

BOMBER DOWN

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NEWHOUSE NEWS SERVICE

Editor's note: National security correspondent David Wood came across the ghost of Buzz One Four on a backpacking trip in western Maryland in 1996. This is the first time the full story has been told about the B-52 bomber's last flight from Westover Air Force Base in Chicopee in the middle of the Cold War.

At 1:32 on the bitter cold morning of Jan. 13, 1964, the Cleveland Air Traffic Center got a call from a B-52 bomber passing southward across central Pennsylvania en route to Turner Air Force Base in Georgia. The most powerful combat aircraft the United States ever built, the B-52 was the pride of America's nuclear-war-fighting force. This one, a seven-year-old B-52D, was designated Flight Buzz One Four for this mission. It carried five crewmen and two thermonuclear bombs, and it was feeling the first tendrils of the most violent storm of the winter.

"Cleveland, Buzz One Four, ah, we're experiencing, ah, light turbulence, our present position and, ah, occasionally moderate, ah, no problem." This was aircraft commander Thomas McCormick, a lanky, 42-year-old West Virginian, slow-spoken, methodical, unflappable. Cleveland: "Buzz One Four, Cleveland, roger."

As a young pilot, McCormick had taken part in the 1945 firebombing of Japanese cities, a vicious campaign that burned to death more people than the atomic raids on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that August. Unlike most draftees, he had stayed in service after the war, and in late 1949, as a maintenance officer for the Strategic Air Command, he began hearing rumors of an advanced intercontinental bomber design of mythic proportions.

According to flight-line gossip, some engineers had concluded that the plane's tail assembly, which soared 48 feet high and was bolted to a bulkhead in the aft fuselage, wasn't strong enough to withstand severe turbulence. The Air Force, it was said, was reluctant to strengthen the tail because of the additional weight that change would require; more weight meant a smaller bomb payload and shorter range. One day, Tom McCormick checked out the secret plans for the B-52 to have a look for himself, but he couldn't tell one way or the other. It didn't seem to be a big deal, and anyway, he reasoned, if there really was a problem, the Air Force would fix it.

Two minutes after his first exchange with Cleveland Center, McCormick radioed back: "Cleveland Center, Buzz One Four, over."

Cleveland: "Buzz One Four, Cleveland, go ahead."

Buzz One Four: "Ah, roger, we're experiencing moderate turbulence at the present time."

Cleveland: "Roger, would you like to change your altitude?"

Buzz One Four: "Ah, roger, we'd like to descend to flight level, ah, two nine zero (29,000 feet), over."

Thick cloud laced with snowflakes winked back reflections from Buzz One Four's navigation lights as the bomber plunged into squalls of snow. Out there in the dark, along an axis that ran roughly from Tennessee to Cape Cod, a southbound wedge of dense arctic air was grinding into a wall of warm, unstable weather, creating a storm that raced in from the west. But that wasn't all. A jetstream wind accelerating to 167 mph was slamming into the storm from the southwest, igniting a rolling, high-velocity explosion that was blasting sheets and shards of wind in all directions, like shrapnel.

Cleveland cleared Buzz One Four to descend to 29,000 feet, but McCormick three minutes later called back again: "Cleveland, this is, ah, Buzz One Four, we're experi - we've just left three one zero (31,000 feet), we're passing three zero (30,000) and we're still in it."

Only that note of frustration in McCormick's voice - "and we're still in it" - betrayed the chaos that erupted as Buzz One Four slammed into the storm front. Until the indicated airspeed dial became an unreadable blur, it showed the aircraft staggering through 60-mph vertical and sideways jolts. McCormick worked the throttles, hoping to dampen the wild gyrations as the plane rocketed up and down. His copilot, Mack Peedin, alternately pinned to his seat and yanked above it, wrestled with the control wheel, trying to keep the wings level. McCormick had once flown this very aircraft through moderate turbulence, skimming along the Nebraska prairie on a low-level practice bombing run. Fireballs of lightning had bounced off its nose and the plane had shaken and rattled. That was bad, but nothing like this. Now, as they fought the airplane, both McCormick and Peedin avoided stabbing the rudder pedals. They knew it would put pressure on their plane's huge tail.

Cleveland: "Buzz One Four, Cleveland, would you say again your remarks, I was talking to Washington on another line."

Buzz One Four: "Ah, Cleveland Center, Buzz One Four, we're climbing back up to three three zero (33,000)."

Cleveland: "Buzz One Four, roger, stand by one."

A minute later, Cleveland Center called back with clearance to return to 33,000 feet.

Buzz One Four's reply was unintelligible, according to the official transcript of the conversation.

Cleveland: "Buzz One Four, Cleveland, did you copy?"

Again, the reply was unintelligible.

Cleveland Center, after listening to the tape over and over, would say that Buzz One Four's last

transmission consisted of several sounds, including - rushing air. It was the Cold War, of course, that put Buzz One Four high over the rumples terrain of southwestern Pennsylvania. It is hard to remember that before it became an exercise in intellectual shadowboxing and rhetoric, the Cold War seemed like a real war. The Soviets threw up the Berlin Wall. Washington and Moscow double-dared a nuclear holocaust over missiles in Cuba. Each side signed what was in effect a suicide pact, promising that if attacked, it would let fly with everything it had. Stockpiles of retaliatory bombs and missile warheads grew accordingly. Schoolchildren practiced covering under their desks. Bomb shelters sprouted in basements stocked with survival gear.

