

Preserving the Legacy of Buzz One Four

JANUARY 13, 1964, THE B-52D BOMBER, CALL SIGN "BUZZ ONE FOUR" CRASHED IN BLIZZARD CONDITIONS IN GARRETT COUNTY, MARYLAND



Written by: **Bucky Schriver**

This B-52 is not the bomber that went down, but is the same size, era and type (this model has a shorter vertical stabilizer than Buzz One Four).

The arrival of calendar year 2024 marked the 60th anniversary of the most horrifying catastrophe that ever occurred in far Western Maryland. A massive B-52 bomber, carrying two 9-megaton nuclear bombs, suffered structural failure over southern Pennsylvania due to severe turbulence at 1:38 a.m. on January 13, 1964. The 40-foot-high vertical stabilizer snapped off and fell over, taking the left horizontal stabilizer with it. The massive bomber rolled over on its back and began a downward spiral, shedding major parts of the plane before crashing in a farm field in Garrett County, Maryland, four minutes later. A massive fireball, fed by tens of thousands of gallons of JP-4 jet fuel, lit up the night sky like sunrise. The destructive turbulence was a consequence of a brutal nor'easter that dumped more than two feet of snow over the mountainous terrain of Western Maryland. Each of the nukes onboard was 600 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. The nukes were in "safe mode" and could not have detonated since the switches that initiate the arming sequence had been disabled for the sake of safety while flying over friendly terrain.

At 1:30 a.m. on January 13, 1964, Maryland State Highway employees Emerson Alexander and Bob Foote were operating a huge square-nosed FWD Truck Company Tractioneer model snow plow in an area of Route 40 known as Long Stretch, four miles west of Frostburg, Maryland. Alexander was driving and Foote was operating the wing

blade on the right side of the truck. Foote's wife had made a paper bag full of sandwiches for her husband to prepare for what would turn out to be a 30 hour shift. An intense storm accompanied by thunder and lightning created blizzard conditions in the high terrain of Garrett County. After a particularly long rumble of thunder, Foote exclaimed "Wow! I never heard thunder like that." It was only in retrospect that Foote realized that what he heard was probably not thunder at all, but the disintegrating B-52 that crossed over Route 40 at Long Stretch at approximately the same time. The vertical stabilizer from the plane detached and, like a 40-foot-high flying knife blade, split a tree and stood up along Green Lantern Road, only two miles south of Long Stretch.

Shortly afterward, the dispatcher's voice came over the radio, instructing Alexander and Foote to return to the state road garage at the eastern foot of Savage Mountain in Frostburg, load up with salt and sand, and meet Maryland State Trooper Milt Hart at the traffic light in Lonaconing. The notice surely seemed extraordinary, considering the urgency of duties in which the two men were currently engaged. When they arrived at the state road garage in Frostburg they were told there had been a plane crash on Savage Mountain, four air miles west of Lonaconing. Only later would Alexander and Foote learn it was a nuclear-armed B-52 bomber.



Maj. Thomas McCormick
Pilot



Capt. Parker Peedin
Co-Pilot



Maj. Robert E. Townley
Bombardier



Maj. Robert L. Payne
Navigator



Tech Sgt. Melvin Wooten
Tail Gunner

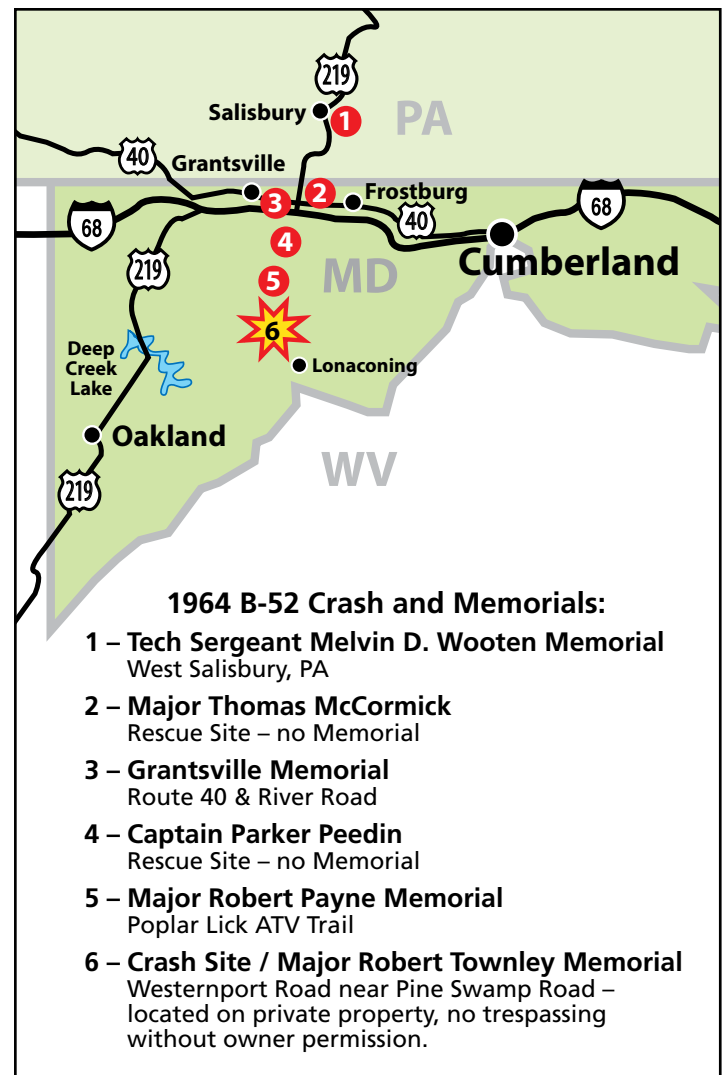
Daybreak on Monday morning, January 13, revealed the massive scale of the tragedy. The plane's impact with the ground left a crater 25-feet-deep and 100 yards long. Massive piles of smoldering, twisted and broken metal, huge tangles of wire, and rolls of chaff (aluminum foil used by the Electronic Warfare Officer to throw off ground missile defenses) littered Harry Russell's field. The acrid aroma of unburned jet fuel permeated the air. Strings of chaff were strung through the trees like tinsel used to decorate Christmas trees, in stark contrast with the surrounding scene that must have seemed like Armageddon.

