled against the blinding snow. He, too, made a decision to stay on site until morning hours. Walking a distance of nearly two miles the next day, McCormick encountered a farm house along Route 40 and was later transported to Cumberland for medical evaluation.

Sergeant Mel Wooten was not so fortunate. A piece of the disintegrating plane severely injured his left leg, head, and chest areas. Landing in a field known as Dye Factory,

hundred soldiers from Fort Meade and one hundred Marines from Quantico, Virginia, were deployed in search and rescue efforts. According to the *Cumberland Times*, St. John’s Lutheran Church in South Cumberland hosted the servicemen by introducing them to Maryland fried chicken dinners and other meals. Hundreds of dinners were prepared by more than 70 volunteers who assembled at the church.

Location of the downed aircraft was crucial due to its payload. Once located, the Maryland State Police arranged a “top security” ring around the main wreckage site until federal officials could quarantine the mountain area. Of chief concern was the whereabouts of the two, 24 megaton nuclear bombs that were onboard. Due to the remote location of the aircraft, it was not until January 15th that efforts were successful in removing the nuclear bombs from Big Savage Mountain. A local stone quarry operator used a “highlift” to raise the bombs onto open flat bed trucks. Incredible by today’s standards, the flat beds remained open

with only tarps and straps covering the bombs. A small sign attached to the rear of the flat beds succinctly understated the cargo—“Explosives.” Maryland State Police escorted the trucks from Big Savage Mountain to Maryland Route 36, and from there, to United States Route 40 and Cumberland. A trip across Blue Bridge into Ridgeley, West Virginia, and the short trip along narrow Route 28 brought the bombs to Cumberland’s Municipal Airport for transport. Residents recall the tarpaulin covered objects on the flat beds that were parked along the airport terminal road. The Air Force dispatched a Douglas C-124 Globemaster II to the Cumberland Airport, probably the largest aircraft to land at the facility.

An investigation of the tragedy revealed that other B-52 crashes also involved a faulty bulkhead and support system for the tail. The report specifically concluded the Western Maryland crash was the result of a faulty bulkhead and the tail ripping off in heavy turbulence. No pilot error was involved. The final report of the crash remained “classified” even to family members.

A large memorial located about a mile east of Grantsville on U.S. Route 40, called the Mountain District American Legion Monument, was dedicated in July 1964. Two thousand people attended the dedication including Strategic Air Command dignitaries, Major McCormick, Captain Peedin, and family members of those airmen who perished in the crash six months previously. A B-52 flew over the site at low altitude to mark the solemn ceremonies. Additional smaller markers commemorate the individual airmen who perished.



GUARDING THE WRECKAGE

An Air force officer, left and a sentry armed with a carbine stand guard over part of the wreckage of the Strategic Air Command B-52 that crashed on a slope at Big Savage Mountain Jan. 13, 1964. (AP Photo)

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the B-52 incident as Van Gaus and Steven Johnson continue to research the circumstances surrounding the crash and subsequent investigation. Visits to the crash site have provided interesting and informative information about the Cold War incident that unexpectedly thrust Western Maryland into the center of national news for a week in January 1964.



TURNER AIR FORCE BASE
Albany, Georgia

*399 Flittrak
Albany, Georgia
January 28, 1964*

Dear Mrs Werner,

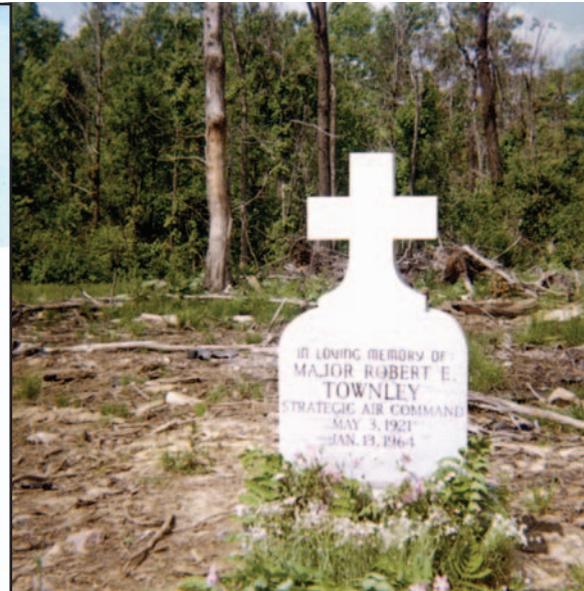
When my husband returned home from the hospital in Cumberland he brought many cards and letters he had received while there.

We are overwhelmed at the many kindnesses shown by so many people.

It has been a week of great joy that two of them returned safely and one of great sorrow for the three that didn't come home. The families of these three men are wonderful and they are going to be fine.

I want to thank you for the kind words and your prayers for my husband and his crew.

*Gratefully
Klorimarie McLarnik
(Mrs Theo. W. McLarnik)*



Memorial for Major Robert E. Townley, located at the crash site.

Dedication of memorial for Sergeant Melvin Wooten, attended by survivor, Captain Parker Peedin (left).



Van Gaus

This piece of the B-52 was found near the crash site and identified as a Flexible Ammunition Chute.

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