

Requiem at 5,000 Feet



**499th Engineer Combat Battalion
U. S. Army**



**10th Troop Carrier Squadron
U. S. Air Force**

TributeTo A Former Classmate - by Clark N. Nelson, Sr.



Overture

Life is a super highway in most respects; as we continue along this super highway, we may select an off ramp that appears to offer that which we've hoped for, what we've searched for, at times, that which we've actually prayed for. These off ramps may ultimately determine one's fortunes as well as one's fate.

This was the case with a former classmate, Ferris (aka: Farris) E. Bowler who was so anxious to serve his country, that he found that service more important than a high school diploma, which ultimately cost him his life, August 11, 1955.

Ferris (aka: Farris) was a soft-spoken kid with a baritone voice. This is my personal tribute to a former classmate who just happened to choose the wrong off ramp from the highway of life, that was to ultimately take his life at the age of 18 near Edelwiler, Germany, as a member of the U. S. Army 499th Engineer Combat Battalion.

I was standing in line at the local post office May 29, 2018. A blonde-haired woman in her 40s standing behind me is originally from Hamburg, Germany. I asked if she was familiar with Edelwiler, and she replied, "Oh, yes". I briefly described the tragedy that took the life of my former classmate at Edelwiler August 11, 1955. I'm especially proud of that soft-spoken kid with the baritone voice, Ferris (aka: Farris) E. Bowler.

Requiem at 5,000 Feet

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Preface

As we perceive our destiny in life we make decisions that seem to ensure that destiny. These decisions are often based on notions or concepts, yet a twist of fate or a stroke of bad luck can prove the ultimate destiny. I accepted death in the East China Sea, yet there were margins for survival. It's a shame a young soldier wasn't afforded in kind.

Preamble

I've researched a number of sources regarding the tragedy of August 11, 1955. I consider these the most relevant: (1) an eyewitness account; (2) an account based on an accident report; and (3) an overview provided by an aviation safety network.

After reviewing the aforementioned sources I don't suggest either might be flawless, however the eyewitness account appears the most reliable. This proves relevant to an oversight within text based on an accident report, as well as the overview provided by an aviation safety network. The overview corresponds with details in the eyewitness account.

Moreover, tragedy in detail remains indelible in memory for an eyewitness, while details from an accident report are subject to error throughout review as well as transcription.

The eyewitness observed the accident aboard the C-119G in slot #2, a member of the command element, slightly to the rear and left of slot#1. When it comes to a detailed account, the eyewitness was afforded a vantage point common to few. To coin a phrase, with all due respect, he had the best seat in the house.

Pilot names for C-119G (53-3222) and C-119G (53-7841) are confirmed, yet conflicts emerge regarding slot positions, left or right boom, who collided with whom, at what altitude, when comparing the eyewitness account with details based on an accident report. Notwithstanding these conflicts, this was a tragedy of massive proportion.

A Tap on the Shoulder

Ferris Elmo Bowler was born in St. George, Utah November 10, 1936. He was the son of Harry Lamond and Harriet Elizabeth Barnum Bowler.

Ferris was a member of our class at Woodward Jr. High. He was a soft-spoken kid with a baritone voice. He seldom had much to say but seemed very likeable.

There seems to be a conflict considering the spelling of his given name. I've found only one notation which seems to confirm his given name was *Ferris*. However, the 1951 Woodwardia yearbook has the name *Farris* beneath his picture.

This suggests his given name might've been changed; what might've prompted a change is anyone's guess. This remains a quandary since I'm unable to locate a documented source confirming either name.

I recall only one conversation with Ferris. I remain puzzled by the fact he chose me. Considering the topic within that conversation, the poignancy and urgency within this tribute, I find it ironic.

We were seated in a classroom in 1953. Ferris was seated one row behind and just over my right shoulder. The teacher was talking to someone just outside the classroom.

I felt a tap on my right shoulder. Ferris leaned forward with arms on the knees, eyes focused on the floor, head moving from side to side as if in disgust, as if to say "No". He straightened up and explained his plans for the future.

He told me he was fed up with school. He considered school a waste of time. He told me he planned to join a branch of the military as soon as possible. I've been unable to locate the date of enlistment.

Considering the date of Ferris' birth, he might've enlisted at some point near the close of 1953 or the following year.

Requiem

On August 11, 1955 Ferris was a member of 7th Army's 499th Engineer Combat Battalion based at Phillips Barracks in Karlsruhe, Germany. He was assigned to Company 'A' and held the rank of Pvt-2.

