

# Remembering...

## 1964 B-52 Military Crash in Western Maryland

In 1964, Western Maryland and nearby Pennsylvania became datelines for international news stories. Radio bulletins, network television coverage, and on site military personnel created a sense of urgency the rural areas had never experienced. The cause of excitement was the crash of a nuclear-laden B-52D Strato-Fortress bomber. Multiple news stories also confirmed crew members were missing and that volunteers were needed for search and rescue missions, official requests that older residents vividly recall. Over the decades memorials were erected to commemorate events surrounding the B-52 crash, rescue and recovery efforts. More recently, additional commemorative work has been completed that once again brings the historical event to the attention of interested citizens. The tragic incident made an indelible mark on the communities it affected and deserves additional consideration and review.

Following the January 13, 1964 crash, residents learned the B-52 crew was following a flight course from Westover, Massachusetts Air Force base to Turner Air Force Base in Albany, Georgia, when it encountered a convergence of two strong storm systems. The turbulence was so severe it removed the vertical stabilizer and damaged other sections in the rear one-third of the aircraft. Major Thomas McCormick,



PHOTO BY LANCE C. BELL

**This memorial at Grantsville, Maryland (#3 on map) at Route 40 and River Road was the first memorial to be dedicated to the B-52 crew and citizen volunteers. Since July 1964, thousands of people have visited the site.**

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**

pilot, issued a Mayday call before ordering the crew to bail out of the doomed B-52 that quickly spiraled out of control.

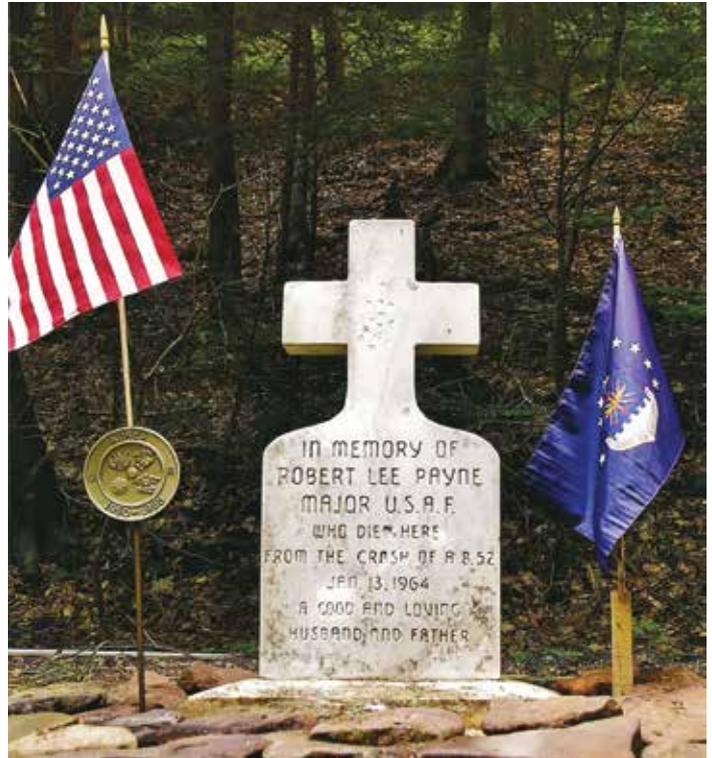
Major McCormick safely parachuted into a field where he struggled through waist deep snow for a distance of two miles before encountering the Warnick family house along US Route 40, not far from Grantsville, Maryland. Co-pilot, Captain Peedin also successfully ejected into the frigid air and landed on farmland approximately two miles from Grantsville where first responders came to his rescue. The tail gunner and navigator parachuted from the plane but later succumbed to injuries and exposure to frigid

temperatures. Major Robert Townley, radar navigator, could not eject and perished in the crash.

Search and rescue efforts mobilized hundreds of local citizens who answered the calls for assistance. Churches and service organizations provided meals and rest areas for personnel engaged in around-the-clock efforts during dangerous weather conditions—the nearly week long mission was quickly embraced by local communities.

In July 1964, the first memorial to the crew and citizen volunteers was dedicated along US Route 40, near Grantsville, Maryland. Major McCormick and Captain Peedin, family members, and nearly two thousand guests attended

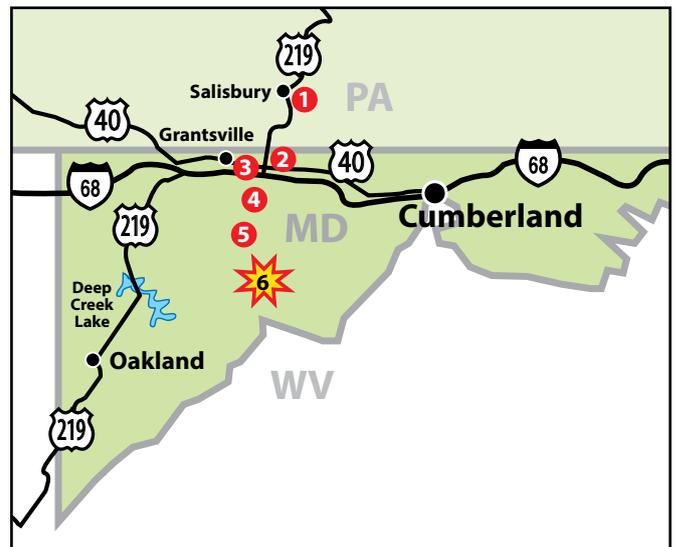
**Robert Payne's memorial cross (#5 on map) located at the site where he perished; Poplar Lick ATV Trail in Savage River State Forest. These photos show before and after professional restoration.**



