

MARYLAND WINTER ORDEAL

Although a beautiful hiker's wonderland in summer, the mountains of western Maryland in winter are dark, foreboding, and dangerous. Winter winds howl across the mountain tops in a great imitation of the lower arctic. The valleys are deep, cold, and seem to disappear into the gloom of evening by mid-afternoon. Places close early in winter, and when the blizzards come, they close tight. The local settlers must have been affected by the harsh surroundings. They gave their towns names like Frostburg, Savage, and Accident. They seem to be a careful people who keep their distance from outsiders, but when the need arises they work together and freely offer any help that's needed. If someone had decided to pick a time and place to not have a nuclear accident, 1:38 AM on 13 Jan 1964 would be the time, and western Maryland's mountains would be the place. It was at that moment that the crew of flight "Buzz One Four" began to eject from their dying B52D Stratofortress and were scattered into the hostile uncertainty of the subzero darkness thousands of feet above the area around Grantsville, Maryland. The big bomber had flown from Turner Joy Air Force Base, Georgia on 11 Jan as part of the 24 hour a day nuclear weapons airborne alert force. Code named "Chrome Dome," its job was to be ready to join a massive retaliation effort in the event of a surprise attack by the Soviets. Each day, nuclear loaded Strategic Air Command bombers cruised the skies within range of their



designated targets. On order, they would head toward the Soviet Union and orbit at pre-designated fail-safe points, where they would hold unless issued a validated attack order. On this particular mission, "Buzz One Four," was loaded with two 6,700 lb Mk

39-Mod 1 thermonuclear bombs, each containing a 4 megaton W53 warhead. The aircraft crossed the Atlantic, refueling along the way, and began to cruise their patrol area south of Turkey. The mission started to "go south" when they developed engine trouble and were forced to land at Moron Air Base in Spain. After some repairs, the exhausted crew

returned to the US and landed at Westover Air Force Base in Chicopee, Massachusetts. Because the plane was needed at Turner Joy as soon as possible for other “Chrome Dome” missions, a replacement crew was chosen to ferry the plane to its home in Georgia. The plane was piloted by Maj Thomas McCormick. He was crewed with: co-pilot Cpt Parker Peedin, navigator Maj Robert Payne, bombardier Maj Robert Townley, and tail gunner SSgt Mel Whooten. No electronic warfare officer was on board because the weapons were in transport mode (pullouts disconnected and electrically separated from the aircraft’s fuze activation system). The plane lifted from Westover and headed southwest for Georgia. Over



Part of Vertical Stabilizer found near Meyersdale, PA

Pennsylvania it began to feel increasing turbulence as they flew into the teeth of a powerful winter storm. As the storm deepened, the stress on its unmodified bulkhead holding the 48 foot high vertical stabilizer proved to be more than it could take. The bulkhead failed and the vertical stabilizer tore away from the fuselage, damaging the left horizontal stabilizer as it went, and flipped away into the storm. Suddenly, the situation changed from uncomfortable to untenable. Once, another B52 had lost its vertical stabilizer and was still landed safely. That was an experimental ship, on a perfect day, flown by two extremely experienced test pilots. Even they would have been powerless to control this “Big Ugly Fellow” on this night with no place to

land in a blinding snow storm driven by winds of near hurricane force. After a short, valiant fight, Major McCormick alerted the crew to “bail out.” One by one they punched out or jumped. All except Major Townley, who for some unknown reason rode the aircraft down and was killed. The plane button-hooked to the north, its left wing dipping as it plunged to earth. It roared over a local farmhouse on Frostburg Road on the west side of Big Savage. As it came in, the left wing stalled, hit the ground, and was torn away. The rest of “Buzz One Four” slammed into the trees - and died in three feet of snow covering the frozen ground in an area called Callahan’s Swamp. Some cook-offs of ammunition were reported, but soon the only thing that broke the dark and silence were the sounds of snowing and wind in the trees, and the glow of dying fires. The airborne alert mission was over and the EOD mission began.

About 180 miles away at Ft. Meade, the peaceful sleep of the members of the 28th Ordnance Detachment (EOD) was shattered at 0300 when the call “Broken Arrow” came in from Maj Walter Korsgaard of the 549th Ordnance Detachment (EOD Control). The words “Broken Arrow” were used in Vietnam as the code for a unit being overrun, and bring back memories of the 7th Cav in the Ia Drang Valley. In 1964 in the rest of the world, it meant an accident involving at least one nuclear weapon had occurred. Korsgaard also alerted the 44th Ordnance Detachment (EOD) from Erie Ordnance Depot to go to the scene as backup.



Air Force Personnel securing site

Weather and road conditions prevented them from getting there before the EOD job was finished. At about the same time that the 28th was alerted at Ft. Meade, an Air Force EOD Team was alerted from Andrews AFB. They set out in their 4 WD extended cab pickup, but when they reached Cumberland, MD they could go no further and the team checked into a motel. The 28th's first element (light), consisting of Lt Carl Ellenberg, Msg William Ramsey, and SP5 Horace Coltraine was loaded and on the road by 0345. At Frederick, MD they stopped to put on tire chains and continued to Cumberland where they were met by a State Police escort. They rolled on to Lonaconing, MD near the incident scene. At about this time, the Officer in Charge at the 2d Army Emergency Operations Center was telling Maj Korsgaard that he should proceed to the crash scene and take over the EOD tasks. He replied that the mission of the 549th was to command, control, and support its units, not take over their assigned missions. After some continued badgering by Army, he agreed to dispatch one of his operations officers to the scene. His instructions to the officer dispatched included the admonition not to interfere with unit operations in any way. The admonition was unnecessary because the unit had completed all safing procedures before his arrival. From Lonaconing, the 28th was led by a local bulldozer operator who cut a trail through the deep snow to within about 100 yards of the crash site. They arrived at about 1000 hours, and after setting up their control point, Ellenberg & Coltraine went forward. It was a very difficult approach through several feet of accumulated and fresh snow, and they took turns in the lead to “break trail.” This “initial recon” located the bombs and they got ready to go to work. About that time, the phone company had a line to the unit CP manned by Ramsey.