The Strategic Air Command, America's nuclear-war-fighting headquarters, grew so concerned about a sneak attack that it ordered a dozen B-52 bombers to be airborne 24 hours a day, loaded with thermonuclear weapons. On these intercontinental flights, code-named Chrome Dome missions, the B-52s and their crews would fly their attack profiles, soaring across the ocean and angling in toward the target-rich Soviet interior before breaking away short of Soviet air space.

Wartime orders for Tom McCormick and his crew called for them to cross the Atlantic, skim the mountains of eastern Turkey and lob their bombs at a pair of Soviet military airfields in Tbilisi, then make a hard right turn and streak for northern Iran. There, almost out of fuel, they would set down in the desert and await further instructions from a world that presumably lay in smoking rubble.

At air bases like Turner Air Force Base outside Albany, Ga., men were scrambling to meet SAC's schedule, flying Chrome Dome missions, practicing bombing runs and standing seven-day nuclear alerts. That involved sleeping in fortified bunkers beside their bombers, occasionally being roused by siren and sprinting for their cockpits in nerve-jangling rehearsals for Armageddon. SAC's warriors lived the theory of deterrence: If they were ready and willing to attack, they would never have to.

These missions required an extraordinary aircraft, and Boeing's B-52 was nothing if not extraordinary. Nose to tail, the bomber stretched 156 feet, almost the length of three tractor-trailer rigs. Its wings were so long, 185 feet tip to tip, that Boeing had to stick little wheels on the ends to keep them from dragging on the ground. Those big, flat surfaces gave the B-52 its long, soaring range - and caused trouble. The 4,000 square feet of wing and the four-story tail would catch the full force of turbulence like sails, putting immense stress on the entire structure.

Even before the flight of Buzz One Four, the B-52's record in turbulence was fearsome. In January 1961, a B-52 flew into heavy weather over the jagged mountains of southeastern Utah. A horizontal gust ripped off its tail. The crippled bomber rolled to its right into an uncontrollable spin and struck the desert floor near Monticello. Pilot John Paul Marsh and four of his seven-man crew died.

Twenty-four months later, a second B-52 crashed, this one on Elephant Mountain near Greenville, Maine, after its tail was wrenched off in heavy turbulence. Seven of the nine-man crew died. Within days of that accident, turbulence over New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains snapped the tail off another B-52. It, too, spun and crashed. Four of the crew ejected;

the tail gunner and electronic warfare officer were killed. The problem wasn't difficult to identify. On March 25, 1963, Air Force investigators made a report to a panel of senior officers and aerospace engineers from the Air Force, the FAA, Boeing and other interested parties.

In each of the three crashes, the investigators said, the bomber's tail had been wrenched loose from a critical horseshoe-shaped bulkhead in the rear of the fuselage - Bulkhead 1655. The investigators had found "fatigue cracks and weld defects" in the failed bulkheads. In all three cases, they concluded, the shock of heavy turbulence had yanked out the bolts that connected tail to fuselage. This problem had become "acute," the panel said in its final report to the Air Force brass on April 6, 1963. It urged speedy installation of new, stronger 1655 bulkheads. Unless the Air Force and Boeing got serious about doing so, the panel said, "an accident, similar to the three that have already occurred, could happen at any time."

The panel's extensive study and clear conclusions led the Air Force and Boeing to believe that there was indeed a problem with the plane. They flew a test B-52 directly into heavy turbulence. Sure enough, its tail was ripped off. The Boeing test pilot, through skill and luck, brought the plane down safely. But the Strategic Air Command was in the middle of fighting a war, even if it was a Cold War, and a general stand-down of the B-52 fleet, a pause to fix the problem, was never ordered. Had the generals decided that it would be too great a risk, that the Soviets might immediately attack? Were they squabbling with Boeing over who should fix the problem and pay for it?

Now, 35 years after the fact, there are no direct answers. Over the course of the past 18 months, both Boeing and the Air Force declined to respond to a series of questions about the last flight of Buzz One Four. It was just too long ago, they said. But Walter J. Boyne, a retired Air Force B-52 pilot, historian and author, says that standards simply have changed, that losing three bombers and 14 men over three years was an acceptable rate of loss in those days.

"It's pretty sobering to look back and see how many planes they were losing," says Boyne, who flew B-52s from 1959 to 1963. At the high levels of command, Boyne says, "this was considered acceptable." It's as if responsibility for the Cold Warriors' lives has faded away like an echo in the anonymous corridors of the military-industrial complex.

On Jan. 11, 1964, the seven-year-old B-52D that would be designated Buzz One Four torched off the runway at Turner Air Force Base and banked right, trailing black exhaust fumes as it headed out over the Atlantic on yet another Chrome Dome mission. But engine trouble required a pit stop at Moron Air Base in Spain, where it was patched up enough to get it back across the Atlantic. The plane had landed at Westover Air Force Base in western Massachusetts with an exhausted crew and a long list of new mechanical problems, but the 484th Bomb Wing needed the plane back at Turner to be plugged into the Chrome Dome schedule. Somebody had to go up to Massachusetts to pick it up.

