

Remembering Pilot Mabry Simmons and the Miller Hill Crash



Photo of Lt. Mabry Simmons from the Pampa Daily News, March 9th 1943

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This story is about Mabry Simmons, a WWII pilot who survived several close calls, but met his end during a routine flight in Oregon in 1956. Mabry Simmons qualified as a U.S. Army Air Corp pilot on April 25th, 1941. Later that same year, Second Lieutenant Mabry Simmons was assigned to the 88th Reconnaissance Squadron based at Fort Douglas UT. On November 17, 1941, he was the co-pilot on B-18 Army bomber, serial number 36-311, that was flying from Denver's Lowry Field back to Salt Lake City UT. The B-18 encountered a blinding snow storm which included thunder, lightning, snow and 50 mile an hour winds. Powerful downdrafts and icing quickly overwhelmed the B-18 and it crashed into Iron Mountain four miles west of Park City, Utah. The B-18 crash killed two men, but Mabry Simmons and four others survived by parachuting from the stricken aircraft. The B-18 crash event is known as the "Iron Mountain Miracle". Just earlier this year in May 2018, the Park City Museum partnered with the Park City American Legion Post 14 to honor the entire crew. Memorial plaques were dedicated at the Park City Cemetery where two of the B-18 crew members are buried.



Memorial plaques dedicated at the Park City Cemetery

For 2nd Lt. Mabry Simmons, the B-18 crash was just the first of a series of events that eventually claimed his life. Three weeks after the Park City crash, Mabry Simmons was again the co-pilot of another bomber headed for trouble. This time he was flying in one of twelve B-17s that were approaching Hawaii from California on the morning of December 7th 1941. Six of the B-17s were from the 88th Reconnaissance Squadron, 7th Bombardment Group based at Salt Lake City, Utah. The Utah based bombers had left Salt Lake City on December 5th destined for the Philippines to reinforce the American forces there. It was the first trans-Pacific flight for the new, heavy bombers, nicknamed the "Flying Fortress" because of their numerous .50-caliber machine guns. Lt. Simmons was the co-pilot flying in B-17E, serial number 41-2430, named *Naughty but Nice*. Upon arriving over Oahu and low on fuel they flew right into the middle of the air raid with nothing to shoot back with.



Painting "Flying into a War" by Stan Stokes

They were prevented from landing at Hickam Field due to anti-aircraft fire, so they circled three times and saw the battleships burning with smoke and flames everywhere. The pilot of the B-17, Lt. Chaffin said to Mabry Simmons. "OK, let's get the hell out of here then." The B-17 then scrabbled for an alternate landing field and headed north over Oahu to the short fighter strip at Haleiwa Field. There was hardly enough room to land at Haleiwa, but the B-17 landed safely, overrunning the dirt airstrip and coming to rest amid vegetation. The bomber was quickly refueled, rearmed and later completed the flight to Hickam. The B-17 group patrolled out of Hawaii for six weeks following the attack until the flight continued on, eventually ending up at Townsville, Australia. During 1942, Lieutenant Simmons was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

Fifteen years later, Mabry Simmons luck finally ran out when he was fatefully involved in yet another crash. On March 30th 1956, Lt. Colonel Mabry Simmons took off on a navigational proficiency flight from Norton AFB to McClellan AFB California and then continuing to McNary Field, Salem Oregon.



Beech C-45 Expeditor

The aircraft for this flight was a Beech C-45 Expeditor, the military transport version of civilian Model 18S twin-engine, twin tail light transport. The C-45 was originally manufactured as C-45F, serial number 44-86902, but it was remanufactured by Beech and converted to a C-45H and assigned new serial number 52-10957.

A crew chief and three passengers were aboard for the flight. The clearance indicated that the flight was to be conducted under VFR conditions. The aircraft took off at 1143 PST and landed at McClellan AFB at 1413 PST. A check with McClellan Flight Service indicated that the pilot made one position report over Bakersfield while enroute to McClellan AFB. Upon arrival at McClellan AFB, the pilot reported to Base and Transient Maintenance that his radio compass was not working; that the audio was all right, but the needle was inoperative. A check was performed by Base Flight Maintenance and after operating the compass for ten minutes on the ground; the mechanic reported the compass to be working satisfactory and stated that no malfunction was in evidence.