He was in touch with the entry team at the wreck by field phone, and with Maj. Korsgaard at the 549th by AT&T phone.



Townley memorial at crash site

Korsgaard was in contact with the Air Force, and using the manuals common to all EOD units, coordinated the necessary steps of the safing procedure appropriate for the situation. The objective was not to fully disassemble the bombs, but to make them safe to transport. They accessed the rear face of the primary through the access door forward of the parachute pack. They then went through the electrical safing procedure to physically break continuity between the internal power supplies and the explosives of the “primary warheads” by disconnecting each bomb’s trigger. They then carefully

inspected the bombs to make sure they were intact and in reasonably good condition. It was impossible to tell (without disassembly) if the weapons had suffered internal damage. But, based on the apparent condition of the bombs and their intimate knowledge of the internal arrangement of components, the team decided with confidence that the bombs were safe to move. This was all done by about 1030. The team secured the site and waited through a very long cold night for the arrival of the Air Force recovery team. Being stationed at Ft. Meade, the 28th was in a climate zone that was not authorized extreme cold weather gear, so they were very cold in their standard field jackets and army gloves. The crash had started some fires, and the team took part of a tree that was still glowing and used it to start a bonfire. The second element (heavy) arrived at about noon. The unit avoided frostbite by keeping the fire going all night in the subzero cold. While waiting, MSgt Ramsey prepared a handwritten hand receipt on an Army Disposition Form that included a description of the bombs and their serial numbers. The Air Force Colonel who arrived the next day signed for the weapons on the form. The EOD mission was over and the recovery and clean-up jobs began.

When they heard of the accident, the people in the area came to help. People simply dropped what they were doing and went to work. By the time Air Force officials arrived, they found that the townsfolk already had things well in hand. Hazel Klotz sent the word out early: There’s a big plane down, probably some airmen out there in the woods, so turn on

all your porch lights to guide them in, and get out and scour your farmland and, ladies, we need volunteers. The county plow cleared the road up Big Savage Mountain, and Milt Hart, following instructions from the Air Force, got two AT&T phones installed up there and put out guards to keep curious crowds away. As a thousand searchers fanned out through the woods, Army helicopters and local Civil Air Patrol planes combed the area, and the women cooked. One night the Lutheran Church Women of St. John's served 1,500 dinners of baked ham, roast chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, corn, and coleslaw. The next night followed it up with a menu that featured stuffed pork chops. Volunteer searchers were bivouacked everywhere: 130 men bunked at the American Legion Hall, 152 at the fire hall, 150 at the Grantsville School, and 50 on cots at the Lutheran church. Hazel reported on the radio that the helicopters were "thick as flies." As the work progressed, the bodies of Maj Payne and SSgt Wooten who died of exposure were found and recovered.



American Legion Memorial

Over the years, lots of stories have been retold and "improved," but a local favorite is about recovering those two nuclear bombs. The way people tell it, "Ray Giconi, who owned the local quarry, got his men together and one of his huge forklifts and a couple of dump trucks, and they all headed in a convoy up to the frozen swamp where Buzz One Four had come to rest. At the crash site, they gently scooped up those bombs, one at a time, gingerly lowered them onto the piles of mattresses in the trucks, and then drove down off the mountain. A local newspaper reporter asked Giconi if he wasn't scared while handling those bombs. "Well," said Giconi, "I do know

that if they'd a' gone off, instead of being in the quarry business I'd have been in the gravel business." There is a nugget of truth in that story because a local heavy duty forklift was used (probably Giconi's) to place the bombs onto two flatbeds where they were chocked in place, covered with tarps, and strapped down. The trailer took them to the Cumberland Airport for shipment. With the urgent business completed, there followed a long period of recovery and site cleanup.

It is interesting to note that, when finally disassembled, the bombs involved were found to have significant internal damage. Despite the dire warning in our manuals about “powdered HE,” the weapons were safely transported without incident, even though handling conditions were fairly primitive.

A beneficiary of the accident was the 44th stationed at Erie Ordnance Depot. It was in non-operational status because it had failed its Army Training Test at Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD. At the time of the accident the 44th was fully loaded and was staying overnight at the 145th EOD at Greensburg, PA on the way to Aberdeen for retest. Maj Korsgaard reviewed the reasons for its failure, made the decision to declare the unit operational, and dispatched it to the scene as back-up for the 28th. Weather and road conditions prevented the 44th from reaching the crash scene before the EOD job was finished. Even so, because it was declared an operational unit, the 44th did not have to go through the retest.

The military never recognized the 28th with any commendation or award because their outstanding job was considered to be just “business as usual.” Even so, the unselfish flow of public support and the outstanding military actions made the handling of this incident under brutal conditions a credit to those involved and an inspiration for us all. There are several monuments in the Grantsville, MD area, but the one erected along old route 40 by the American Legion seems the most appropriate. It memorializes both the local citizens and the air crew, and is dedicated to those “who gave their time, energy, and skill for more than 5 days in sub zero weather to assist the air and ground rescue teams in recovery of the victims of the crash.” When push comes to shove, the military and citizens of our country respond magnificently.