Red-alert phone number 3-8 jangled early on the morning of Sunday, Jan. 12, 1964. The phone sat on a desk at the home of Robert Payne, on Turner Air Force Base. At 41, Bob Payne was an experienced navigator, and he'd been an eager flier until his brother, Phillip, had been badly burned in a bomber crash a few years earlier. After the thrill of flight began to go flat, Payne

took a staff job with the 484th Bomb Wing. It was hard, balancing the innocent joys of a young family with the awful burden of his profession, which, after all, called for incinerating the other guy's young family.

Payne was a patient and sometimes goofy dad, holding his daughter's Barbie while she was dressed and pratfalling around with his two sons like his beloved Three Stooges. Sometimes he would come home from a long day of waging nuclear deterrence and waltz his wife, Fay, around the living room of their tiny house as the three children shrieked with laughter. Payne kept in the pocket of his flight suit a lucky silver dollar, minted in the year he and Fay were married, 1944.

When he picked up his red-alert phone that Sunday morning, Bob Payne was given the chore of assembling the crew that would pick up Buzz One Four. At 9 a.m., freshly shaved and wearing his favorite Old Spice aftershave, he headed into the office. He selected the McCormick crew and started making calls. McCormick's navigator was on alert duty. Buzz One Four needed a replacement. Payne volunteered himself. "Bob came home pretty quick and said, 'I'm going on the flight,'" recalls Fay. "He didn't have any heavy winter flying gear, just those thin coveralls, and I didn't like that. But he said it would be OK, he was coming right back." As a staff officer, Payne hadn't been issued winter flight gear, and the wing's clothing-issue shop was closed. So he just went.

As Buzz One Four took off from Westover Air Force Base, Payne was sitting in the Black Hole, a windowless closet that sat almost on the bomber's bottom skin. The Black Hole was where navigator and bombardier sat in front of consoles, linked to the flight deck by intercom. Next to Payne was Buzz One Four's bombardier, Maj. Robert Townley, a good ol' boy whose head rang with the thin whine and throaty roar of race cars, but who went quiet and dead serious on the run-in to the target. SAC guys allowed that he was accurate as hell.

Upstairs on the flight deck were Tom McCormick and Mack Peedin - Capt. Parker Caswell Peedin, a handsome, deep-voiced North Carolinian, a jaunty hotshot, a gifted and graceful flier who was, at 29, one of SAC's youngest warriors.

A dozen feet behind the pilot and copilot sat the fifth crew member, Tech. Sgt. Mel Wooten. He was a quietly reliable 27-year-old, and the tail gunner. Normally, he occupied the final few feet of the airplane, sitting behind four .50-caliber machine guns half a football field's length behind everyone else. But because Buzz One Four wasn't carrying an electronic warfare officer, Wooten took that seat. Although it would be hard to tell later, he was probably the first one out of the plane.

When things start to get dicey in the air, even the most seasoned flier will think the unthinkable, will finger his ejection lever and run through the procedures in his mind, remember to ram his head back against the headrest so the blast of ejection doesn't snap his neck. The B-52 was not built for ease of exit. Up on the flight deck, the pilot and copilot were meant to explode straight up through a roof hatch. Down in the Black Hole, the navigator and bombardier were fired downward, through a hatch in the bottom of the aircraft. Web straps would keep their legs from flying up and catching on something when their seats rocketed down the rails.

The tail gunner was supposed to blow off the back of the plane and pitch himself out of the wreckage. But because Mel Wooten was seated up front, he could eject upward, through a roof hatch, like the pilot and copilot. Which was, comparatively speaking, a good thing.

As Buzz One Four struggled against the storm, its tail tore away from Bulkhead 1655 with a loud bang and sheared off, taking with it the left horizontal stabilizer and Wooten's empty tail gunner's pod. Traumatically unbalanced, the aircraft skidded sideways and its right wing rose and kept rising and the plane rolled sickeningly over on its back and slewed into a lopsided spin like a broken carnival ride.

On the flight deck, Peedin hung in his harness, heaving the control wheel hard right in a futile attempt to bring up the left wing, and out of the corner of his eye he noted a fiery red glow as if an engine were on fire, a potential problem he was too busy to worry about. As the wreckage of Buzz One Four hurtled down through the storm, G-forces squeezed and yanked the men in their seats and wrenched pieces off the airplane and spun them away into the frigid void.

Peedin's hands were flung off the jerking control wheel. McCormick groped with his right hand beside his seat for the bailout switch and hit it, setting off a clanging bell and a bright red light at each crew member's position. A hatch blew, sucking out the warmth and oxygen, and the cockpit filled with a hurricane of arctic air and cigarette butts and papers and candy wrappers and dirt.

The official transcript at 1:38 a.m., six minutes after the original call:

"Cleveland Center: Buzz One Four, Cleveland, climb and maintain flight level three three zero.

"Buzz One Four: -- (two sounds omitted - unreadable)

"Cleveland Center: "Buzz One Four, Cleveland, did you copy?"

"Buzz One Four: -- (several sounds and keying of transmitter omitted but unreadable)"

McCormick bellowed "Bailout bailout bailout" into the intercom but he was drowned out by the gale, and he hit the radio transmit button and with his lungs heaving he croaked, "Mayday Mayday Mayday Buzz One Four is bailing out."

One by one, men fired themselves out and disappeared into the shrieking storm. "There's a momentary blackout or grayout," Peedin remembers. "I can't tell you anything about going through the plane, I just went. There's just the wind blast and you start tumbling. It happens so quick there's no fear." Stunned with cold and shock, Mack Peedin fell like a stone for 2 1/2 minutes, reaching a velocity of 120 mph.

