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FEATURES

Disaster in Denton

3-28-03

By **BOB BURCHETTE**, Staff Writer
News & Record

DENTON -- Highway Patrolman Ray Kirkman was driving south of Thomasville on narrow, winding N.C. 109 about 9:15 p.m. when the dark sky suddenly was filled with a great light and a boom.

Kirkman, an Air Force veteran with 14 years on the patrol, had never seen anything like that giant flash on March 30, 1961. He accelerated in his patrol car and headed south toward the flash.

Across the town of Denton, residents were startled away from what they were doing. Some thought the explosion was an atomic bomb. Others had thoughts of the world coming to an end.

It was a night to remember.

A B-52G Stratofortress bomber crashed outside the town limits, killing six of the eight crew members. The plane, based at Dow Air Force Base in Bangor, Maine, was taking part in a refueling exercise as part of simulated bombing competition when it crashed, though the cause was never discovered.

Kirkman was the first lawman on the crash scene in a field about 50 feet off of Silver Hill Mine Road. What he saw was a red inferno in a crater, later figured to be about 150 feet long, about 30 feet wide and more than 30 feet deep.

"I never saw the plane," he said. "All I saw was a big fire burning."

Forty-two years later, Denton is having a memorial service for the crew of that fatal crash. The service was organized by Lowe Garner, 40, who



Artifacts and photos collected about the 1961 crash of a B-52 bomber near Denton by historian Lowe Garner include a piece of metal from the plane as well as copies of photos of the crew. (H. Scott Hoffmann/News & Record)



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Aaron Crouse died 16 years ago. His wife, now 79 and in a nursing home, hopes to be at the memorial service. Also looking forward to the event are Roy and Glee Arnold, 81 and 84 respectively. The other crash survivor, Maj. Wilbur F. Minnich, had shown up on their doorstep.

"The first thing he wanted was a cigarette; then he wanted a drink of whiskey," Roy Arnold said. "I didn't have either."

As Farnham and Minnich were getting medical attention, helicopters equipped with spotlights searched the area of the crash, looking for other possible survivors and parts of the plane.

Dr. Ken Gobel, one of the two doctors who arrived to care for the crewmen, said he later learned that the engines of the plane went about 20 feet deeper into the crater than the body of the plane.

"If it had hit Denton, there would be no Denton," he said.

Pieces of the plane were strewn for miles, and many Denton-area residents still have metal fragments they found after the crash.

Workers gradually removed the wreckage and filled in the hole. The town was full of airmen for several days.

Chuck Poist of Havre-be-Grace, Md., was among an Air Force crew from the Seymour Johnson base that came to help with the search. Poist fell in love with Rex Glover's barbecue at the Park Inn Grill and also with Beverly Surratt, daughter of mail carrier Grady Surratt.

The following Feb. 4, Poist and Surratt were married. They lived in Maryland for five years but have since returned to Denton and hope to make it to the service.

Also hoping to make it are Poist's daughter, Angie Loftin, who works at the clinic where the two injured airmen were treated, and her son Jonathan.

It will be Jonathan's 10th birthday -- on a date people around Denton

Killed in the B-52 crew were:

Capt. William D. McMullen, 36, commander and pilot from Bad Axe, Mich.

Capt. William W. Farmer, 29, co-pilot from Wilson. He was the only crew member with connections to the area, having been a 1954 honor graduate of N.C. A&T in Greensboro. He also had been president of his class and the top student in the college's Air Force ROTC.

Capt. Robert M. Morgenroth, 31, radar navigator from Christiana, Pa.

Capt. George W. Beale, 34, competition observer from Bowling Green, Va.

Sgt. James H. Fults, 29, instructor gunner from Tracy City, Tenn.

Airman First Class Robert N. Gaskey, 28, from Providence, R.I.

Survivors who ejected to safety with only minor injuries were:

Maj. Wilbur F. Minnich, 40, who retired as lieutenant colonel and died Aug. 15, 1993. He was from Des Plaines, Ill.

First Lt. Glen C. Farnham, 25, electronics warfare officer from Loveland, Texas, who also retired as lieutenant colonel in 1978 after flying 135 combat missions over southeast Asia.

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of that fatal crash. The service was organized by Lowe Garner, 70, who wasn't even born when the plane crashed.

Garner has spent more than a year researching the crash after he and brother-in-law Don Glover became curious about the event that they heard about growing up in Denton.

Kirkman, who has been mayor of the town of 1,500 for the past 16 years, will present a resolution from the town's commissioners. The resolution notes that the crash left the "families of the perished and the local community of Denton, N.C., forever changed."

Also speaking at the service on Sunday will be First Lt. Glen C. Farnham, one of the two survivors of the crash.

Farnham, now 67 and living in Sun City West, Ariz., recalls that the bomber started going down about half a mile before meeting up with the refueling plane. At 15,000 feet, the pilot yelled for the crew to bail out. Farnham figures he must have ejected at 14,000 feet, and then the sky lit up above him.

He landed in a field near Aaron and Frances Crouse's farm. After twice running into an electric fence, a stunned and weary Farnham made his way to Crouse's farmhouse.

"My neck was aching," he said. "I saw a light, and I figured if I could make it to the light I could get help."

Frances Crouse answered Farnham's knock at the door about 15 minutes after she and her husband heard the explosion. Farnham checked in with the base in Goldsboro, learned that one other crew member had survived the crash, and lay down on the Crouses' couch, where Frances Crouse laid a blanket over him.

Want to go?

What: Memorial service for crew of B-52 bomber crash

When: 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Camp Walter Johnson, near Denton

Directions: Take N.C. Highway 109 south from Thomasville to Denton; turn onto Salisbury Street and take street out of town where it becomes Flat Swamp Road; go about three miles and turn right on Summerville Church Road. Go two miles and turn left onto Camp Walter Johnson Road.

Information: Call Lowe Garner at 859-2937.

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