

24Jan63 B-52 SAR Maine

ELEPHANT MOUNTAIN, Maine - After surviving a deadly B-52 bomber crash and a night on a frozen mountainside, Gerald Adler, injured and frostbitten, could recall only the red handlebar mustache of his rescuer. The two gripped each other in a bear hug Saturday.

For the first time in 50 years, the retired Air Force captain came face-to-face with the mustachioed medic, Eugene Slabinski, who dropped from a helicopter to rescue him and the only other survivor after a night in 5 feet of snow in the wilderness of northern Maine. "He doesn't have the red moustache anymore," Adler joked, pointing out Slabinski's snow white hair.

The long-delayed meeting was a bright spot in a somber observance as 75 people joined Adler, 81, and Slabinski, 83, on Memorial Day weekend to remember the Cold War tragedy that occurred when their B-52 bomber encountered turbulence strong enough to snap off the vertical stabilizer, causing it to crash onto the side of Elephant Mountain on Jan. 24, 1963. It was supposed to be a routine low-level training flight to test ground-avoidance radar.



Eugene Slabinski, left, 83, of Hanover Township, Pa., sits with Gerald Adler, 81, of Davis, Calif., in Greenville, Maine, at a 50th anniversary remembrance of a B-52 crash in January 1963 on Elephant Mountain, Maine. Slabinski, an Air Force medic, dropped from a helicopter to rescue Adler, one of two survivors of the crash. Seven other crew members died. (AP)

Adler survived along with the pilot, Lt. Col. Dan Bulli, after spending 20 hours on the mountainside as the temperature plummeted to more than 20 below. A pained Adler said he had mixed emotions. He survived while seven crew members died. He raised a family and is now a grandfather living in Davis, Calif. Other families lost sons, fathers, brothers, uncles in the crash.

Powered by eight jet engines, the B-52 Stratofortress flew north from Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts before being buffeted by gusts coming off mountains in western Maine. Eventually, the turbulence became severe, and there was a loud bang. The B-52 crashed seconds later. Only three crew members had time to eject. Bulli ended up dangling in a tree 30 feet above the ground. The deep snow saved Adler's life after his parachute failed to deploy and he crashed to the ground in his ejection seat. The co-pilot also ejected but smashed into a tree. Six others went down with the aircraft.

The B-52 crash in Maine and another one six days later in New Mexico helped to reveal a structural weakness that caused the vertical stabilizer to snap off under certain conditions.

Slabinski, of Hanover Township, Pa., was part of the crew of the first rescue helicopter on the scene the following morning. He dropped to the snowy terrain to get Bulli, then Adler, both of whom were hoisted to safety.

Slabinski was happy to find two survivors. He recalled seeing Bulli first because he'd deployed an inflatable raft. He gave him morphine for his injured foot. Adler, though, was in worse condition with severe frostbite, broken ribs and a fractured skull. He was unconscious for five days and eventually his leg was amputated because of gangrene.

Bulli, 90, of Omaha, Neb., was unable to attend Saturday's event. He had specially engraved lighters sent to the five helicopter crew members at Otis Air Force Base, telling them in a note, "Thanks for the lift."

Slabinski still has his. Saturday's remembrance included an event at the Moosehead Riders snowmobile club house in Greenville, followed by a rain-soaked event at the crash site, still strewn with debris. The families of three crew members participated, along with several rescuers who used snowmobiles and snowshoes to reach it.

Adler said the crash underscored that military service can be a deadly business, even in peacetime.

"Deaths don't always occur in combat. This is a noncombat situation, a combat simulation. That's why we were down so low. And seven men died. And people die all the time, and it's not just Vietnam, or Korea or World War II. Just give thanks that people are willing to give a portion of their lives over to help serve their country," he said.

1963 Elephant Mountain B-52 crash

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1963 Elephant Mountain B-52 crash



Memorial and wreckage of B-52 on Elephant Mountain

Accident summary	
Date	January 24, 1963
Summary	Structural failure Elephant Mountain, Maine
Site	 45°31′40″N 69°26′5″W Coordinates:  45°31′40″N 69°26′5″W
Passengers	0
Crew	9
Injuries	2
Fatalities	7
Survivors	2
Aircraft type	B-52C Stratofortress
Operator	Strategic Air Command , United States Air Force
Registration	53-0406 ^[1]
Flight origin	Westover AFB near Springfield, Massachusetts

On January 24, 1963 a [United States Air Force Boeing B-52C Stratofortress](#) with nine crew members on board lost its [vertical stabilizer](#) due to [buffeting stresses](#) during [turbulence](#) at low altitude and crashed on [Elephant Mountain](#) in [Piscataquis County](#), [Maine](#), six miles (9.7 km) from [Greenville](#). The [pilot](#) and the [navigator](#) survived the accident.^[2]

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Training mission

The crew's training mission was called a *Terrain Avoidance Flight* to practice techniques to penetrate *Advanced Capability Radar* (ACR) undetected by [Soviet air defense](#) during the [Cold War](#). ACR training flights had already been made over the [West Coast of the United States](#) on *Poker Deck* routes. This was to be the first low level navigation flight, utilizing terrain following radar, in the [Eastern United States](#).^{[2][3]}