Cleveland Center, uneasy at having suddenly lost contact with Buzz One Four, called the 8th Air Force Command Post at Westover. Maj. James R. Colley was on duty and answered the phone, unaware of the drama that had just played out over southwestern Pennsylvania.

"Cleveland: "Are you aware you have a possible?"

"Colley: A possible what? "

Mack Peedin, his eyes squeezed shut against the searing cold, was counting through clenched teeth. He knew his chute was supposed to open automatically at 14,000 feet. He knew how fast a human body falls, and he knew how high he was falling from. He'd just about decided he couldn't do the calculation in his head when the chute snapped open. Four minutes later, still blinded by the snow, he crashed through the brittle branches of a small tree and landed on a farm two miles south of Grantsville, in western Maryland. His muscles and brain flooded with adrenaline, he sprang to his feet and started running. He gained all of two yards before he pitched forward on his face. He'd forgotten to unclip the harness of his chute, which was tangled in the tree he'd hit. He lay with his face buried in snow, breathing hard, feeling foolish.

Peedin had been an Eagle Scout and had gone to Air Force survival school. It all started coming back to him: If you're lost, stay put. He was lost. He decided to stay put. His survival gear, clipped on a long cord attached to his chute harness, contained a life raft. He chuckled at the irony. Then he got it out, inflated it, set it upside down on the snow and climbed on top, where he enjoyed an insulating foot of dead air between him and the cold ground. He arranged his chute into a sort of canopy and snuggled into the small sleeping bag from his survival kit.

As Tom McCormick shot out of the plane, he was hit by a blast of cold that iced his eyeballs and flash-froze his hands. Spinning, he fumbled among the hardware on his harness, and by mistake tugged on the rip cord. At 500 mph, the effect was dramatic: The billowing chute braked him to a standstill. The straps around his legs and crotch and chest held, luckily but painfully. McCormick dangled in the storm.

Eight feet beneath him on a nylon web strap hung his survival kit, and eight feet below that, his survival raft. It wasn't long before all that weight started swinging under him like a grandfather clock's pendulum, back and forth, in wider and wider arcs. Fearing that he'd do a 360, with unknown consequences, McCormick hooked his right leg around the strap to try to break the oscillations. It didn't work. Helpless, he went figure-eighting on down through the snow and wind. It was a long ride down, 10 or 12 minutes, and when he hit Meadow Mountain, already banged up and suffering from exposure, he struck the frozen trunk of a dead tree.

Like Peedin three miles away, McCormick had been to survival school. He spotted a distant light intermittently visible through the blowing snow, and took a compass bearing on it, 135 degrees, southeast. Like Peedin, he decided to stay put until morning. Although his left arm had been knocked numb and useless, McCormick got a fire going and used his chute to make a tent over his life raft. Leafing through the first-aid booklet from his survival kit, he came across a warning: If your arm feels numb and useless, you're probably having a heart attack. Alarmed by this news, McCormick quickly lay down inside his shelter and prepared to die. Then he noticed that his fire was burning low. Ever the pragmatist, he got up with a sigh and fed the fire.

When Mel Wooten blew out of Buzz One Four, he struck a piece of the spinning plane, perhaps a jagged part of the tail wreckage. The impact shattered his left thigh and gashed his head, chest

and hands, but he came down alive in a flat meadow known around Salisbury, Pa., as the Dye Factory field. There, he collapsed in the snow. Behind him, warmth and salvation lay 200 yards away, in a line of houses just beyond some railroad tracks. In front of Wooten, half a mile away, were the twinkling lights of town. He cut himself loose from his blood-stained orange chute and survival kit and began crawling toward the lights, not knowing that between him and town lay the ice-choked Casselman River.

And what of Townley, the redneck hot-rodder? No one knows why he remained in the wreckage of Buzz One Four until its fiery end. There are theories and scenarios, and the most plausible one is this: Shortly before Buzz One Four flew into turbulence, the Air Force accident board later determined, Townley had called up to the flight deck on the intercom. He had to relieve himself; he'd be right back. He slid back into his seat as the stricken plane lurched over into its fatal spin.

Townley's seat had a complicated harness, with straps that buckled over shoulders and across hips and chest, and leg restraints. To eject without instantly killing yourself, you had to be completely strapped in and snugged down before you reached down between your legs and pulled the ejection trigger ring.

Here is Townley down in the Black Hole in the panic and chaos of that spinning wreckage, half strapped into his seat and hanging upside down, struggling in the roaring, gyrating darkness to find the buckles and straps, knowing the plane is going down, the eject bell is clanging, and here is Payne strapped in beside him ready to eject and he is leaning over trying to calm Townley down and get him strapped up into his seat.

Seconds race by, the plane is screaming toward the ground, Townley can't get himself strapped in, he is being yanked and heaved by G-forces and maybe he is bellowing with fear and rage and yelling at Payne to get out and save himself, everybody else has already gone, and at the last moment Payne goes too. He explodes out toward safety and life, and Townley plunges on down and the earth rears up to catch him and then the sky is empty except for the soft falling snow.

