

The Legend of Airplane Canyon



F-100C Super Sabre, photo courtesy supersabre.com

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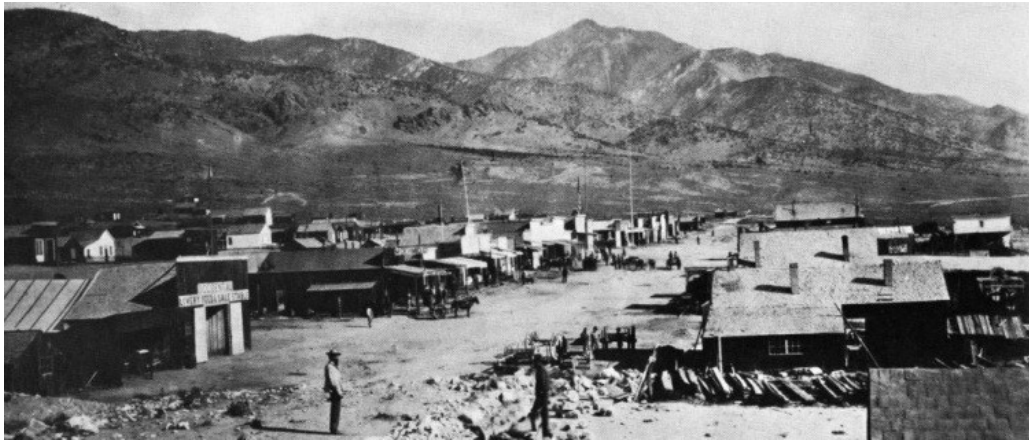
July 2015

There are many stories that are passed down through generations in the western United States to become folklore. This is one such story that was investigated to learn the tragic truth about what happened so long ago. An F-100 Super Sabre jet fighter was lost back in 1957. This story reveals the truth about what happened to the jet and what still remains a legend in the old west. The setting for this story is the nearly ghost town of Cherry Creek in north central Nevada. The main occupations there are hunting, gold prospecting, drinking, and storytelling. All these elements came together for this story.

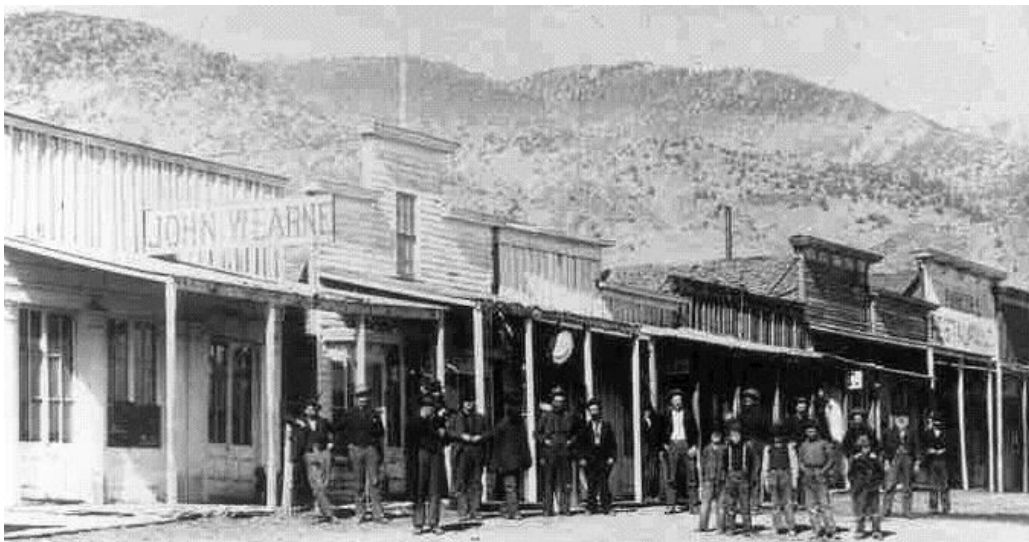
More than a hundred and thirty years ago the town of Cherry Creek Nevada had over 6000 residents and 28 saloons. Cherry Creek's largest years of gold and silver production were between 1872 and 1883. One local mine produced more than one million dollars in gold bullion. Just to the south, in Egan Canyon, Pony Express riders and stage coaches traveled thru the area. Cherry Creek remained the home of several hundred people and the base of substantial mining activity until the 1940s. The town has slowly been fading away ever since. The post office closed in 1974 and the last saloon closed in 2010. The last census in 2010 listed 79 residents and currently only about 20 people live there in peace and quiet. The town has no businesses, no cell service and the nearest store and gas station is over 50 miles away in Ely Nevada. Life there runs on at different pace and on a different time scale. It is a place where time is