the dedication. Thousands of visitors have visited the site over the years, particularly during dates relating to the anniversary of the crash. In 2014, the Grantsville Memorial once again drew a large assembly for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration that was attended by several of the crews' family members, Air Force personnel, elected officials, and interested citizens. While the Grantsville Memorial is the most visited and visible, additional markers have been dedicated.

Major Robert Payne's memorial cross, located along Poplar Lick Trail in Savage River State Forest, provides visitors with an appreciation of the difficulties he faced in trying to survive the blizzard conditions of January 13th; a more remote location in western Maryland would be difficult to find. The original cross, dedicated in 1964 and donated by Frostburg Memorials, suffered deterioration over the decades caused by weather and weapons fire. Bucky Schriver, Midland resident with an interest in the B-52 event, recently decided to address the issue by contacting Howard Wellman, a specialist in monument conservation. Through Mr. Wellman's expertise, and financial support from the Governor's Commission on Military Monuments and the Associated Gun Clubs of Baltimore, the Major Payne Memorial has been professionally restored and placed at the site where he perished.

Tech Sergeant Melvin D. Wooten's Memorial may be found on West Salisbury Avenue, West Salisbury, Pennsylvania.



#### 1964 B-52 Crash and Memorials:

- 1 – Tech Sergeant Melvin D. Wooten Memorial**  
West Salisbury, PA (N39 45.517 W79 05.437)
- 2 – Major Thomas McCormick**  
Rescue Site - no Memorial (N39 41.619 W79 05.775)
- 3 – Grantsville Memorial**  
Route 40 & River Road (N39 41.787 W79 08.197)
- 4 – Captain Parker Peedin**  
Rescue Site (N39 39.229 W79 07.393)
- 5 – Major Robert Payne Memorial**  
Poplar Lick ATV Trail (N39 37.085 W79 09.012)
- 6 – Crash Site / Major Robert Townley Memorial**  
Westernport Road near Pine Swamp Road – located on private property, no trespassing without owner permission. (N39 34.066 W79 04.241)

While successfully parachuting from the aircraft, Sergeant Wooten suffered a severe leg injury and was unable to make his way to safety, even though he probably saw the lights of Salisbury a short distance away. His body was recovered on the bank of the Casselman River. The memorial site, which is open to the public, was recently enhanced by Eagle Scout Anthony Hillegas.

Major Townley's memorial cross was placed at the crash site in 1965. The quiet location along Westernport and Pine Swamp Roads remains much the same as it did when the spiraling aircraft struck the earth with tremendous force. Townley's memorial showed considerable deterioration by 2014 when Bucky Schriver and friends decided to act.

Bucky Schriver, Buck Burkett, Eric Alexander and Mark Alexander, restored the area and built protective fencing while Mike Beal constructed a 12 x 16 foot stone memorial that captures the final flight of the doomed B-52. The flat stone surface provides a serene field for the outlined aircraft that is depicted with stabilizers intact. Major Townley's cross is placed slightly behind the aircraft, while a United States flag is displayed as a backdrop to the memorial. The peaceful setting, amid still visible artifacts from the crash, is an emotionally moving and appropriate reminder of the terrible events of January 1964. The volunteers expressed gratitude to the Governor's Commission on Military Monuments and the Associated Gun Clubs of Baltimore for their support of the project.

The crash site and memorial are located on private property and may not be viewed without permission of the owner; however, a small memorial sign has been placed in an accessible area on Westernport Road at the head of the Savage Mountain hiking trail.

The enhanced and conserved memorials are testimony not only to the B-52 crew members, but also to the volunteers and their overwhelming response to the incident. The tragic crash continues to make news worthy stories and memories more than five decades after it occurred.

*For additional information on the B-52 crash, see "A Night to Remember," Fall/Winter 2007 issue of **Mountain Discoveries** magazine (available online at [www.mountaindiscoveries.com](http://www.mountaindiscoveries.com)) and **buzzzonefour.org** where a list of donors to the 50th anniversary commemoration is available.*

**Top: Major Townley's memorial cross (#6 on map) was placed at the crash site in 1965.**

**Middle and Bottom: Bucky Schriver, Buck Burkett, Eric Alexander (left to right), along with Mark Alexander, collaborated on restoring the monument and erecting protective fencing. Mike Beal was solely responsible for all of the stonework including a representation of the aircraft.**

