Topics - B-29s - Mid-Air Collision in Texas
TB29-44-62223 &m 44-87774

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OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT REPORT

[KWE Note: This report was sent to the KWE by Frank "Bud" Farrell, who lost a buddy in this terrible tragedy.]

DESCRIPTION OF ACCIDENT

At 1350 CST, 12 March 1952, two B-29 aircraft, AF No. 44-87774 and No. 44-62223, both assigned to Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, were involved in a mid-air collision approximately 19 miles north of Randolph Air Force Base. Results of the collision were such that the tail section of the rammed aircraft, No. 44-62223, separated from the fuselage, rendering this aircraft uncontrollable. Portions of the ramming aircraft, No. 44-87774, found along the flight path following the collision, indicated a strong possibility that all personnel in the forward section of this aircraft were incapacitated. Both aircraft crashed with all personnel aboard.

On this date aircraft No. 44-87774 was airborne at 1045 CST for a five-hour normal instrument training and transition flight during which the instructor pilot, 1st Lt. Dale W. Scott, was to give two instrument checks. Both students, Major Robert W. Padgett and 1st Lt. Lester H. Johnson, were student aircraft commanders, this being their final flight in the transition phase of training. At 1300 hours this aircraft returned to Randolph Air Force Base for the purpose of flying one CCA. It was assumed that this CCA was the final part of the first instrument check. It is not known which of the student aircraft commanders were at the controls at this time. Immediately following this CCA the aircraft left the traffic pattern to continue the training flight.

At 1327 CST, B-29 No. 44-62223 accomplished take-off for the same type five-hour mission as had B-29 No. 44-87774. On this flight the instructor pilot, Captain Donald L. Rottier, was to give an instrument check to 1st Lt. Robert L. Neu. Following take-off this aircraft made four touch-and-go landings before departing the traffic pattern. The exact time of departure is unknown since no record is maintained by the Tower personnel on the varied phases of the transition flight other than the initial take-off and final landing.

The first indication of a crash in the vicinity of San Antonio was overheard in a conversation between San Antonio Control and Carswell Flight Service at approximately 1435 CST. Base Operations, at this station, monitors this circuit at all times. This information indicated that an aircraft was down but no definite information could be obtained as to the type and location. Base Operations of Randolph Air Force Base immediately dispatched a B-25 aircraft, piloted by Captain Charles D. Robinson, to search the area. At 1513 CST Captain Robinson contacted Randolph Tower, stating that a B-29 had crashed in an area north-northwest of this station at a distance of approximately 20 to 25 miles. This aircraft was identified as being aircraft No. 44-62223. At this time only one aircraft was known to have crashed.

Immediately following confirmation of the crash all necessary crash personnel departed this station, proceeding to the crash area which was near a small town known as Smithson Valley, Texas. On reaching the vicinity of the reported crash of a B-29 aircraft, No. 44-62223, the B-25 dispatched earlier was noted circling and directing the crash convoy. On reaching the crash scene, the investigating and crash personnel were advised that another aircraft had crashed nearby. This information was verified with the cooperation of the few available witnesses directing the way to the second aircraft, which proved to be a B-29 aircraft, No. 44-87774.

A statement and interrogation of Mr. Duance C, McDonald, a former service pilot with approximately 2000 hours military flying time, revealed that Aircraft No. 44-62223 was seen to be flying in a near westerly direction, at an estimated altitude of 3000 to 4000 feet, when Aircraft No. 44-87774

approached from the left rear, on a heading estimated to be 20 to 30 degrees greater than the first aircraft. The aircraft approaching B-29 No. 44-62223 appeared to pass completely underneath the rammed aircraft, then continued on course with no apparent damage or difficulty. The rammed aircraft maintained course and altitude momentarily before dropping off on the right wing, followed by a spin estimated to be one and one-fourth turns, leveling off momentarily, then rolling to its back. From this inverted position the aircraft was observed to go into a dive. This was the last observation this witness, Mr. McDonald, was able to make since the terrain in this area is very hilly and obscured his vision. The severed tail section of this aircraft floated to the ground with very little damage on impact, as is indicated in the photographs which are a part of this report. Mr. McDonald also stated that fragments of both aircraft were observed falling through the air immediately following the collision. As previously stated, the apparent normal flying condition of the ramming aircraft did not warrant further observation by the witness.