almost forgotten. The town has been described as historic, remote, rural, and uncivilized. In the town a few newer homes are interspersed with the ruins of abandoned buildings from earlier times. A museum is located in an early one-room schoolhouse that was the second oldest school in Nevada. Exploring the area is like taking a step back in time. There is a sense of history about the place. Walking around town I could easily image horses and miners crowding the streets and I could almost sense the people who lived out their lives before us there. Cherry Creek is one of the best places to experience the old west and is definitely one of the best ghost towns in Nevada. Just don't call it a "ghost town" to any of its few residents! Cherry Creek offers a rare opportunity to see a relatively intact old-time mining community and a relatively intact jet fighter plane wreck.

Cherry Creek in the past



Cherry Creek 1870s, photo from the collection of Jerry Bowen



Cherry Creek main street 1898, photo from the collection of Jerry Bowen



Cherry Creek store with gas pump on the right front, photo from the collection of Jerry Bowen

Cherry Creek present day, photos by Dave Trojan





This building was the last saloon in town to close



Abandoned buildings in Cherry Creek



Old school house and now town museum



Building foundations and road leading into town with the same old gas pump



Relics from the past litter the town

For many years ranchers, hunters, and miners traveling through a remote narrow canyon 10 miles west of town couldn't help but notice the reflection of the sun off something large and shimmering high up on a mountain side. However, no one was brave or foolhardy enough to venture into the rugged mountains to discover what it was. Rumors were rapid in town about what it could be. Could it have come from Area 51 that is not too far away? The legend was born about the mysterious object on the mountain. The object had been there for as long as anyone could remember. Eventually, curiosity got the best of some locals and the Sheriff was called in to investigate. He reported back that the reflections were caused by the wreck of an unmanned drone aircraft. He went on to say that it was nothing to worry about and there was nothing to see at the site. However, in this town they are suspicious of the authorities and some locals decided to make the challenging hike up to the site to see for themselves. Besides investigating the site they could do some hunting and gold prospecting along the way.

A few locals made the long journey along the mining roads and the arduous trek up the steep mountain to the site. Once they arrived at the site, not being knowledgeable about aircraft and because of its condition, the wreck was misidentified as an F-104 jet fighter. The adventurous hikers did take some photos, and brought back more stories to share, but found no gold on the mountain. Years passed by and I'm sure more than a few stories were told about how the jet plane got there and where it was from. The story of the plane wreck was a favorite at the local watering hole before it closed down years ago. The remote mountain canyon became known by the locals as "**Airplane Canyon**".

Eventually the story of the plane wreck on the mountain near Cherry Creek Nevada reached me. Luckily, one of the last 20 people remaining in the town is the brother of Jerry Bowen, local Vacaville California Historian. Warren Bowen owns a house in the town and is one of the few residents who has studied and collected the local town history. He put me in touch with the locals who had hiked to the site and took the pictures years ago. Examining the photos, I also could not positively identify the wreck due to its condition. I could see that there was a lot of aircraft wreckage there, but which one and why was it there? The investigative hunt was on!

