



NCAS Members visit the tragic crash site of the B 29 USAF Superfortress bomber on Bein Tharsuinn mountain above Lochgoilhead in Argyll.

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Abstract

Substantial remains of the aircraft form a debris field on the high slopes of Succoth Glen 2.5 miles west of Lochgoilhead in Argyll.

OS Landranger 1:50,000 No 56, Loch Lomond & Inverary Map.

Introduction

Firstly, this reporter has merely trawled the web for information about the events of the crash and subsequent narratives of what has went on at the site. It is certain that further data will be available through more and better in depth searches, and from official information being released in due course. The writer makes no pretence at being a knowledgeable person in connection with this matter and has presented it as an archaeological site with an unusual story and significance. Nor can the writer competently describe parts of aircraft wreckage.

In 1949 WW II was four years in the past but already The Cold War was taking effect as the Soviet Union attempted to starve West Berlin, by attempting to isolate the city from outside access through what was now East Germany. The heartless attempt failed because the West ensured supplies by a massive airlift to bring in food and other supplies by planes especially supplied by the United States of America and Britain.

Both countries had superfluous aircraft, bombers, remaining after the war and the Americans especially had huge planes such as the Boeing B29 Superfortress, the type of plane which had delivered the atom bombs which were dropped in Japan, and finally ended WW II.

Two of these bombers had been based for the airlift at RAF Scampton in Lincolnshire and left there on the 17th January 1949 to return to their home base of Smokey Hill AFB, Salinas, Kansas. Boeing B-29A-70-BN Superfortress was only three years old having been delivered to the USAF after the war and assigned to 31st Bomber squadron, 301st Bomb Wing, Smoky Hill, Kansas. The normal crew numbers were twelve.

The planes were to fly over Scotland to Keflavik in Iceland where they would re-fuel and then continue to their home base. However, the flight did not go as planned because of adverse weather conditions, mainly freezing temperatures which meant the planes were icing up. After reaching Scotland the Captain of one of the planes decided to return to RAF Scampton and abandon the flight. For whatever reason, and it is not recorded, the pilot of the second plane; 1st Lt Sheldon C Craigmyle made the decision to continue his flight and at 9.50am the plane crashed on Stob na Boine Druim-fhinn, a mountain in Succoth Glen, near Lochgoilhead in Argyll, the wreckage was consumed in fire and all twenty persons aboard were killed. The exact cause of the tragedy was never determined, and it has been assumed that the bad weather and poor visibility were the main contributing factors.



Fig 1. The route adopted by the NCAS Group to reach the site. An arduous walk of just over 3km.



Fig 2. The proposed flight plan was a straight line between Lincoln - Prestwick - Barra Head - to Iceland. Why did the plane deviate from that route to crash where it did?

The site and field visit

Four members of NCAS; Ross Bremner, Sandra Kelly, Alistair McIntyre and Tam Ward visited the site in October 2019, led by local mountain expert Alistair McIntyre. The route taken was from the estate offices at Lochgoilhead and climbing straight up the lower south flank of Stob na Boine Druim fhinn, through a firebreak in the forestry, traversing NW along to a gap in the ridge to the NE of the summit of Beinn Tharsuinn, and then descending down the valley directly to the wreckage site at circa NS 162 022. It was really a hill walk but some very steep parts made the going quite difficult, the rewards of course were the magnificent views which changed constantly as the group progressed towards the summit of the pass on Beinn Tharsuinn, and then made the more gentle ascent to the actual crash site which was partially hidden at the edge of a commercial forest, planted in recent years.

Trees are planted over the actual debris field and parts of the plane now lies scattered among them, while the main wreckage is presently lying in a massive tangle exposed to the elements, many parts are now seen to being subsumed by vegetation and the trees, the latter of which will eventually cause problems of maintaining some integrity of the site.





Pl 5. View from the pass towards Lochgoil.



Pl 6. Back down to Lochgoilhead.



Pl 7. View over Lochgoil, Loch Long, Gareloch, Rosneath Peninsula and the Clyde beyond.

Memorial cairn on site. Pl's 8 & 9.

A memorial cairn has been built within the main debris and a brass plate commemorates the event and the names and rank of the twenty men killed at the spot, it is inscribed thus:

“In memory of the crew of U.S.A.A.F B29 Superfortress which crashed here on the morning of the 17th January 1949 with the loss of all twenty crew members aboard.