A rumbling, grinding thunder shook Jesse and Mary Frances Green from bed in their white frame farmhouse on Big Savage Mountain, near Grantsville. The sound was terrifying, like what Mary Frances imagined a tornado would sound like. As the crewmen plummeted through the storm, Buzz One Four was spiraling past the Greens' house, its eight engines still roaring. Jesse stood barefoot at the window in shock, his wife behind him, as one wing caught the ground and the wreckage jackknifed, spun, leapt, crashed and slid in flames over the hill and out of sight.

Unthinking, Jesse sprinted out the front door and up to the barn and peered over the ridge through the falling snow. All he could see of the wreckage, now more than a mile away, was a dull red glow. Mary Frances had come out on the porch in her nightgown and bare feet to see. Throat pounding with fear, she ran inside and dialed the state police.

The porch thermometer read 10 degrees as he plunged back into the snow, this time wearing boots and a heavy coat, and pushed through the blizzard up the hill past the barn to see what he could of the wreck. The state police had told Mary Frances, if you find anything up there call us back quick. She waited in the kitchen, biting her nails. It's about a mile and a half from their barn

to the crash site. Jesse's a big man, tall and rangy with a stride like a giraffe. It took him over an hour to get there. The wreckage was burning and crackling, so he didn't dare go close.

"The ammo was firing itself off," he said. But he could see it had been one big airplane. By the time he got home and dialed up the police again, they already had word that a big Air Force plane was missing. Barely had Green hung up than the phone rang. "It was from the head men at the Army or Navy or whatever, up there in Massachusetts; they said don't go near the plane, it's got bombs on it," Green said. Did the authorities mention those were nuclear bombs? "I can't be certain," Green said from the distance of decades. "They might have."

Milt Hart, a World War II Marine, was the first state trooper on the scene. He went up the mountain with his 11-year-old son, Mack, hanging onto his belt loops as he breasted through the drifts (Hart was an indulgent dad when it came to high adventure). "The wreckage was still burning, but there was about eight inches of new snow on it," Hart said.

"We was wandering around and didn't see any tracks around the wreckage, so we figured, well, maybe there's somebody still in there, so Richard Graham, he's our canine guy, we sent him back to the car to go get his dog. We was trying to find something high enough to stand on, you know, to look around, the snow was so daggoned deep, and we climbed up on what turned out to be the two bombs. We kept sliding off. They were just in there with the wreckage but not covered up or anything. I thought they were the engines."

In the villages around Big Savage Mountain, people lived on the assumption that if something needed doing, you did it yourself. The local police chief and his deputies were volunteers, and so were the firefighters. The fire hall was the town's social center; that's where they had covered-dish suppers every Sunday evening. At noon every day, the fire hall siren sent everyone home for lunch.

Joe Anaya was the fire chief, a square-jawed Colorado Navajo who'd come east with the Army in World War II, married a local girl and stayed on to work as a carpenter and contractor. Joe was also president of the school board and for a while ran the local economic development council. His wife, Virginia, ran the fire department ladies auxiliary.

It would be weeks before she could tell her husband that she had jerked awake that night, breathing hard: In a nightmare, she had seen a young man wearing an orange jacket, lying in the Dye Factory field at the edge of the Casselman River. The man was injured, bleeding and holding out his arms.

When Buzz One Four fell into their midst, local people simply dropped what they were doing and took responsibility. By the time Air Force officials arrived, well after noon on Jan. 13, they found that the townsfolk already had taken things well in hand. That morning, things got started with a spark from Hazel Klotz, a plump, motherly woman who usually managed to find herself at the center of whatever was going on. In today's terms, she would be the Big Savage Mountain home page.

"Hazel's always on the phone yakkin'," is the way her husband, Danny, puts it. Hazel was so

well plugged into things that the local radio station, WFRB out of Frostburg, gave up trying to find out what was going on and just put Hazel on the air direct. She 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 came out and plowed the road up Big Savage Mountain, and Milt Hart, following instructions from the Air Force, got two phones installed up there and put out guards to keep curious crowds away. Army troops and Marines were trucked in to help. A thousand searchers led by Salisbury Police Chief George Winters fanned out through the woods 50 feet apart, feeling with their boots for big lumps beneath the snow. Army helicopters and local Civil Air Patrol planes floated over the area, looking for parachutes. 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 cole slaw, and the next night followed it up with a menu that featured stuffed pork chops. Volunteer searchers were bivouacked everywhere: 130 men bunked in at the American Legion Hall, 152 at the fire hall, 150 at the Grantsville school, 50 on cots at the Lutheran church. Hazel reported on the radio that the helicopters were "thick as flies."

There are many stories of that week, the five days it took to recover the living and the dead and to police up the wreck site. The stories have been retold and embellished so often that neighbors tend to hold sharply different beliefs about what actually happened, but one story they all like is about recovering those two nuclear bombs. The way people tell it, it was Ray Giconi, who owned the local quarry, who 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.

Shortly after the crash, the Pentagon said the nuclear warheads would not detonate: They were designed with safeguards to prevent them from going off by accident. (Since 1950, the Pentagon acknowledges, there have been 32 accidents involving nuclear weapons, but no explosions.) Even so, Giconi and his men stopped at a state boys' camp and took all the mattresses they could find and lined the dump trucks with them.

Up at the crash site, they gently scooped up those bombs, one at a time, and 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, 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."