In addition to the investigating personnel from Randolph Air Force Base, an investigating team, composed of Lt. Col. L.B. Farnell, Major R.E. Crane, and 1st Lt. H.A. Cover from the Directorate of Flight Safety Research, Norton Air Force Base, California, assisted in the investigation.

A thorough search of the area, over which the two aircraft collided, and following a path of fragments torn from both aircraft as a result of the collision to the point of the first crash, revealed the following:

Fragments from rammed aircraft:

(1) Numerous pieces of torn skin

(2) Portions of the tail gunner's compartment

(3) Cover for the lower aft turret of the aircraft.

Fragments from the ramming aircraft:

(1) Broken pieces from the nose section (Frames supporting plexiglass panels)

(2) Padding and cover from the upper part of one of the pilot's seats

(3) Section of plywood on which a metal plate was fastened with the AF Serial No. 44-87774

(4) Amplifier racks which are to the rear and approximately eye level with the Aircraft Commander

(5) Service cap identified as Major Padgett's by his name being printed on the underside of the bill. Major Padgett was one of the student aircraft commanders in Aircraft No. 44-87774.

(6) Section, approximately 8 to 10 feet in length and 4 feet in width, torn from the upper part of the forward pressurized compartment of aircraft No. 44-87774, starting from the aft edge of the plexiglass nose back to approximately station 209. This included the upper turret ring and the outlet for the Very pistol.

(7) Broken pieces of the navigator astro-dome

Numerous other items were found but their identity in relation to a particular aircraft could not be determined.

In view of the above listed items found in the crash area, and with information gained from witnesses, it is believed the ramming aircraft, No. 44-87774, did approach the rammed aircraft, No. 44-62223, from the left rear at approximately a 45 degree angle, colliding with the fuselage between the lower aft turret and the tail gunner's compartment, leaving this section of the aircraft in such a weakened condition that the tail section and tail gunner's compartment were separated from the forward section of the aircraft. It is also believed that at the time of collision the tail gunner's compartment was torn from the tail section, since these two items were found approximately three-fourths miles apart.

Following the loss of the tail section, the rammed aircraft performed several gyrations, as indicated earlier in this narrative with reference to the witness, Mr. McDonald, before crashing. It is felt that the unusual forces applied to the personnel in this aircraft, due to its erratic descent, made bail-out practically impossible from such a low altitude. Although investigation of the wreckage did reveal the nose gear to be fully extended and the main gear partially down. Two possibilities are indicated, one

being the extension of the gear in an effort to effect a bail-out, the other being a part of an instrument check which required the gear to be in the down position.

Further investigation revealed that on impact with the ground the aircraft was in an inverted position with forward momentum negligible. This was borne out by the fact that the aircraft came to rest among several small trees, breaking a minimum number of branches near the tops in a downward motion, but did not shear any of the tree trunks which would have been done had there been any forward motion. The wreckage was confined to a small area. All four engines were found in line just forward of the leading edge of the wing: Nos. 2, 3 and 4 engines just as they contacted the ground; No. 1 engine was turned over, the propeller facing aft. The explosion following the crash may have caused this engine to be found as mentioned. Further, an explosion is evidenced by the rear spar of the right wing being found in the wreckage of the fuselage. This crash occurred approximately 4 miles from the estimated point of collision.

Information gained from witnesses, indicating the ramming aircraft, No. 44-87774, continued on course with no apparent damage, proved to be incorrect. The aircraft possibly did continue on course and, from the viewpoint of the witness on the ground, no damage could be seen, but a study of the debris, as listed above, scattered along the flight path, caused the investigating board to conclude that the aircraft continued on course due to having been properly trimmed prior to collision. Location of the crash was in a small valley approximately 6 miles from the estimated point of collision. It was felt that the operator of the ramming aircraft was incapacitated, due to contact with the other aircraft. Matter, identified as human by a biochemical analysis, was found on numerous parts of the broken nose section which was scattered along the flight path. This bears out the conclusion that the personnel in the forward pressurized compartment were incapacitated. In addition to this, the fact remains that the two scanners in the ramming aircraft remained aboard until the aircraft crashed. It is assumed that these two people may have possibly been rendered unconscious at time of collision or, due to the demolished condition of the forward compartment at time of collision, they were unable to receive any information as to the extent of damage incurred at the time the two aircraft collided; therefore, remaining in their positions until it was too late to successfully perform a bail-out.

