

Sunday, July 8, 1962

Page 14-The Salina Journal

Three Seconds Between Life And Death

Sole SAFB B47 Survivor Gives Details Of Tragedy

By Ray Miller

Through the normal ejection seating, the difference between life and death for First Lt. Virgil Steen was measured by three ticks of his wristwatch.

It Steen, 28, was the copilot aboard the B-47 which exploded high over Bird City Friday night, killing his two crew mates.

Steen's flight began in routine manner. At 7:50 pm he lifted off the Schilling AFB, Kansas, and headed north on a routine flight which was to return to Schilling at 11:30 am Saturday.

That, near Bird City, the routine flight turned into a nightmare.

Six hours after the crash, Lt. Steen sat in a small white building used at the administration of the St. Francis Municipal Airport.

Almost numbly he waited for the arrival of Schilling AFB Lt. Col. Bob, hospital where he was en route. He talked about the crash and found to have been in the room with other crew members on board.

"We had clear conditions. We were at 22,000 feet. The two engines exploded and then the airplane.

"The wing was on fire. The engine failed and the aircraft commander, I saw the aircraft coming from Schilling.

Journal Reporter On The Scene

Salina Journal reporter-photographer Ray Miller was on the scene of the B-47 crash just a few hours after it happened.

Miller worked all night gathering facts and taking photos, then spent most of the following day writing the stories on this page and checking details.

Probers Seek Crash Cause

Salinan's Husband A Victim

A team of Air Force investigators was taken to a Salina home Saturday morning to search for the cause of the explosion which wrecked the plane.

A third flier survived when he jumped from the falling bomber.

Dead was First Lt. Douglas Powell, 26, the navigator.

Under treatment for shock at St. Francis hospital is the 23rd Air Force Wing's Lt. Steen, 25, who has been at Schilling about three weeks. Steen is married but his wife has not moved to Salina as yet.

The plane, from the 380th Bomb Squadron, was on a night training mission and had left Schilling about 7:50 pm Friday.

It was not carrying a nuclear warhead, Schilling officials said.

The plane exploded about 8:30 pm while flying at about 22,000 feet near Bird City.

Col. Order

It Steen said he ejected from the plane on the order of Lt. Bishop.

Why the other two crew did not eject is a question for which there is no answer. Presumably, they were trapped by the heat before they could.

Scattered Far Miles

Wreckage was scattered five miles across Kansas farmland.

It Steen came down near the Kansas-Nebraska line on the Virgil Hatch farm about 10 miles from the crash scene.

Found By Farmer

Hatch found Steen in a pasture, but he did not know who he was and drove him to a hospital.

Later Hatch returned Steen to St. Francis where he met the Air Force investigation team.

Col. Watson In Command

Col. G. H. Watson is commanding the investigation team. He sent Lt. Steen to the hospital and before long began work on recovery from the shock of his experience.

St. Schilling spokesman said that day will be required to complete the investigation.

Highway patrolmen said several thousand residents of the area went to the crash scene.

Wreckage is important to reconstructing an accident pattern.

The explosion created a powerful shock in the sky which was seen by many people.

The plane fell in several distinct pieces, leading some observers to believe that two or three planes had collided.

New SATAF Commander

WICHITA (AP)—Col. George H. Anderson has been named head of the Six Airborne Task Force.

Anderson is a colonel and was in command of the 380th Bomb Squadron at Schilling AFB, Kansas, where he was commander of the 380th Bomb Squadron.

Two of the engines had been removed from the plane.

Col. Watson said the plane was the one which exploded.



Wearily Waiting
First Lt. Howard Steen waits for SAFB investigators at door of St. Francis airport building. (Journal Photos by Ray Miller)

A Huge Mob Gathers

By Ray Miller

"I don't know where in the hell day did come from."

At 4:30 am Saturday morning the scene of the crash was a temporary command post at a junction of Highway 161 and Highway 2.

On either side of the highway, gathered over several miles burning and smoldering banks of the plane for several hours.

Approximately 2000 people gathered at the crash scene.

"I was in my house when I heard this 'boom,'" he said. "I was under my car when I saw the plane in the sky. Then I saw the plane in the sky. Then I saw the plane in the sky."

He estimated the crowd at the scene at 2000 persons.

"They had cars lined up along this highway for miles," he said. "They were even driving cars in the field."

Other than this mob incident, no other fires or property were endangered by the flaming crash.



Tragedy In A Wheat Field
Smoking crater gases where first section of Schilling B-47 crashed in wheat field. Blackened area is where flames from debris burned wheat stubble.



Twisted Wreckage
Remains of B-47 in air right of this picture. One of the bodies was found in wreckage.

Wearily Waiting

First Lt. Howard Steen waits for SAFB investigators at door of St. Francis airport building. (Journal Photos by Ray Miller)

A Huge Mob Gathers

By Ray Miller
"I don't know where in the hell day did come from."
At 4:30 am Saturday morning the scene of the crash was a temporary command post at a junction of Highway 161 and Highway 2.
On either side of the highway, gathered over several miles burning and smoldering banks of the plane for several hours.
Approximately 2000 people gathered at the crash scene.
"I was in my house when I heard this 'boom,'" he said. "I was under my car when I saw the plane in the sky. Then I saw the plane in the sky."