[-] = not on the plaque.

1/LT SHELDON C CRAIGMYLE [Pilot]	PFC JACK L HEACOCK
1/LT MYRTON P BARRY [Co-Pilot]	M/SGT HENRY P PRESTOCH
1/LT RICHARD D KLINGENBERY [Navigator]	T/SGT FRANK M DOBBS
1/LT ROBERT A FRITSCHER [Bombardier]	SGT CECIL G JONES
T/SGT DELBERT E COLE	SGT CHARLES W ROSS
M/SGT WAYNE N BAKER	PFC ROBERT BROWN
T/SGT JOHN B LAPICCA	T/SGT RUFUS G TAYLOR
S/SGT MALCOLM W BOVARD	SGT PAUL W KNIGHT
SGT ANTHONY V CHRISIDES	PFC FREDERICK N COOK
SGT RUFUS W MANGUM	PFC BRUCE J KRUMHOLS

ERECTED BY No 2296 SQUAD (DUNOON) ATC AND
DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY AVIATION MUSEUM”

It is interesting to note who created this sad monument on a remote hillside, one may have thought some American influence may have been represented, however it is good to see that a local (Scottish) initiative has refused to condemn the site and the story to anonymity. A tattered, small American flag and a single poppy are the only other indicators that someone has shown interest and cared about the event. Spelling of a few names given on some web reports do not correlate with those given on the plaque, which is the source quoted here, also Richard David Klingenberg is given on his gravestone at the Golden Gate National Cemetery, San Francisco, while on the plaque the name is given as ‘Klingenberg’.



Pl 8. The memorial cairn and plaque.



Pl 9. Names on the plaque (see above).

The wreckage

By comparing this visit to earlier ones given on the Internet, it is clear that the location is fast becoming obscured within the forest, why trees were planted so close to the wreckage seems disrespectful to say the least, but there can be no doubt that the overall site is becoming more vague within the area of trees and by the boggy growth of moss and grass. Parts of wings described in previous years are no longer visible or just barely visible, therefore photographs of this site are essential if it is to be studied and understood in future years.

The most obvious body of wreckage is lying in a vegetation free patch of ground, presumably the soil is poisoned by pollutants from the plane. Exactly to what depth the tangle of metal reaches in the centre is difficult to judge without recourse to moving parts of it, something which should be resisted by visitors.



Pl 10. Trees planted over parts of the debris field.



Pl 11. Among the wreckage is an engine (rhs) and a wheel undercarriage (centre).



Pl 12. Wheel gear.



Pl 13. Wheel gear with last remnant of tyre surviving.



Pl 14. Part of a wing flap?



Pl 15. Molten metal.



Pl 16. Someone cared. Poppy on wheels.



Pl 17. Headlamps and mangled metal.



Pl 18. Rivet holes on panel.



Pl 19. Electrical apparatus.



Pl 20. A window frame, soon to be overgrown.



Pl 21. The main wreckage area.



Pl 22. Rear gun compartment with tail skid.



Pl 23. Rear gun compartment with protective steel plate.



Pl 24. The wreckage looking to the summit of Beinn Tharsuinn.

No items were removed from the site by the NCAS visitors, only photographs were taken. However it is clear that much material is absent from the location and it seems that over the years insensitive people have removed objects and materials from the crash site. This writer appeals to visitors not to take items from the location and indeed there is a web site specifically asking persons who have removed objects to return them, and that can be done via beckett.kieth@googlemail.com. Where that gentleman will make arrangements for any returns.

The aftermath

The stories about the crash as told by different sources vary slightly, in both opinionative and factual detail, however one source which seems the most authoritative (to this writer) and much used here is that by one Brian Canfer, an RAF Squadron Leader who appears to be the only person who has studied the event in detail and analysed the available data in a professional capacity. His exhaustive report should be read by anyone who wishes to learn as much as possible about the event, this paper merely cherry picks some of the data from various sources.

As an RAF aviator it seems Brian Canfer's take on the events of the actual crash circumstances may be most reliable, furthermore his research into the other aspects of the disaster by contacting relatives of the unfortunate victims, lends more credibility to untangling of fact from fiction regarding the personal details of the crew and passengers. His work however makes no mention to the rumour that twenty one persons were aboard, rather the official version of twenty.

The plane was heard to crash on the mountain by local men whose statements to the police at the time are available. They were the first to visit the site and were met with the horror of the situation including the discovery of many of the bodies, or, rather, body parts.

