

THE CRASH OF BUNO 140439

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IN MEMORY OF '439

by Billy-Ace Penguin Baker
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Thirty years ago a VX-6 P2V Neptune en route to McMurdo Station landed at Wilkes Station. The plane was refueled and the crew remained overnight at Wilkes. The next day the plane crashed and burned during take-off. I compiled this story of the event from books and magazine articles that I have in my collection. Some details of the story are missing, including the names of two of the survivors, but with my meager resources I was unable to determine their names or a photograph of the entire crew.

THE ALL AMERICAN BOY

by Bill Burch, member Wilkes 1961
Quoted from *Aurora* -, June 1996 - Page 7 & 8

His teeth I remember most about him. An absolutely perfect set kept totally visible through the mobile shutter of a mouth that rarely closed as he chewed gum and talked, simultaneously. A tricky

manoeuvre which demanded great facial mobility. He was in every way the epitome of what the movie, and early TV had taught me to think of as the “All American Boy”. Six foot something, crew cut hair, big beaming smile, looked to be barely twenty. **His mother must have been very proud of him!**

I was helping him to refuel the Neptune P2V aircraft on the plateau above Wilkes station from numerous 44 gallon drums of ATK we had hauled to the “airstrip” on the Athey wagon behind a D4 driven by Max Berrigan.

I think he was an aircraft mechanic. He and eight of his compatriots had just landed after a flight from Mimy, final stop McMurdo. Somehow almost all of the rest of his crew, and ours, had hopped into the Weasels to go back to base for a party, leaving just a few of us “volunteers” to refuel.

I remember too, feeling more than a little miffed when one of the first things he said after our self-introductions was “That was one hell of a rough landing strip you guys have - nearly as bad as Mirny”. Poor old Max had ploughed up and down with the D4 for hours knocking the tops of the sastrugi and giving the “strip” as smooth a surface as he could. For there was not really a strip at Wilkes just a slightly flatter



Figure 1--Tail section view of crash site of the Neptune at Wilkes .

area of plateau defined by survey pegs. But it was a very happy meeting - they being the first visitors we had seen all year, and this was 7th November. The dog team was a big hit of course. Nothing like animals to break the ice, if you will pardon the metaphor.

But back to the refueling. As you might imagine, trying to fill the fuel tanks of, in those days, a large aircraft from drums with a single hand pump, could be well compared with one of those crude parallels about porcupines and hot butter. What was more galling for me as my arm began to seize, was the fairly brisk flow of fuel out of some drain hole aft of the bomb bay area in the fuselage where the huge auxiliary tank had been mounted to give the aircraft its long range capability.

In answer to my questioning this curious exercise of pumping ATK out on to the snow via the aircraft, my new found comrade dismissed it as "pretty usual spillage". He should know. I had never even been close to a specialised aircraft like this before, let alone help refuel it.

So eventually we were done and trundled back to the station to join the party. Lofty, our cook, had excelled again in the pastry department - it was about the only department he did excel in. "eat it or wear it" was his favorite riposte. And our visitors had brought with them some fresh meat and vegetables, so in today's vernacular, we "pigged out".

Next morning: some of us who had not blown ourselves away at the party escorted the nine visitors back up to the aircraft, to see them off. My toothy mate told me about the JATO bottles they carried and would use to boost the take-off. These had some kind of solid fuel rocket propellant, were about the size of a hospital oxygen cylinder, and up to three could be clipped into special racks on each side of the fuselage to be fired electrically from the cockpit during the take-off run. I think they were supposed to burn for 20 seconds.

Great! As official photographer, I had charge of the 16mm camera on the base which had a magnificent 200mm lens. So I lugged a heavy tripod out to the strip and on advice from the pilot, gave myself a good vantage point to film the take-off, especially the firing of the JATO's.

We said our farewells and I remember my new "mate" gave Osluck (sired by Oscar out of Muckluck - surprise, surprise) a big hug. Their smiles matched - except for the gaps in Osluck's teeth.

The cockpit crew certainly had the better of the plane's accommodation. The rest were plopped around in little cramped jump seats, mainly sharing its belly with the long range fuel tank.