The weather officer on duty at McClellan AFB stated that preparatory to filing a clearance from McClellan to McNary Field, Salem Oregon; the pilot expressed much concerns to his proceeding VFR and was advised he could proceed on airways route Amber 1, VFR, but not on Amber 8. The weather officer further stated that the pilot was insistent on making the flight VFR. The weather forecast was as follows: minimum ceiling 2,000 NE Oregon; max cloud tops 15,000; minimum visibility 10 miles; light to moderate rain; wind from 260 degrees; 35 knots at 8000 ft. The forecast for Salem was 1500 scattered; 3000 broken; 7000 overcast; 10 miles visibility; and light rain showers.

The aircraft departed McClellan AFB VFR via Amber 1 at 1534 PST enroute to McNary Field. The DD Form 175 indicated that 253 gallons of fuel were aboard, or six hours' worth and the estimated time enroute was 2 hours and 34 minutes. A check with Flight

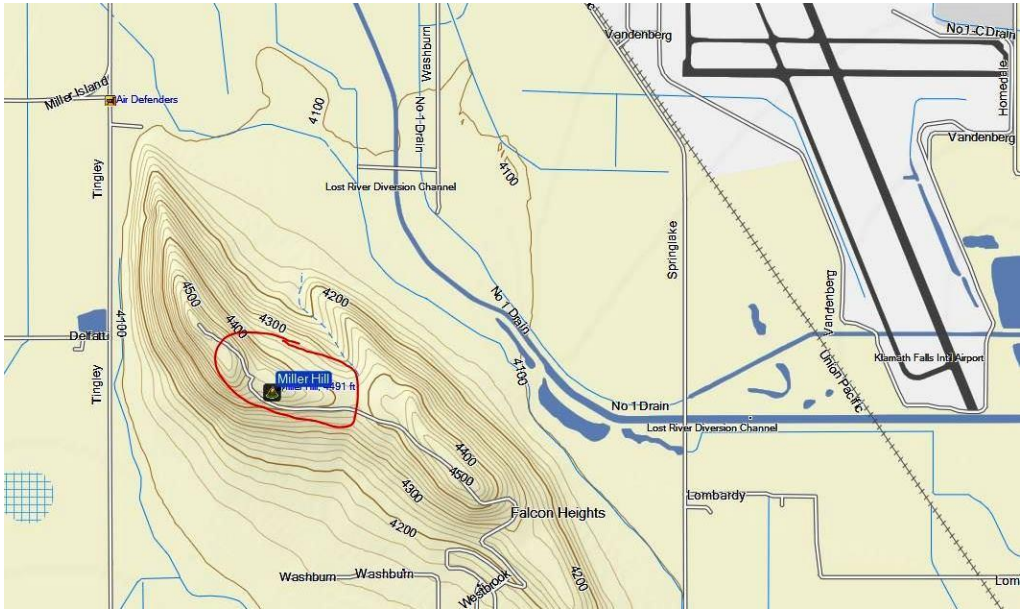
Service indicated that the pilot did not make a position report until 1832 PST when he contacted Klamath Falls Radio, giving his position as 15,500 on a heading of 130 degrees and, what he thought to be, 30 miles NE Klamath Falls. At this time he requested information with reference to a DF (Direction Finding) fix and was advised that no UHF DF equipment was available, but that Klamath Falls would contact Seattle ARTC. Medford Radio (on the same interphone line) said they had VHF-DF equipment, but the pilot advised that he only had UHF. The pilot further advised he had found a big hole over a lake and thought he could descend all right. Nothing more was heard from the pilot, except occasional queries by the Klamath Falls Radio Operator as to his progress to which he stated he was coming along all right.

At approximately 1900 PST, the pilot queried Klamath Falls Radio if Tule Lake had a road running through it and stated he was on a heading of 120 degrees towards Klamath Falls, then immediately stated he was on a heading of 150 degrees. Klamath Falls Radio advised him that the inbound range course heading Amber 8 to Klamath Falls was 162 degrees. At approximately 1930 PST, the pilot reported over the cone at 11,000 feet south bound and made inquiry if the operator could hear his engines. The operator answered in the affirmative and asked him why he did not make a range approach, as the weather at this time was 1800 feet scattered, 3000 feet overcast, with light rain showers. The pilot asked for the range approach headings, stated that he was too busy to look it up and that he was flying alone. The approach was read off and the pilot was advised not to descend below 6000 feet because of the surrounding hills near the airport.