Study and investigation of the crash area, and meager information gained from witnesses, indicated this aircraft contacted the ground in a right wing low attitude, causing a cartwheel effect preceding an explosion which resulted in complete disintegration of the aircraft. The right wing low attitude was verified by an identifiable section of the left wingtip being found approximately 150 yards from point of initial contact. In the area of initial contact crumpled and torn portions of the right wingtip were found. Dispersal of the wreckage to the right of the flight path also indicated the aircraft was turning to the right. All four engines were thrown over a small hill approximately 850 yards from point at which right wingtip first contacted the ground. Complete disintegration, at time of impact, precludes determination of exact cause of this second crash.

FINDINGS:

1. That there was a mid-air collision between the two aircraft.

2. That the actual cause of the mid-air collision is unknown.

3. That the ramming aircraft proceeded ahead out of control, although stated by witnesses that it was under control.

4. That, aboard the ramming aircraft, No. 44-87774, there were three pilots, an instructor pilot and two student aircraft commanders, all of whom were familiar with the published 3511th Combat Crew Training Group Standing Operating Procedure which requires an observer be stationed in the bombardier's position on all hooded flights. Of these three fully qualified aircraft commanders, two of whom were students on their final flight, one had an outstanding rating as a student aircraft commander, the second had a rating of above average, and the instructor aircraft commander had a rating of outstanding by his section commander.

5. That the tail section of the rammed aircraft was so weakened from impact that it came off in flight.

6. That the aircraft with the tail severed went into a spin, leveling off momentarily, before going onto its back, and was last seen in a vertical dive. It is felt that forces caused by the erratic descent of the aircraft prevented the bail-out of this crew.

7. That a check with instructors for compliance with existing Standing Operating Procedures, published by means of an R&R from Training Group Headquarters, requiring a safety observer to

occupy the bombardier's position on all hooded instrument flights, indicated compliance. However, in checking with some students, evidence to the contrary was brought forth in that compliance was not effective 100 percent of the time.

8. That the reason for the failure of the two scanners in the ramming aircraft to use their parachutes could not be determined. There are two possibilities (as suggested in the narrative) which were considered by the board: (a) That they were rendered unconscious due to the impact; (b) That they failed to realize the seriousness of the situation until too late to effect abandonment of the aircraft, or received no message (if any was given) until they were too low to bail-out.

9. That most probably the altitude at which the mid-air collision occurred was near 3000 or 4000 feet, as reported by some witnesses, rather than 7000 feet as reported by other witnesses.

10. That the weather, although somewhat hazy at Randolph Air Force Base, was not considered a factor in this accident, because within the area of the crash, visibility was more than 12 miles.

11. That the possibility of the sun blinding the pilot, at that hour of the day, was determined not to be a factor, considering the angle of approach of the two aircraft.

12. That the ramming aircraft, No. 44-87774, was not trying to make a forced landing, but was out of control at time of crashing. This is borne out by diagram attached as Tab 4.

ASSUMPTIONS:

1. The probability of a gunner being out of position on the rammed aircraft to burn off the APU (after take-off if everything checked OK and the aircraft is leaving the pattern the APU is turned off) was ruled out by the fact that the instructor gunner was on board. He was responsible for insuring that each of the two blisters of the rammed aircraft had a gunner stationed there.

2. It is assumed, due to the demolished condition of the nose section, as evidenced by the wreckage found along the flight path from estimated point of crash of the rammed aircraft, that some, if not all, personnel in the forward pressurized compartment of the ramming aircraft were incapacitated as a result of the collision.

3. The fact that something may have occurred in each aircraft at the particular time to distract the attention of the responsible individual is extremely remote; however, such is one of the things considered. For example, the scanner of the rammed aircraft may have had his attention distracted just prior to the collision while, at the same time in the ramming aircraft, such a thing as a sudden illness of one of the crew members in the front end may have required the assistance of the others in moving him; also, this being near the end of the scheduled mission for the ramming aircraft, the possibility that the hood was being taken down must be considered. Under such conditions the bombardier in the nose turns around to assist in the removal of the front end of the hood, while the instructor aircraft commander normally removes the attachment at the rear. The fact that such should occur simultaneously for the two aircraft, as previously stated, is extremely remote but, it, along with other such assumptions, was considered by members of the board.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. No positive recommendations can be made for corrective action, as there are no positive known causes of the accident.

2. That continued emphasis be placed on all procedures affecting safety in flight, specifically the Standing Operating Procedures requiring the positioning of safety observers during flight.

3. That this accident be brought to the attention of all flying personnel at this station.