The engines started with a whine and this ungainly looking bird waddled over the wind-blown snow waves like a pelican, wings outstretched, to the edge of the more or less flattened sastrugi called the Wilkes airstrip.



Figure 2--The crash site of Neptune at Wilkes Station.

It was way before fancy zoom lenses and quick release fittings, so I had to commit to the long lens for the whole take-off sequence, and the JATO rockets just filled the viewfinder at the start of the roll. Everything was looking good.

The engine pitch rose to a scream making the propellers tear frantically into the still air, and a huge fluff of snow billowed out as the plane began its roll. Right on cue I saw the JATO rocket flames spit rearwards, seeming to paint the side of the 'plane in fire.

Hey hang on! It wasn't seeming at all. It WAS suddenly burning right onto the tail.

The plane was now well in the air thrown there by the JATOs' thrust.

The sharp-edged JATO flame had vanished, no longer flaring from the bottle, yet there was fire all over the rear of the aircraft.

It turned into a steep left bank, and I could hear some frantic garbled shouts over the nearby Weasel's radio about fire, smoke, and not being able to see

anything. I kept the camera rolling but a nearby rise in the plateau screened us from the remaining drama.

I am sure we all hoped in those few seconds that somehow the pilot had succeeded in any kind of safe return to the earth. But then the black geyser of smoke above our snowy screen signalled immediately that he had not.

The next few minutes will remain in my memory as one of those nightmare sequences. Imagine riding pillion on a D4 going flat out across sastrugi at about 10k per hour, trying desperately to cover perhaps a kilometre in case we could help. The Weasel beat us of course, and we came over the brow of the rise to see through thick smoke, three shadowy figures staggering to the Weasel, all with their hands over their faces.

In fact four had escaped. The other five could not be seen or heard, and the heat from the burning wreck prevented us getting closer than about 20 metres to the fuselage, which was largely intact.

The rest of the plane was scattered over a wide area.



Figure 3--Deep Freeze '61 crew of P2V '439. From Left: William W. Chastain, AM1; Arnold E. Tilley, PH2; George D. Conner, AD1; Clarence C. Allen, AT2; Larry E. Mckee, SSgt, USMC; Robert C. Daley, Ad1; Jack C. Shaffer, AE1; Lt E. J. Stetz and Lt David J. Finn.

Apart from severe burns to exposed skin, those who got out were relatively lightly injured.

It was agreed that the five others must have perished and our priority lay with getting the injured back to base as quickly as possible. Max and I were asked to stay back and record the wreck site as well as we could, in case a blizzard wiped out vital evidence for any crash investigation. Locating the bodies of the others for later recovery was also part of the plan.

In forty minutes or so we had paced and photographed all we thought was relevant and now the center of the burnt out metal bird was cool enough to approach closely. Knowing where most of the crew had been sitting, it was obvious where they should be, and led by the faint sweet sickly smell of badly burnt flesh, we found a jumbled mass of almost unrecognizable bodies all but one.

He was fixed in the remains of the exit doorway; his hands on what must have been the release levers. I knew who he had been. My friend of less than a day.

The perfect teeth were still perfect. but black; and clenched horribly tight. **I wondered what they would tell his mother.**

MOMENTS OF TERROR

The following is paraphrased from *Moments of Terror. The Story of Antarctic Aviation* by David Burke.

A memorable flight was planned for the P2V *Bluebird* which lifted off under the command of Lieutenant Eli Stetz from McMurdo on 9 November 1961. Note that in the story above the arrival of *Bluebird* at Wilkes was recorded as 7 November. In triangular pattern it would make a magnetic survey of little known eastern Antarctica, by way of Mirny, the Soviet station, and Wilkes, lately handed over to Australia from the U.S. The projected course of 3,500 miles would set a new interior distance record. All went according to plan until, after the stop-over at Wilkes, they readied for the final 1,400 mile leg back to McMurdo. But on take-off from the ice strip 8 miles behind the base, as the ski undergear bumped across the rough and ridged surface, something went dreadfully wrong. In the words of a VX-6 report, based on an eye-witness account:

The aircraft, after travelling the full length of the skiway, became airborne rising in a straight course to a height of approximately 500 feet. Some small fragments of solid material were seen to fall from the fuselage of the aircraft during this ascent.