Much planning was required to make the long journey to the remote location. The town is situated above 6000 feet in high desert country and the crash site is located another 2000 feet further up into the mountains. A team of professionals was assembled that included an ex-JPAC member, a Boeing Company engineer, a distinguished author and his wife and me, a humble Aviation Archaeologist and Historian. On a hot June day with the temperatures pushing over 95 degrees and the high altitude taking its toll we made the long journey to the crash site. Now usually the challenge is finding the crash site, but in this case we knew where it was. We could see the wreck high up on the mountain side near a cliff. The problem was how to get there. We required a tough new 4 X 4 truck to transport us up as high as we could get on the mountain. We had to claw our way up the rough abandoned mining roads to about the 7500 ft. altitude. We still had another 500 feet more up in altitude to reach our destination by hiking through the dense brush.



Airplane Canyon, object of interest circled in red, photo by Dave Trojan



Airplane Canyon, object zoomed in, photo by Craig Fuller

While hiking through the wilderness I could hear the birds squabbling and the wind howling. I could image what it was like for gold prospectors seeking treasure. I was experiencing what it is like to haul myself and equipment up the mountain through the rough terrain. I was doing the same thing as the prospectors, but the treasure that I was seeking was the truth about what happened so long ago. I kept wondering what I would discover on the mountain.

We passed by a test mine honed out of the rock by miners in search of gold. I'm sure it was very hard labor to carve out a hole in the rock, only for it to come up empty of gold. The hike was hard labor due to its high altitude, but the search continued through the thick brush and steep terrain. Several hundred feet from the wreck site we found our first piece of debris from the aircraft. It was most likely placed there as a guide marker to the site. We knew we were getting close, but we still could not see it because thick brush obscured our view.



First piece of unidentified plane wreckage found, photo by Dave Trojan

Finally we broke out into a clearing and the once powerful jet fighter revealed itself along the mountain ridge. It was amazing to see such a sight, the view was spectacular. There before us lay the remains of the wrecked jet plane and we instantly we knew all the effort to reach the crash site was worth it. Excitement ran high as we each explored the wreck in our own way. I took a moment to take it all in before I started my detailed examination of the parts. Part numbers and data plates confirmed the wreck was a North American F-100C Super Sabre. The F-100 Super Sabre was the first operational aircraft to reach the speed of sound in level flight. The F-100 was not an easy aircraft to fly and a quarter of all F-100s were lost in accidents.



F-100C Super Sabre wreck laid out on the mountain, photo by Craig Fuller



Left side view of wrecked F-100C in Airplane Canyon, photo by Craig Fuller



Right side view of F-100C in Airplane Canyon, photo by Craig Fuller

Later, further research revealed it crashed July 25th, 1957 under mysterious circumstances. The young pilot, 1st Lt. Samuel Bacon, was 28 years old at the time. He was a graduate of Brigham Young University and was married with a six month old daughter. He also had a brother and two sisters.



First Lieutenant Samuel Kenneth Bacon, Jr., photo from Bacon family

History of the flight from the official accident report:

A flight of six F-100 Super Sabre jet aircraft took off on a routine training mission from George AFB at approximately 1300 hours for Webb AFB, Texas, and return to George AFB on 25 July 1957. Pilot 1st Lieutenant Samuel Bacon, was flying in F-100C, serial number 54-2090. Near El Paso Texas it was noticed that Lt. Bacon had taken a position high and in trail of his wingman. Lt. Bacon was then heard to say something to the effect that he was "getting out". When queried by other flight members, he negated his previous statement, saying he was alright and in the clear at 7,000 feet. He then called and said he thought his aircraft was on fire, then denied that and declared that his Heat and Vent Overheat warning light as on and there were fumes in the cockpit. Lt. Bacon was then directed to select the RAM OFF- PRESSURE OFF position on his cockpit pressurization selector and asked, "How do your gauges read?" Lt. Bacon stated that the warning light had gone out and the gauges "read O.K." Lt. Bacon was advised to set a course to the Wink TX radio waypoint and climb to 3,000 feet to rendezvous at Wink TX. The flight, minus Lt. Bacon, proceeded to Wink TX waypoint. Lt. Bacon then apparently flew by mistake to Carlsbad, NM (about 75 miles from Wink TX). The flight was then instructed to select UHF channel #10 for Ground-Controlled Interception (GCI). The GCI site established radar contact with all the aircraft and vectored Lt. Bacon to a rendezvous with the others at Wink, 15 to 20 minutes after he had become lost. The flight then proceeded to Webb AFB under VFR conditions and GCI control.