Well before dawn on the morning of Jan. 13, an insistent doorbell summoned Dorismarie McCormick. She caught her breath at the sight of the base commander and chaplain, fidgeting in the porch light of the small McCormick house at Turner Air Force Base. This was the black and unspoken side of the Air Force she'd married into, the price you paid for being accepted into this tight community with its white-gloved, spit-polished social order and the shared burden and pride of its thundering moral purpose, Defending the Nation.

Tall and rangy like her husband, with a pleasant, angular face and a quick laugh, she had always joked with him that if he had to eject, he'd make his way to a farmhouse and call her collect. In no time that morning, she was making coffee for nearly 50 people crowding in to share the empty hours after the first report that Buzz One Four was missing. Laughing, she told the crowd that any moment, McCormick would be calling collect, and the crowd laughed dutifully. Inside, they were all sick with dread.

But it was Tom McCormick who came out first. In the gray light of dawn, he awoke cramped and cold. He wolfed down his survival-pack food, including a couple of pills marked "for extreme exhaustion only," since he figured he'd soon be exhausted enough. Compass in hand, he took a bead on a tree at 135 degrees and started wading through snow. About 4 o'clock that afternoon he hobbled painfully up to Robert Warnick's stone house on Route 40, about two miles away. The old farmer eyed the airman suspiciously. "Ye lost?" he inquired. "Not anymore," McCormick answered. He was quickly whisked away to Cumberland Memorial Hospital, but not until he'd taken care of one little detail.

Back in the little house at Turner, the phone rang, instantly hushing all the nervous chatter, as though a door had slammed shut. It was Tom, calling collect from the Warnick farmhouse. "See? I told you," Dorismarie McCormick told the crowd through her tears.

Mack Peedin, snug in his life raft, was still lost, and it was still snowing. His Air Force-issue "waterproof" survival matches wouldn't light, so he got out his Zippo and lit a fire. All that day, Monday, he called on his hand-held UHF radio, but got only silence. Tuesday dawned bright and clear and bitter cold. Peedin could hear airplanes flying around. One small plane, a Civil Air Patrol volunteer, floated into sight. Peedin leapt up and flashed his signal mirror. The plane flew directly over him, waggled its wings, and flew away. Pretty soon, four volunteer searchers waded up to where Peedin was standing in the snow, rehearsing his rescue line: "Welcome to my living room, boys."

The rescuers were in pretty bad shape. They were shaky and airsick from their first helicopter ride and bushed from trying to run through waist-deep snow from where the chopper had put down a mile and a half away. Peedin said, "You guys better come over here by the fire," and they flopped down. One told Peedin, "damn, you're in better shape than we are." When they'd recovered, the chopper dropped them off at the local airport, where they enjoyed a couple of restorative snorts of whiskey. State cops took Peedin to Cumberland Memorial, where he was examined by Richard Schindler, who complained good-naturedly that Peedin was in such good shape there was nothing for him to do, not even amputate a frostbitten toe. "What else can I do for you?" the doctor asked.

Peedin allowed as how he could use a hot shower, a warm bed and a bottle of whiskey. Well, said the country doctor, I can't do the whiskey but you got everything else. Peedin had his hot shower and was in bed when a nurse showed up with a big basket of fruit. Peedin had it put over on a table. When Schindler showed up for rounds an hour later, he asked, "How'd you like the fruit?" "Didn't touch it, but thanks anyway," said Peedin. "Dig down deep in there," the doctor said as he left. Peedin got the basket and dug. At the bottom was a bottle of Canadian whiskey.

On Tuesday evening, the remains of Robert Townley were located in the wreck of Buzz One Four. At the time of impact, investigators would conclude, he had been in his seat. His harness straps were not buckled. Robert Payne, however, had landed dazed and bruised but alive. Unlike Peedin and McCormick, he set out to walk to safety, trudging through deepening snow and cold across the mountains. At one point, he stopped to try to build a fire, but without gloves, his fingers had gone dead. In desperation, he plunged on through the night.

On Wednesday at 7:15 a.m. at the Salisbury Volunteer Fire Department hall, radio operator R.L. Hoke entered a notation in his log: Another man had been found. "Back of New Germany dam area," Hoke wrote, "aviator in bad shape, evacuating on sled." At 8:20 a.m.: "Call from Winters, Army sending helicopters to assist in rescue." At 9:15: "Definitive report: aviator is dead. Name Maj. Robert Payne."

Kenneth Resh, who farms out on New Germany Road outside Grantsville, was one of the hundreds who volunteered to search for the missing airmen. He had waded through waist-deep snow all day Monday, the day of the crash, and all Tuesday as well, and on into the night. As darkness fell, Resh thought he heard above the sighing of wind and creaking of frozen branches a faint cry for help. And again, fainter. "I know that boy was alive then, sure as I'm sittin' on this wagon," Resh said.

It took six more grueling hours before Resh and six friends found Payne's tracks and followed to where the navigator had fallen down a ravine into a creek called Poplar Lick Run, had tried repeatedly to crawl up the far side, and finally had slid back into the swift, dark water. When they found him, Payne was on his knees, in the creek, his head cradled in his arms, the snow gathering on his ice-encrusted summer flight suit.