The crew, consisting of two [99th Bomb Wing](#) Standardization Division crews based at [Westover Air Force Base](#), [Massachusetts](#), and two instructors from the [39th Bombardment Squadron](#), [6th Bomb Wing](#) at [Walker Air Force Base](#), [New Mexico](#), was briefed for six hours the day before the accident. They had the choice of flying over either the [Carolinas](#) or [Maine](#).^[2]

The B-52C departed Westover AFB at 12:11 p.m. on Thursday, January 24, 1963, and was scheduled to return to Westover at 5:30 p.m.^[4]

The crew spent the first 95 minutes of the flight calibrating their equipment. Upon receiving updated weather information for both available routes they chose the northern one. They were supposed to begin their low level simulated penetration of enemy airspace just south of [Princeton, Maine](#), near West Grand Lake. From there, they would head north to [Millinocket](#) and fly over the mountains in the Jo-Mary/[Greenville](#) area. They planned to turn northeast near [Seboomook Lake](#) and southeast near [Caucomgomoc Lake](#) to proceed through the mountains of northern [Baxter State Park](#). After crossing [Traveler Mountain](#), the aircraft was supposed to climb back to altitude over the [Houlton VOR Station](#).^[2]

Accident



Crash site
Maine, USA

One hour later, around 2:30 p.m. the Stratofortress crossed the Princeton VOR, descended to 500 feet (152 meters) and started its simulation of penetrating enemy airspace at low altitude with an [airspeed](#) of 280 knots. The outside temperature was 14°F below zero (-26°C) with winds gusting to 40 knots (46 mi/h; 74 km/h) and 5 feet (1,5 meter) of snow on the ground.^{[4][5]}

Approximately 22 minutes later, just after passing [Brownville Junction](#) in the center of Maine, the aircraft encountered turbulence. The pilot and crew commander, Westover's Most Senior Standardization Instructor Pilot, started to climb above it when the vertical stabilizer came off the plane with a "loud noise sounding like an explosion".^{[3][5]} Having suffered severe damage, the B-52C went into a 40 degree right turn, with nose pointed downward. The pilot gave the order to abandon the aircraft when he could not level it.^{[2][4]}

Only the upper [flight deck](#) crew members of the B-52C have [ejection seats](#) that eject them upwards. The seats of the [pilot](#), [copilot](#), and [electronic warfare](#) officer (a navigator also trained in electronic warfare) function at any altitude, as long as the airspeed is at least 90 knots, which is the minimum required to inflate their blast propelled [parachutes](#). The lower-deck crew members eject on a downward track. Hence, the [navigator](#) and [radar navigator](#) cannot safely eject at altitudes less than 200 feet (61 meters). Spare crew members do not have an ejection seat at all. They must use parachutes and jump out of the navigators' hatch after the navigators have ejected or drop out of the aircraft's door.^[5] The [tail gunner](#) has his own unique escape option: he can sever the tail gun and jump aft out the resulting hole in the rear.^{[6][7]}

The navigator, who was operating as electronic warfare officer, ejected first. He was followed by the pilot and the copilot; there was neither enough altitude nor time for the six lower-deck crew members to escape before the aircraft crashed into the west side of Elephant Mountain at 2:52 p.m.^{[4][5]}

The copilot suffered fatal injuries, striking a tree a mile (1.6 km) away from the main crash site. The pilot landed in a tree 30 feet (9 meters) above the ground. He survived the night, with temperatures reaching almost -30°F (-35°C), in his survival kit sleeping bag atop his life raft. The navigator's parachute did not deploy upon ejection. He impacted the snow-covered ground

before separating from his ejection seat about 2,000 feet (610 meters) from the wreckage with an impact estimated at 16 times the force of gravity. He suffered a fractured skull and three broken ribs. The force bent his ejection seat and he could not get his survival kit out. He survived the night by wrapping himself in his parachute.^{[2][4]}

A [grader](#) operator on a remote woods road witnessed the final turn of the Stratofortress and a black smoke cloud after impact.^[2] Eighty rescuers from the [Maine State Police](#), the Maine Inland Fish and Game Department, the [Civil Air Patrol](#) as well as [Air Force](#) Units from [Dow Air Force Base](#) in [Bangor, Maine](#), along with others from [New Hampshire](#) and [Massachusetts](#) and other volunteers went to work. Search aircraft were on the scene, but they searched too far south and east to locate the wreckage before nightfall.^[3]

After the crash site was located the next day, [Scott Paper Company](#) dispatched plows from Greenville to clear 10 miles (16 km) of road of snow drifts up to 15 feet (4.6 m) deep. The rescuers had to use snowshoes, dog sleds and snowmobiles to cover the remaining mile to the crash site. At 11 a.m. the two survivors were airlifted to a hospital by a helicopter.^{[3][4]}

Accident investigation



B-52H (61-023), configured at the time as a [testbed](#) to investigate structural failures, still flying after its [vertical stabilizer](#) sheared off in severe turbulence on 10 January 1964. The aircraft eventually landed safely and remained in service until 2008.