A formation of F-100C Super Sabres from the 434 FBS 479 FBW George AFB, USAF photo

After landing at Webb AFB, the flight leader received a message advising them to return to George AFB as soon as possible. During the layover Lt. Bacon held a lengthy telephone conversation with a friend and was visited at the flight line by two other friends and their wives, identities unknown. Also during the turn-around time at Webb AFB, the flight leader talked with Lt. Bacon about his losing the flight previously. Lt. Bacon said he had simply lost sight of the leader, when he looked at his instruments, his attitude Gyro was indicating a 45 degree climbing turn to the right, and he thought his instruments were inoperative. During his attempts to right the aircraft, he said, the airspeed dropped to 110 knots then built up to Mach 1, just prior to pull-out. The flight leader asked him if he had been in a spin, to which Lt. Bacon replied he wasn't sure what maneuver he had done.

Some of the flight members noted that Lt. Bacon appeared not to be too well. He assured them he was alright and felt well enough to fly. He had gone to the Flight Surgeon at 0730 hours that morning, complaining of a sore throat and a low down cough. The doctor gave Lt. Bacon APC's (APC - Aspirin, phenacetin, and caffeine) and he was told to gargle and get some rest. The doctor cautioned him against prolonged breathing of 100 % oxygen, as this may cause symptoms of "the chokes" because of the dryness. Formal grounding was never considered.

After determining that each aircraft had sufficient oxygen (all had more than three liters), the flight leader briefed all the pilots for the return flight to George AFB. Flight positions were the same as on the previous leg. The briefing included basic instrument flying, night flying, night formation, vertigo, hypoxia, lost flight procedure, lost wingman procedure, loss of radio, loss of flight instruments, emergency airfields en-route, weather en-route, emergency GCI procedures and the flight profile. Lt. Bacon was further briefed on the relative position he should maintain during the return flight. The flight was to consist of two elements of three aircraft each, with a separation of approximately one minute between elements. All flight members had in their possession flight logs and maps covering the route, which was the reciprocal of the previous route. The entire return flight was to be at one thousand feet "on top". The weather en-route included scattered thunderstorms with heavy turbulence and hail. It was also reported that the maximum cloud tops were at 49,000 feet with heavy icing at 14,000 to 25,000 feet in the thunderstorms.

The flight took off at 2041 and climbed to 35,000 feet, then to 42,000 feet, then to 43,000 feet in order to remain 1,000 feet "on top". While approaching El Paso TX Lt. Bacon's wingmen maintained "fairly close formation" for approximately five minutes, but then Lt. Bacon entered a steep bank toward the element leader and crossed under his aircraft. At about this time he called that he was crossing and re-crossed to his original position. The wingman could "Think of no apparent reason for this maneuver." Subsequently, Lt. Bacon's formation position varied excessively.



F-100C Super Sabres of the 479th Fighter Day Wing, George AFB, CA, USAF photo

As the cloud tops were becoming lower, the flight leader called his element to “close in,” so as to descend to a lower altitude. He then repeated the order without response from Lt. Bacon. Immediately there-after Lt. Bacon’s aircraft was observed dropping slowly out of sight and into the cloud tops and Lt. Bacon was heard to say that he had lost sight of the flight. Lt. Bacon was then told the heading, altitude and airspeed of the element while the flight began a slow descent to 40,000 feet, remaining 1,000 feet “on top”.