A training exercise was scheduled. It would be a joint exercise with the Air Force transporting troops and equipment. The Air Force contingent were nine C-119G Flying Boxcars from the 10th Troop Carrier Squadron, 60th Troop Carrier Group.

The 10th Troop Carrier Squadron had recently moved from Rhein-Maim Air Base in Germany to a base in Dreux, France. They departed the base earlier in the day. The troops involved were all members of 7th Army's 499th Engineer Combat Battalion. They were loaded in buses and transported to the airfield. Each soldier carried full field equipment.

Begin: eyewitness account

This would be an orientation flight for the troops of the 499th. These were regular Army troops, not paratroops. They weren't familiar with normal procedures when flying, such as fitting each soldier with a parachute. This was standard procedure; all crew members and passengers must wear parachutes.

The aircraft departed Echterdingen Airfield near Stuttgart at 1:00 p.m. Within fifteen minutes they were a nine-ship formation with three elements of three. They were tucked in fairly close at five thousand feet.

Slots #4, #5, and #6 made up the element on the left. Slots #7, #8, and #9 made up the element on the right. Slots #1, #2, and #3 made up the center element, the command element, with the mission commander in slot #1.

This would be a short flight around the local area near the Black Forest. Then something went wrong, terribly wrong.

Lt. Eugene Pesci, pilot of C-119G (53-7841, msn 11258) in slot #6, radioed the mission commander and said he was having problems with one of the engines. He asked permission to leave the formation and was given the "OK".

As Lt. Pesci's aircraft began to descend, it abruptly pulled up and collided with C-119G (53-3222, msn 11238) in slot #5, piloted by Lt. Robert Asher.

Asher's aircraft lost its left boom and elevator and spiraled down; a voice was heard over the radio, "*Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God*"! There was smoke and fire upon impact.

Lt. Pesci was able to maintain a left wing low for thirty or forty seconds, then the aircraft went into a steep dive and crashed, with smoke and fire upon impact.

End: eyewitness account

Begin: account based on accident report

The author of this account claims the aircraft were at 4,000 feet above sea level which is somewhere between 2,500 and 3,000 feet above the terrain; that it was Lt. Asher who asked to leave the formation, rather than Lt. Pesci.

According to this account, the underside of the nose section of Pesci's aircraft came down on the tail section of Asher's aircraft, cutting off part of the boom and right vertical stabilizer; also destroyed were the horizontal stabilizer and elevator. Moreover, Pesci's aircraft rolled over on its back then nosed over into a vertical dive.

I believe the description herein, as it relates to the underside of the nose section, is most likely accurate, however conflicts remain regarding slot positions, left or right boom, and which pilot asked permission to leave the formation. Moreover, I consider details provided by an aviation safety network a vital factor when seeking continuity in detail.

End: account based on accident report

Villagers said there was a massive explosion, that both aircraft were engulfed in flames. There were reports of people hearing the explosion from a distance of 50 miles. When police and volunteer rescue units arrived they were driven back by the fierce flames and heat.

One of the aircraft with 44 airmen and soldiers aboard crashed in a cornfield near the village of Edelweiler. The other aircraft with 22 aboard spiraled into the woods near Grombach, a dense area of the Black Forest. Both aircraft were charred wrecks.

Air Force dignitaries who rushed to the scene were Brig Gen Franklin Rose, commander of the 322nd Air Division, Ramstein Air Base, parent unit of the 60th Troop Carrier Group; Col. Clyde Box, commander of the 60th Troop Carrier Group, Rhein-Main Air Base; and an inspector general team from USAFE HQ.

The first German firefighter to reach the scene said he'd never seen anything like it. He said there was nothing they could do, everyone aboard the two aircraft were dead. He said firefighters stood there and cried like babies.

A farmer described the terror he experienced that afternoon. He said he'd just left the cornfield to go to another cornfield 100 yards away. He heard a grinding noise high above, and when he looked up, the aircraft fell on his cornfield. He said the explosion on impact almost deafened him.

He said he was accustomed to the sound of airplanes so he didn't look up when he heard the engines. But when he heard the grinding noise it was over in a flash.

He said the plane that fell on his cornfield dug itself in the ground at the depth of more than one meter. He said the other aircraft that crashed in the forest was in flames, much like the aircraft in his cornfield.