The crash was caused by [turbulence](#)-induced [structural failure](#). Due to [buffeting stresses](#)^[2] the stabilizer shaft broke^[1] and the B-52's vertical stabilizer came off the plane. It was found 1.5 miles (2.4 km) from where the plane struck the mountain side.^[4] With the loss of the [vertical stabilizer](#), the aircraft had lost its directional stability and [rolled](#) uncontrollably.

Originally, the B-52 was designed to penetrate Soviet airspace at high altitude around 35,000 feet (10.7 km) and high speed around 450 kts to drop nuclear weapons. When the US intelligence realized that the Soviets had implemented a sophisticated, layered and interconnected air defense system with radar controlled [surface-to-air missiles](#) (SAMs), the US Air Force decided the B-52 would have to penetrate the Soviet airspace at low altitude around 500 feet (152 meters) and high speed to stay underneath the radar. However, low altitude, high speed flight operations put enormous stress on aircraft structure, especially when flying near mountains, up and down ridges and through valleys due to [lee waves and the rotor](#). The B-52 was not designed for this kind of

operation. 56-0591, a B-52D, took off from [Larson AFB, Washington](#), on June 23, 1959 and experienced a horizontal stabilizer turbulence-induced failure at low level and crashed. The modification process of the B-52 series began in 1961.^[5]

B-52C 53-0406, which crashed on Elephant Mountain, was the second high tailed B-52 to suffer such a fatal structural failure. After extensive testing, another [two fatal crashes](#) and one year later, Boeing determined that turbulence would over-stress the B-52's [rudder](#) connection bolts, causing first a rudder and subsequently a tail failure. The bolts were strengthened throughout the fleet which fixed the problem.^{[2][5]}

Aftermath

Of the two survivors the pilot returned to active duty after spending three months in the hospital^[4] and the navigator, whose feet were frost bitten contracted double [pneumonia](#), became unconscious for five days and his leg had to be amputated from the [frostbite](#) and [gangrene](#) that had set in.^[4]

Most of the remains of 53-0406 are still at the crash site which is owned by Plum Creek Timber Co. They improved the foot trail so visitors can view the wreckage.^{[3][4]} While the site has signs posted asking viewers to show due respect while there, it has been vandalized with names carved in the wreckage or marked with permanent marker.

In the late 1970s a retired military pilot and president of the Moosehead Riders Snowmobile Club, initiated the annual memorial snowmobile ride in honor to those aboard the B-52. The annual crash site ceremony is attended by representatives from the [Maine Air National Guard](#), the American Legion, the Civil Air Patrol, Maine Warden Service and members of the snowmobile club. There is a color guard, the laying of a wreath, the reading of the names of those who died, a prayer by a military chaplain and the playing of taps.^[3] One engine and the navigator's ejection seat can be viewed at the Clubhouse.^{[3][4]}

1993 a special commemorative service was sponsored by the Moosehead Riders Snowmobile Club. The navigator attended the event and was honored at several ceremonies. He went to the crash site for the first time since being evacuated out thirty years earlier.^[4]

In the fall of 2011 a Maine Forest Service employee found an ejection seat from the aircraft near an overgrown logging road while hunting. In May 2012 he returned to the site to take photos and record identification numbers to confirm it came from the infamous B-52. A recovery team retrieved the mostly intact ejection seat.^{[8] [9]} Researchers claim that it is most likely the pilot's seat^[10] and remarkably similar to the seat at the snowmobile clubhouse in Greenville. It is the third seat recovered from the crash and preserved for public viewing. The other is in a Bangor museum.^[11]

In 2013, 50 years after the crash, the Snowmobile Club held the annual remembrance at the crash site^[12] and the retired pilot gave a rare interview.^[13] Navigator Gerald Adler came face-to-face with his rescuer for the first time in 50 years in a Memorial Day event on May 25, 2013.^[14]

See also



- [1964 Savage Mountain B-52 crash](#)
- [List of aircraft structural failures](#)

References

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4. ^ [a b c d e f g h i i k l](#) Ferland Jr., Durward J. [The B-52 Crash on Elephant Mountain Maine](#). The Moosehead Lake Region Resource Guide.
5. ^ [a b c d e f Look mom, I lost my tail! We gotta bring this Buff in anyway](#) by Edward Marek [Talking Proud](#)
6. ^ [B-52 Stratofortress](#), [US Military Cyberwall](#)
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8. ^ ["Ejection seat from B-52 found"](#). Retrieved 23 May 2012.
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External links

- [National Archives and Records Administration](#) video files. Archive id [68755](#); local id 342-USAF-34150. 25-28 January 1963. Department of the Air Force video, hosted by Criticalpast.com.
 - o ["CH-3 plane in flight for rescue operations after a B-52 crash on Elephant Mountain, Maine"](#). (Historic video of air search operations for B-52C s/n 53-0406.)

- o ["Air search operations for B-52 crash on Elephant Mountain, Maine"](#). (Historic video of air search operations for B-52C s/n 53-0406.)
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- [Contemporary video of the crash site](#) at [YouTube](#)
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