Lt. Bacon acknowledged the instructions to maintain his heading and to descent to 40,000 feet. As the cloud tops continued to lower, the flight descended to 38,000 feet, also acknowledged by Lt. Bacon. Approximately five minutes east of Tucson AZ, two aircraft engaged afterburners to assist Lt. Bacon in establishing visual contact, but without success. The heading, altitude and airspeed information was again transmitted and Lt. Bacon was advised to notify the flight when he had a compass swing on Tucson Radio. Lieutenant Bacon acknowledged the radio call. At 2043 hours Lt. Bacon called that he had a compass swing on Tucson. Lt. Bacon was then instructed to turn to a heading of 284 degrees for Gila Bend AZ Radio, and Lt. Bacon acknowledged. That was the last transmission heard from Lt. Bacon.



F-100C Super Sabre, USAF photo courtesy F-100.org

A radar search was immediately conducted seventy miles in front of and behind the flight of jets using both height and search radar, but contact could not be established with Lt. Bacon's aircraft. There being nothing further the flight could do, they proceeded to George AFB and landed at approximately 2135 hours. First Lieutenant Samuel K. Bacon Jr. was lost.

Approximately 200 planes were involved in the daily search for the lost jet for almost a month. During the search, telegrams, telephone calls, and thousands of letters were received by the family from all parts of the world. They expressed the theme: "We are praying for Lt. Bacon's safety." There was a front page article in the LA Times about how the family offered a \$2500 reward for information about him.

The jet crash site was finally located on August 20th after 28 days of searching. It had crashed on the western slope of the Egan Mountain Range about 10 miles west of the town of Cherry Creek and about 40 miles NNW of Ely, NV. The pilot was found in the burned out cockpit deceased. Officially the primary cause of the accident was undetermined.

Recommendations from the accident report:

All pilots were re-briefed to ensure they do not fly if they have any doubt about their physical condition. Pilots were also briefed about the correct procedures to follow if they become lost, especially at night. To further enhance safety, all squadron pilots were reappraised of the importance of abandoning the aircraft at least 10,000 feet above

terrain when a suitable emergency landing field is not available. The pilots were told to particularly bail out at night at recommended altitudes and not to attempt a flame out landings except at known fields under very favorable conditions. Other recommendations included strengthening the seat structure and relocating the liquid oxygen converter in the cockpit.

At the crash site we spent a couple of hours carefully examining the wreckage. The wreck was laid out pointing uphill and there was trail of debris from its impact point below.



Me at the crash site, photo by Don Hinton

Both wings were separated from the fuselage. I could still read the USAF on the upper wing and the insignia on the bottom looked good.



USAF on top of wing still readable



Insignia underneath

The forward section of the plane was completely burnt out. The vertical tail had been cut off and there were torch marks on several other pieces. The Pratt & Whitney J57 engine was relatively intact and by examining the inside of the engine it appeared that it was not running at the time of impact.



J57 engine relatively intact

A couple of binder rings were found. They must have contained the flight logs, maps and check lists from the pilot. They were a vivid reminder of the personal tragedy that took place there.



Burned binder rings found at the crash site

We paid our respects at the crash site and left two American flags attached to the wreckage. One located near the cockpit section of the aircraft in memory of the pilot, Samuel Bacon. Another flag was placed as high as we could near the top of the wreckage for the spirit of Samuel Bacon. He served his country well and he loved what he was doing. May his spirit live on and fly high.



Memorial flags placed at the crash site, photo by Dave McCurry

By researching this accident and visiting the crash site I tried to answer some questions about the plane wreck to dispel some of the myths about it.