According to an Edelweiler resident, the area of the cornfield where the plane crashed hasn't been farmed since the tragedy. Steel parts are still embedded in the ground. Oil seeps up to the surface during heavy rains leaving a purplish, damp residue.

On August 16th, a crowd of 2,000 paid tribute to the memories of the soldiers who were killed in the crash of the two C-119s. Rites for the 10 Air Force victims was held at Rhein-Main Air Base one day earlier.

Families of soldiers killed, military and civilian dignitaries, and fellow soldiers gathered in the Phillips Barracks Chapel area for outdoor services.

The commanding officer of the 555th Engineer Group delivered a tribute saying the men of the 499th Engineer Combat Battalion based at Phillips Barracks *"proved themselves in life equal to the finest in America's heritage"*.

Among those attending the services were the widows of Lt. Col. Frank R. Little, 499th Battalion CO; Captain Gerald H. Martin; M/SGT Joseph P. Smola; SGT Henry T. Wood, Jr.; SGT Richard L. Rannow; and SGT Jack J. Lowenstein.

Dignitaries present included Lt. Gen. H. I. Hodes, 7th Army CG; Maj. Gen. Elwyn D. Post, USAREUR deputy of staff for operations; Brig. Gen. Charles H. McNutt,

USAREUR engineer; Brig. Gen. William M. Gross, 12th AF deputy commander; and Brig. Gen. Franklin Rose, commander of the 322nd Air Division.

Also present were the deputy commander of French Forces in Germany, Maj. Gen. Andre Demetz; Col. Kurt Brandstaedter, chief of personnel for West Germany's Ministry of Defense; and the Lord Mayor of Karlsruhe. The U. S. Navy Rhine River Patriots Karlsruhe unit attended en masse.

Shortly before the services, the Army announced it had incorrectly identified one of the victims as Pvt Farris H. Boe of St. George, Utah. His correct name was noted as Farris E. Bowler of the same city.

It was the worst aviation disaster in Europe since the end of the Second World War. It was the worst U. S. military air disaster since June 18, 1953 when 129 were killed aboard a U. S. Air Force C-124 Globemaster near Tokyo. The previous major air disaster in Germany occurred with the death of 44 passengers aboard a Sabena Airlines aircraft near Rhein-Main.

In 1993, a local forest ranger planted an oak tree near the cornfield crash site. Village officials would eventually set it aside as a memorial. A local resident said the area is always treated with respect, much like the grounds of a cemetery.

Several years ago a large stone was placed near the tree. A steel plate has been added, etched with the names of the 66 men who died there. In 2008, a similar stone was placed at the site where the second plane spiraled into the forest.



Formation of C-119s - courtesy Jim Timmons - 317th Troop Carrier Veterans Group

10th Troop Carrier Squadron

10 Fatalities

*1st Lt. Eugene Louis Pesci
2nd Lt. Ray George Nath
A/1C Lawrence Thomas Dye
A/1C Kenneth Wayne Smith
A/2C Olin Mull Franklin*

*1st Lt. Robert Taylor Asher
2nd Lt. Norman Eric Anderson
A/1C Dino Alleric Bertolo
A/2C George Bertram McGinty
A/2C Doyle G. George*

499th Engineer Combat Battalion

56 Fatalities

*Lt. Col. Frank R. Little
Capt. Gerard H. Martin
1st Lt. Hugh Keen
M/Sgt Joseph P. Smola
Sfc John P. Normile
Sgt Henry T. Wood, Jr.
Sgt Richard L. Rannow
Sgt Robert J. Walker
Sgt Ellsworth Gibbs
Sgt. Jack J. Lowenstein*

*Pfc John B. Ostendorf
Pfc Everett C. Salisbury
Pfc Bueford L. Friedlein
Pfc Boyd P. Lawson
Pfc Theadous Harris
Pfc William Gilbert
Pfc Romeo J. Bolden
Pfc John H. Dunaway
Pfc Roque Vasquez
Pfc Ronald I. Dreke*

*Cpl Charles A. Lebe
Cpl Constancio Trejo
Sp3 Charles W. Olsen
Sp3 Duane I. Sullivan
Sp3 Charles M. Thompson
Sp3 Lonnie I. Skipper
Sp3 Roy M. Frazier
Sp3 Lee R. Burrow
Sp3 Daniel C. Sanchez
Pvt-2 Earl D. Geesler*