Kinloss RAF Mountain Rescue team and a two hundred strong navy team from Prestwick were first to attend the scene officially. Various stories have emerged concerning the plane and its crew and passengers and indeed what it was carrying. It is difficult to disentangle fact from fiction and perhaps the truth will never be known, however a tale emerged in 2004 on April 3rd when the Daily Mail newspaper ran a feature on the crash.

The spectacular headline was that there were £250,000 worth of diamonds aboard. Apparently there was a thriving black market in all sorts of items and large sums of money making their way to USA from Europe. Another airman, Erwin Eckhert claimed that the captain of the B29 which crashed was the “undisputed king” of such smugglers, taking advantage of their positions to buy and transport jewellery and works of art the airmen were running a lucrative business on the side. Eckhert alleged that Captain Craigmyle had an Alka Seltzer bottle stuffed with \$50,000 worth of diamonds.

The plot thickens with stories of large sums of money being found at the site but on a more sombre and sinister note, there is rumour of a twenty first person on board despite the records showing only twenty.

The following is gleaned from one Frank Card, whose book ‘Whensoever’ (Card 1993) deals with 50 years of RAF mountain rescue work. Here we learn in a short chapter, about several aspects of the now mysterious B29 story:

The twenty RAF Kinloss Mountain Rescue unit were preparing to attend the wreck site with a view to the urgent search for possible survivors. Then suddenly they were stood down, only to be summoned again several days later to recover bodies and evidence of the crash. The men arrived and were involved in gathering up the bodies to bring them down from the hill, twenty torsos were accounted for and everything seemed to be correct, however several months later someone found an additional body and it was apparently buried up on the hill, rather than complicate the official records that only twenty were on board! Furthermore the Kinloss team had gathered personal possessions such as wallets and large US denomination bank notes of \$500 and \$1000. This was all handed over to an American USAAF Major who appeared on the scene and explaining he was a padre. To the surprise and concern of the RAF men, the American began burning much of the material handed over, and when asked what he was doing, they were told to “mind their own business”, and he apparently pulled rank on them to quieten them down. Another point which struck the RAF men was the total absence of any press at the dramatic and newsworthy scene and finally, why were the people on board the aircraft all carrying loaded Luger pistols? Of particular note however in the Card book is the total absence of any reference to diamonds or gems at the scene.

Back to Brian Canfer; he was in touch with Captain Craigmyle’s niece, and she confirmed that American pilots were bringing back valuables from Europe, having purchased them, possibly in Germany. Craigmyle was preparing for his retirement from the USAAF by becoming a bona fide jeweller, and there was no secret to that. She inferred that the reason the Kinloss team were originally stood down was to allow time for someone (USAAF?) to search the site for valuables and documentation before any others could get sight of them.

So, like all good conspiracy plots, this one takes a bit of beating, only if official documentation is released will the truth come out, but perhaps never! This paper does not

explore the detailed research carried out by Brian Canfer and given on his Internet report, and the reader is referred to that in order to grasp the various questions which arise from it all:

Were there diamonds and other valuables on board the plane? And what became of them?

Was there an additional passenger aboard but not accounted for in the official documentation? And if so who was he? And why was he there?

Who was the mysterious American Major, the Padre? And what did he burn and why?, was there a cover up at the site and later when the twenty deceased were returned to the States for official burial.

Why did Captain Craigmyle try to continue his journey when the Captain of the other plane wisely abandoned the journey and returned safely to base in England.

Why was the plane flying north of the planned route to crash where it did?

The whole saga has the makings of a great Hollywood movie, but how much is true? And how much is myth? The true part is the visible carnage on the hilltop and the sad fact that some of these men at least had performed a historic and honourable service to the people of West Berlin, who, a few years earlier had been their deadly enemies.

Caution

The trip described above was led by an experience hillwalker who knew the route to the site, the weather conditions were fine, even so at one point, hill mist appeared for a short time nearly obscuring the way. Caution is advised when walking into such landscapes and novices should not attempt this walk unless accompanied by a knowledgeable guide.

This report contains only a selection of the pics taken of the site during the trip by the writer, others can be available on request.

References

Card F 1993. *Whensoever. 50 years of the RAF Mountain Rescue Service 1943-1993*. The Ernest Press ISBN 0 948153 23 7.

Web sites: various web sites, some of which give excellent photographs of the site taken over the years.