Why did the plane crash? High altitude flight, mixed with pilot's viral illness and possible oxygen/pressurization system failure most likely led to the pilot's erratic behavior, hypoxia and his death. An oxygen/pressurization system failure causing hypoxia (deficiency in the amount of oxygen) to the pilot was not uncommon at that time. The pilot had reported fumes in the cockpit and selected the RAM OFF- PRESSURE OFF position on his cockpit pressurization selector. Hypoxia was suspected due to his erratic actions and slow communications with other members of the flight. The F-100 required pilots to be on 100 % oxygen all the time because of possible fumes in the cockpit. The liquid oxygen system used a pressure demand mask and a converter to breathable oxygen in the cockpit. The jet was flying at over 30,000 feet and without oxygen the pilot would have blacked out.

How did the jet get onto the side of the Nevada Mountain? Did the pilot attempt to land it there? By viewing its location, it was obvious that this was no place to try and land a plane. No pilot in his right mind would attempt to land on the side of a mountain. A little further and there were wide open valleys which would have offered a much better place for a forced landing. Pilots in the F-100 Super Sabre were trained to never stay with the jet if they got into trouble. The procedures required pilots to eject, especially at night over unfamiliar terrain. The crash looks like a survivable accident, but the pilot must have been unconscious, incapacitated, or dead at the time of the crash. With the pilot unconscious, the jet plane would simply fly on auto pilot until it ran out of gas. This would explain why the jet was so far off course. The evidence at the scene confirmed that the engine was not turning at the time of impact and that it most likely flamed out

due to fuel starvation. The jet simply fell from the sky after it ran out of fuel, most likely in a flat spin and landed itself. The fuselage skidded up the mountain to its final resting place.

One of the mysteries is why the cockpit section of the jet aircraft burned after it had apparently completely run out of fuel? According to the accident report there was a failure of the structures securing the seat to the plane which allowed the seat to slide forward and to the left. It ruptured the liquid oxygen converter and the escaping oxygen increased the intensity of the cockpit fire.

Why is the aircraft in its current condition? It appeared that decades ago someone attempted to salvage and scrap parts from the wreck. The vertical tail was cut off and is missing. Torch marks remain where they tried unsuccessfully to cut up the remainder of the wreck. One wing had a torch cut through the top, but it did not get through the main structure. There is an ore car track under one wing most likely used as a leverage bar. Several other parts had torch marks from attempted salvage operations before the scrapper gave up.



Ore car rail and container used to melt down aluminum under wing that had torch marks from the scrapper

Why are we so intrigued by abandoned things and wrecked planes? I think it's spiritual really. Making the journey to the town and crash site was like making a pilgrimage to a sacred monument and opening a time capsule that offered a chance to connect with the past in a direct way. The past is revisited through relics. Cherry Creek is a relic of the old days of the west and the F-100 Super Sabre jet wreck is a relic from aviation history. These two very different relics symbolize freedom, the freedom of the old west and the freedom won in air battles. The weathered relics remain as reminders of their historic roles in the nation's past and can still be appreciated. History needs to be explored before it drifts into eternity.

I reached out to the sister of Samuel Bacon. She was only 6 years old at the time, but she still has vivid memories of the events. She told me that every year her brother Ken Bacon is honored by the Brigham Young University Air Force ROTC at the Ken Bacon Speech Contest, recognizing his leadership. The information and photos that I sent her were very helpful and she appreciated me contacting the family. The information helped

put pieces of the puzzle together. There was talk about planning a family “trek” to the crash site. Unfortunately, the family visit to the site did not work out. Maybe sometime in the future it will happen. It will be an honor to accompany the family to the site when they are ready.

Go to this link to read sisters’ very moving tribute to her brother with video at the end of the article: <http://www.americanleadershipfund.com/blog/my-brother-ken-my-hero/>

Quoted from the article, “To the many mothers (and fathers) who have lost their sons and daughters for this great cause and are still “just missing” them today: Thank you, and May the Lord bring you peace and comfort.” They paid the ultimate price.

Before leaving Cherry Creek I donated a binder filled with a copy of the official accident report, photos and stories to the town museum. The family of Samuel Bacon and the people of Cherry Creek now know the truth about **“The Legend of Airplane Canyon”**.



Sunrise not sunset over Cherry Creek Nevada