The searchers, themselves freezing and exhausted, cut saplings and tied Payne's frozen body onto a makeshift travois and headed back through deepening snow to civilization. They dragged Payne up ravines, fought through underbrush, tumbled and slid with Payne down slick hillsides, waded through the twisting Poplar Lick Run half a dozen times. It took six hours to get Payne out to a road where the Air Force waited. Then Resh and his friends turned around and walked the long miles home. It never occurred to Resh that he might have simply come out of the woods and told the Air Force where to find the body. "I wasn't going to leave that boy out another night," he says.

At 9 o'clock Friday morning four days after the crash, a 17-year-old Salisbury farm boy named Ronald Holler was walking home from his grandmother's house along the railroad tracks outside of town when he spotted a piece of orange parachute in a snow drift in the Dye Factory field. Holler ran home and got his father, who notified the fire hall, and they ran back and dug frantically through the snow to find a life raft, a survival kit and the chute harness, all mangled and frozen and bloodstained. It wasn't long before Melvin Wooten's body was uncovered some distance away.

The young tail gunner, whose third child, Debra Kay Wooten, was 15 days old that Friday, was tangled in the bushes at the river's edge, crouched down with his face buried in a snow drift and his legs in the water. He had dragged himself 150 feet to the edge of the Casselman River,

heading toward the street lights of Salisbury, and there he had died.

On the day of the crash, the Air Force appointed a panel to investigate. It included many of the technicians and engineers who, the previous April, had warned that more B-52s might crash unless the Air Force got serious about replacing the faulty bulkheads. After examining the evidence, the panel quickly concluded that no pilot error had brought down Buzz One Four. The bulkhead had failed, the tail ripped off in heavy turbulence and the plane had become unflyable. The report was stamped classified, withheld even from the families of the dead.

On Jan. 31, the Air Force quietly issued orders to speed up the installation of new, stronger bulkheads. The Air Force also lopped eight feet off the bombers' tails, making them less vulnerable to turbulence. The crash was national news for a week before interest faded. No congressional hearings were convened, no action was demanded, no one was held to account. As the winter passed, local people erected stone markers where the airmen fell and raised a grand memorial in Grantsville celebrating the men who flew for the Strategic Air Command. Both the markers and the memorial are still there today.

McCormick and Peedin attended the dedication that summer, sitting with other dignitaries on a flag-draped platform. The families of the dead, including Fay Payne, Mel Wooten's parents and his widow, and Robert Townley's son, Donald, sat on folding chairs on the grass, along with the volunteer firemen and police, the ladies auxiliary, the volunteer searchers and other townsfolk.

A newspaper photo shows Fay wearing a simple black dress, white gloves and a bitter smile. No one would explain why her husband had never returned from a mission he wasn't supposed to fly. In his oration, Air Force Brig. Gen. Woodrow P. Swancutt declared that Townley, Wooten and Payne "gave their lives in the defense of this country just as surely as though they had been shot down over enemy targets." A sudden shadow passed over the gathering, and people gasped and swooned as a giant B-52 thundered overhead in a final salute.

Peedin, sitting up high facing the crowd, could see tears streaming from upturned faces. Turning back to the crowd, Swancutt finished with a flourish. "Khrushchev," he declared, "understands this type language." Swancutt never mentioned the tail problem.

One day an official envelope arrived for Fay Payne. It was from the Air Force explaining that Robert Payne's effects had been processed. The lucky silver dollar he carried in his pocket had been recovered from his body. The check was in the precise amount of \$1.

The Air Force kept the coin.

PLEASE KEEP READING TO LEARN ABOUT MAJOR PAYNE'S COIN

John H. Josselyn

Towson, MD 21286-8321

December 26, 2004

President George W. Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Re: "Buzz One Four"

Dear President Bush,

I have no illusion that this letter will reach you directly but sincerely hope that the staff member who receives it will take a moment to read the attached story. In January of 1964 a B-52 bomber designated flight "Buzz One Four", crashed in the mountains of Western Maryland during a horrific snowstorm. Several of the crew died including the navigator, Major Robert Payne whose body was found in a stream in a very rugged area known as Poplar Lick.

Several years ago I found a marble marker in memory of Major Payne. Since that time I have researched the events and spoken to a number of local area residents who remember that fateful night in 1964. For reasons that defy logic I feel a certain connection with Major Payne, perhaps because my father was also a navigator during World War II.

The attached story by David Wood of Newhouse News Service is one of the better accounts of the crash. If you cannot read the entire story, please read the last two paragraphs on page 13.

My entire purpose in writing is to ask that if by any chance Major Payne's lucky silver dollar is still in the possession of the government that it be returned to his widow.

I am enclosing One Dollar (\$1.00) to compensate the government for the check it remitted to Fay Payne.

Respectfully,

John H. Josselyn

John H. Josselyn

Towson, MD 21286-8321

February 26, 2005

Ms. Heidi Marquez
Special Assistant to the President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Re: "Buzz One Four"

Dear Ms. Marquez,

Thank you for your letter of January 31, 2005 in response to my inquiry (copy attached) about Air Force Flight "Buzz One Four" which crashed in Western Maryland in January of 1964.

While I sincerely appreciate your response, I would very much like to know if President Bush will direct the Air Force to make every effort to return Major Payne's lucky silver dollar to his widow.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions that you may have.

Respectfully,

John H. Josselyn

John H. Josselyn
Towson, MD 21286-8321

May 22, 2005

Ms. Heidi Marquez
Special Assistant to the President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Re: "Buzz One Four"

Dear Ms. Marquez,

This letter is a follow up to my letters to President Bush of December 26, 2004, February 24, 2005 (copies attached) and your letter of January 31, 2005.