Beech Expeditor

At 1939 PST, the pilot reported over the range 5000 feet and requested information if the beacon was green. Pilot then stated he had the field in sight. The operator stated he went to the door and observed the aircraft passing overhead in what appeared to be a normal left hand traffic pattern; then returned to his board and in approximately one minute a telephone call was received stating that an aircraft had crashed and was burning on Miller Hill. Investigation revealed the aircraft to be C-45H, 52-10957. Miller Hill is a 4,785 foot high ridge located three miles southeast of the field and 412 feet above the field elevation. It took rescuers 2 1/2 hours to work their way up a steep hillside to reach the wreckage. The rescuers said it was amazing that anyone survived.



Topo map of Miller Hill near Klamath Falls Oregon in relation to the airfield



Miller Hill as seen from Klamath Falls AFB, photo from the official accident report



Crash site of C-45H serial number 52-10957 on Miller Hill



Air Force personnel at the C-45H crash site

Three people aboard the aircraft were killed and two seriously injured. The two survivors who were thrown clear of the wreckage, PFC. Leroy D. Wigglesworth, of Gladstone, Oregon, and A2C Virginia F. Bowman, of Portland, Oregon, were taken to a hospital suffering from shock, burns and broken bones. A2C Bowman was catching a ride home for the Easter Holiday from Eglin AFB, Florida, where she was stationed, as was PFC Wigglesworth, stationed at Fort Ord, California. The three victims were: Lt. Col. Frank Loughary, of 250 5th Street, San Bernardino, Chief of Military Personnel Division for the San Bernardino Air Materiel Area, survived by a brother in South America; Lt. Col. Mabry Simmons, who was taking graduate studies at Norton related to his Air Force post at the University of Southern California, survived by his widow at 865 Morado Place, Altadena; and S/Sgt. Ray Matzinger, unmarried, his mother Velma Govera lived at 11557 Eldridge Street, San Fernando, California.

Investigation of the accident did not reveal any material failure or engine malfunction. Lt. Col. Mabry Simmons was 40 years old at the time of his death and he is interred in the Willamette National Cemetery plot H 1801 in Portland Oregon.

More than sixty two years later a group of explorers climbed up the steep Miller Hill to locate the exact crash site and render honors to the men killed in the C-45 accident. The group included Dave Trojan, Aviation Historian; Sam Parker, former Boeing employee; and Ryan Bartholomew, 173rd Fighter Wing Historian from the Oregon Air National Guard, stationed at Kingsley Field Air National Guard Base, Klamath Falls, Oregon.



Major Ryan Bartholomew, Wing Historian during the climb up to the crash site

Using newly discovered crash photos and Google Earth imagery, the trio made their way up the steep dry grassy hill. It was a terrible day to go hiking because of smoke in the air due to forest fires in the area, but it was the only day they had available. The explorers brought along GPS and metal detecting equipment, but they were not really needed. Comparing an original crash photo near the top of the hill was the key to locating the exact crash site.



Comparing original crash photo at the crash site, note the navigation marker building is at the same position in both photos

At the location where the original crash photo lined up with the present terrain several small pieces of aircraft aluminum were discovered poking out of the ground. A relatively barren area of ground also marked the location. A quick search was made of the area and a few more pieces of wreckage were discovered confirming the crash site.



Aircraft artifacts discovered at the crash site

Photos and GPS coordinates were recorded to document the crash site. It was noted that a big red beacon light is now located near the crash site as a warning to other planes to avoid the hill. It appears that the beacon was placed on the hill soon after the C-45 crash.



Red beacon light in the background located near the crash site

Before heading back down Miller Hill a flag was placed at the crash location in honor of those killed. Mabry Simmons service to his country and the others who were killed in the Miller Hill crash are not forgotten.



Flag placed near the crash site. Dave Trojan and Major Ryan Bartholomew holding parts from the C-45H aircraft



Hiking on Miller Hill in smoky conditions