*Pfc Franco P. Amici
Pfc Ronald Williams
Pfc Dan H. McWhorter
Pfc Richard Pruski
Pfc Jimmie I. Floyd
Pfc Theodore I. White
Pfc Joseph M. Schulte
Pfc William L. Wendling
Pvt-2 Lloyd R. Hunt
Pvt-2 Louis F. Glaze*

*Pvt-2 James C. Pearson
Pvt-2 George Page
Pvt-2 William A. Edwards
Pvt-2 Charles K. Lehman, Jr
Pvt-2 Hogan I. Markle, Jr.
Pvt-2 George F. Rohde
Pvt-2 Albert Kemp
Pvt-2 Earl S. Jarvis*

*Pvt-2 Farris E. Bowler
Pvt-2 Herman G. Hinkle
Pvt-2 William N. McKesson
Pvt-2 Robert W. Meyer
Pvt-2 Sammy C. Patterson
Pvt-2 John P. Morin
Pvt-2 Percy Fowler, Jr.
Pvt-1 Louis J. Govoni*



C-119G - ROK Air Force - War Memorial of Korea - courtesy Karsten Palt

Reflections



**Ferris Bowler
age 14**



Edelweiler, Germany - August 11, 2006 – an Air Force colonel reads the names of 66 airmen and soldiers who died following a mid-air collision on August 11, 1955.



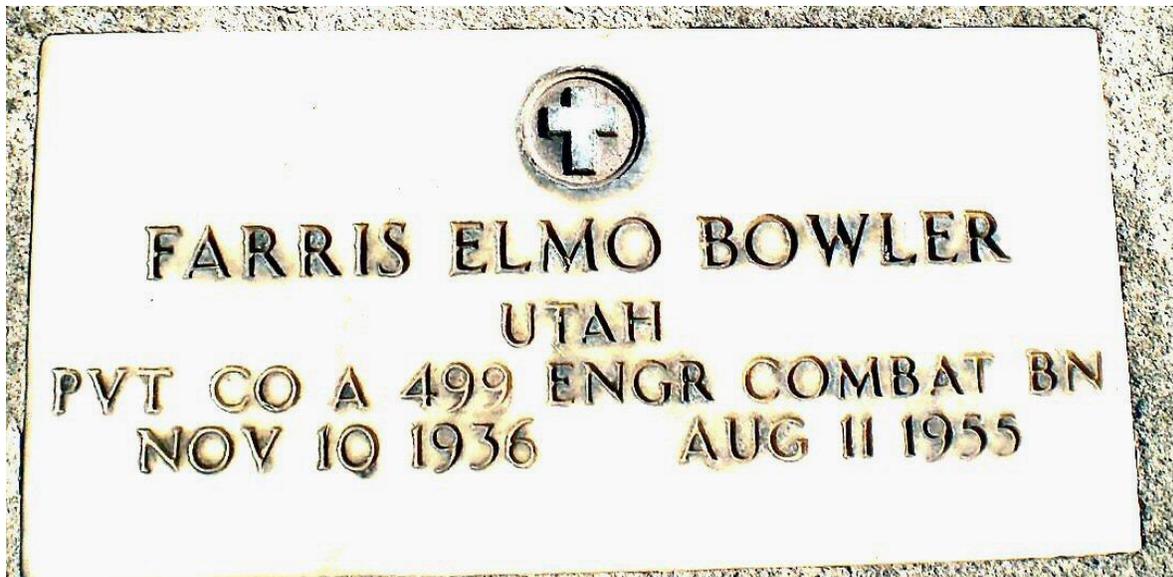
2008 – residents from Edelweiler and Grombach and members of the military community gather in the field where a C-119G crashed following a mid-air collision on August 11, 1955.



2008 - a German Air Force reservist (left) and a US Army Colonel salute the 66 airmen and soldiers who died following a C-119G mid-air collision near Edelweiler, Germany on August 11, 1955



2008 – a memorial stone was placed where a C-119G crashed in the woods on August 11, 1955.



Grave marker at the St. George City Cemetery (Utah)

References

Notation of original name 'Ferris'
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<http://www.oocities.org/betbil.geo/crash.html>

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<http://aviation-safety.net/database/record.php?id=19550810-1>

Services honoring those who died – August 16, 1955
<http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=elc1234&id=I25771>

Edelweiler commemorative – 2006
<http://www.eucom.mil/article/21096/germans-americans-honor-us-military-plane-crash>

Edelweiler commemorative – 2008
<http://www.defense.gov/News/newsarticle.aspx?id=51473>



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