While I sincerely appreciate your response, I would still very much like to know if President Bush will direct the Air Force to make every effort to return Major Payne's lucky silver dollar to his widow.

I would hate to think that President Bush would allow Major Payne's coin be lost in the trash heap of history without any effort to recover and return the Major's coin to his family.

Attached please find copies of my previous correspondence and an email I received from Major Payne's daughter.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions that you may have.

Respectfully,

John H. Josselyn

cc: Governor Robert Ehrlich, Jr.
Congressman Roscoe Bartlett
The Honorable George W. Owings, III
Secretary, Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs

John H. Josselyn

Towson, MD 21286-8321

May 22, 2005

Governor Robert Ehrlich, Jr.
State House
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: "Buzz One Four"

Dear Governor Ehrlich,

Enclosed is an article by David Wood of New House News Service describing the circumstances surrounding the crash of a B-52 bomber designated flight "Buzz One Four." The crash occurred in the early hours of the morning on January 13, 1964 in Garrett County during a severe blizzard.

I first heard of the incident many years ago while deer hunting in Garrett County. More recently I found a marble marker dedicated to Major Payne at the location in Poplar Lick where his body was located by search teams comprised of local residents.

Attached please find copies of the letters I have written to President George Bush seeking his assistance in securing the return of Major Payne's lucky silver dollar.

Unfortunately, I do not have anything remotely like the political connections necessary to reach those in a position of power much less the President. It is my hope that you will use the power of your office to intervene on behalf of Major Payne's family to secure the return of the Major's lucky coin if it is still in the possession of the military.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions that you may have.

Respectfully,

John H. Josselyn

cc: Congressman Roscoe Bartlett
The Honorable George W. Owings, III

John H. Josselyn

Towson, MD 21286-8321

May 22, 2005

Congressman Roscoe Bartlett
7360 Guilford Drive, Suite 101
Frederick, MD 21704

Re: "Buzz One Four"

Dear Congressman Bartlett,

Enclosed is an article by David Wood of New House News Service describing the circumstances surrounding the crash of a B-52 bomber designated flight "Buzz One Four." The crash occurred in the early hours of the morning on January 13, 1964 in Garrett County during a severe blizzard.

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Please feel free to contact me with any questions that you may have.

Respectfully,

John H. Josselyn

cc: Governor Robert Ehrlich, Jr.
The Honorable George W. Owings, III

John H. Josselyn

Towson, MD 21286-8321

May 22, 2005

The Honorable George Owings, III
Secretary
Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs
The Jeffrey Building - 4th Floor
16 Francis Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: "Buzz One Four"

Dear Secretary Owings,

Enclosed is an article by David Wood of New House News Service describing the circumstances surrounding the crash of a B-52 bomber designated flight "Buzz One Four." The crash occurred in the early hours of the morning on January 13, 1964 in Garrett County during a severe blizzard.

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Please feel free to contact me with any questions that you may have.

Respectfully,

John H. Josselyn

cc: Governor Robert Ehrlich, Jr.
Congressman Roscoe Bartlett

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

June 8, 2005

Mr. John Josselyn

Towson, Maryland 21286-8321

Dear Mr. Josselyn:

On behalf of President George W. Bush, thank you for your letter regarding Major Robert Payne.

The White House is sending your inquiry to the Department of Defense. This agency has the expertise to address your concerns. They will respond directly to you, as promptly as possible.

The President sends his best wishes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marguerite A. Murer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "M".

Marguerite A. Murer
Special Assistant to the President
and Director of Presidential Correspondence



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
WASHINGTON, DC

Office Of the Secretary

August 29, 2005

John H. Josselyn

Towson MD 21286-8321

Dear Mr. Josselyn

Thank you for your letter to President George W. Bush regarding the personal effects of Major Robert Payne, who died as a result of an aircraft incident on January 13, 1964 in Maryland. Please appreciate the President cannot possibly respond personally to each communication addressed to him. Accordingly, his staff directed your letter to the Department of the Air Force to give correspondence such as yours the same careful consideration the President would, were he able to do so himself.

The Air Force Mortuary Affairs Office reviewed this matter. The United States Air Force appoints a Summary Court Officer to identify, collect, safeguard, and effect disposition of personal effects of deceased Active Duty Air Force personnel. Generally, cash and negotiable instruments found on the deceased person are turned into the local Defense Finance and Accounting office in exchange for a check suitable for mailing to the authorized recipient. The check issued in the amount of one dollar reflects that the coin in question was in fact processed as described above. Monies turned in are deposited as part of the installation's general fund; the individual coins and bills pass quickly out of government control and therefore are no longer retrievable. White metal coins dating before 1965 were composed of silver, but apparently nothing at the time would have alerted the Summary Court Officer to its sentimental value.

Currently, the United States Air Force policy is to ensure negotiable items have no intrinsic or sentimental value before converting them into treasury checks. Every effort is made to return all items, including coins to the authorized recipient, if requested. While this policy comes too late for us to retrieve and return Major Payne's coin, we trust it will reduce the potential for such events in the future and allow the Air Force to continue to take care of its own in the highest tradition of the armed services.

We trust this information is helpful.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Darrell E. Adams".

DARRELL E. ADAMS
Colonel, USAF