The Maryland State Police, the 336th Military Police Unit based in Lonaconing, Maryland, and Major Sterling Queen's Civil Air Patrol unit based in Kingwood, West Virginia, were called to provide security at the crash site until regular military units could arrive.

The crash initiated an intense week-long drama that could have served as the script for a popular Hollywood movie, without the need for dramatic embellishment. Military and Civil Air Patrol planes scanned the area when the skies cleared on Tuesday morning in an effort to locate the missing airmen. Local citizens trekked day and night through nearly waist-deep snow in densely-forested steep terrain and braved sub-zero temperatures, hoping to rescue the surviving crew members.

Four of five crew members ejected at an altitude of over 20,000 feet, while the bomber was traveling at nearly 500 miles per hour. Tail gunner Melvin D.

Wooten and navigator Robert Lee Payne ejected, but died from exposure before they could be rescued. The bombardier, Major Robert E. Townley, was unable to eject and went down with the plane. The pilot and co-pilot, Major Thomas W. McCormick and Captain Parker "Mack" Peedin, were the only survivors.



After the bombs were made safe to transport, thanks to the effort of the 28th E.O.D. (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) unit based in Fort Meade, the nukes were taken to Cumberland Airport, loaded onto a C-124 cargo plane, and flown away to an undisclosed destination. The 28th E.O.D. operated under the command of Master Sergeant Bill Ramsey, a former resident of Hagerstown, Maryland.



Left: Don Townley, son of Maj. Robert Townley (left) and Frank Sgaggero, have been friends since Frank bought Harry Russell's property (where the crash took place).

Below: Linda Sittig's book is available in local bookstores in Cumberland and Frostburg and on Amazon.com.

Local citizens opened their hearts and their homes to the rescuers and flight crew families. Many civic organizations and churches provided free meals and shelter for the rescuers and troops that provided security at the crash site. Local citizens were advised to turn on their outside lights at night while the search for survivors was going on, in the hope that it might help lost crew members find sanctuary.

The 50th anniversary, observed in 2014, inspired renewed interest in the crash of Buzz One Four. Three video documentaries and several newspaper and magazine stories resurrected the story of the crash. Matt McCormick, grandson of Buzz One Four pilot Thomas W. McCormick, created the video documentary *Buzz One Four*. The documentary is free to view on **Amazon.com** for anyone with an Amazon Prime account.

Further knowledge on the crash is accessible through multiple sources. A treasure trove of information can be found on John Josselyn's website **www.buzzonefour.org**. A link on the homepage leads to a video interview of the last surviving crew member, co-pilot Parker "Mack" Peedin. A downloadable copy of the Air Force Crash Report is also posted on the site.

Linda Sittig's book *B-52 Down*, published in 2021, includes testimonials from many people who were never

interviewed for any of the three video documentaries. Linda's book can be found at local bookstores in the Cumberland and Frostburg, Maryland, areas, and also on Amazon.com. The book provides a unique perspective on the undercurrent of human drama that flowed beneath the surface of the more spectacular aspects of the crash.

Memorials for the three crew members who perished as a result of the crash were erected in 1964 and 1965. Two of these monuments were restored prior to the 50th anniversary commemoration in 2014. Another monument along Route 40 near Grantsville, Maryland, is a tribute to local citizens who volunteered to brave brutal winter conditions to help with the search and rescue operation.

The enduring legacy of the crash of Buzz One Four created unbreakable bonds of friendship and mutual respect between local citizens and the crew member families. Sixty years after the crash, some members of the flight crew families still correspond with local people with whom their lives were tragically intertwined in the winter of 1964.