The aircraft changed its course by banking to the left, shortly after which a puff of flame and smoke followed by a muffled report occurred (sic) toward the rear of the fuselage. The aircraft continued on a banking turn to the left and then dipped slightly and while still banking, disappeared partially behind a low rise in the plateau surface approximately one and three-quarters miles from the point of observation toward the take-off end of the strip. A burst of flame appeared to come from the aircraft, which continued for some distance trailing flame, before finally coming to rest.

Two theories were advanced for the crash. One blamed the jarring loose during take-off of an auxiliary fuel tank located in the Neptune's bomb bay, spilling the contents which ignited and caused an internal explosion. The other was that a JATO bottle stored at the rear of the plane had been shaken, impacted and ignited. In either event, an explosion ripped through the plane, filling it with flame and smoke. Blind and choking, Stetz and his co-pilot fought to bring *Bluebird* down, but they lost control and smashed into the plateau ice. Five passengers died in the fiery wreck, four of them navy men including the new commander of the Deep Freeze air detachment, Lieutenant Commander William D. Counts, while the fifth was a geophysicist attached to the Antarctic Research Program, Dr. Edward C. Thiel; a mountain range close to the South Pole now bears the name of that distinguished scientist from the University of Minnesota. Pilots Stetz and Hand survived and were badly injured, as were the other two survivors. A C-130 Hercules flew a rescue mission from McMurdo to bring back the dead and injured. No equipment could be salvaged from the Neptune wreck.

THE SQUADRONS VERSION OF THE STORY

The following is paraphrased from *20 Years on the Ice, 1955-1975*.

A Lockheed P2V-7LP Neptune, a former patrol bomber modified with two jet engines and a metal bomb bay fuel tank, crashed at Wilkes Station on

November 9, 1961. The Neptune (BUNO 140439) had arrived at Wilkes from Mirny Station after completing a magnetometer mission that originated at McMurdo Station. While taking off from the skiway at Wilkes Station the Neptune caught fire and crashed. Of the nine men on board only four survived. Killed were Dr. Edward Thiel, a geo-physicists from the University of Wisconsin; LCDR William D. Counts, copilot; LTJG Romauld P. Compton; navigator, AMH1 William W. Chastain, metalsmith, and ADR2 James L. Gray, flight engineer.

The investigation of the accident reported the cause as a collision with the ground shortly after take off following an intense, uncontrollable inflight fire that developed in the landing gear-bomb bay fuel tank area. Also, the Neptune was subject to stress at or exceeding the design limits of the aircraft during take off from an extremely rough skiway.

IMMORTALIZED IN ANTARCTICA

by Billy-Ace Penguin Baker

The photograph of the crew of 140439 are from the Task Force 43 crews book for DF-61. Some of

the personnel from this crew were members of the crew of 140439 when it crashed and burned on 8 November 1961. The photographs of the crash site were taken by Bill Burch, the author of *The All American Boy*

We already know that Thiel received immortality by having the Thiel Mountains named in his honor. Thiel Mountains is not the only feature named for Edward Thiel. He was the chief seismologist at Ellsworth Station from 1956 through 1958 and he was the leader of a traverse party that discovered a submarine trough in the Weddell Sea. Original the trough was named Crary Trough, but was later changed to Thiel Trough at the insistence of Dr. Albert Crary who the trough had originally been named for.

But, what of the rest of the fatalities? LCDR William D. Counts also has two features named in his honor; the first is Mount Counts. The second is the Counts Icefall. LTJG Compton has the ice filled Compton Valley named in his honor. Chastain Peak was named for Petty Officer Chastain. Petty Officer Gray has a rocky spur; Gray Spur which is next to Counts Icefall. It is only fitting that all of the land marks honoring the men killed in this crash are located together in the Thiel Mountains. They died together and they are immortalized together.

Not even a rock nor a nunatack was named to honor the two known survivors, not then and not later were they so immortalized.