

1957 plane crash: A 'Dark Day in Clarksburg'

By Stan Goldberg Special to the News-Post Nov 2, 2014



The wreckage of the Capital Airlines 1957 plane crash into the woods near Clarksburg is shown in this screen shot of a video. Damascus resident David Cohen was instrumental in getting the site designated as a historic site.

In late June of 1957 three people were killed in the deadliest civilian airplane crash in the history of Montgomery County, an incident that has long been forgotten.

But through the efforts of aviation enthusiast David Cohen, the accident site, located in Little Bennett Regional Park just south of Frederick County near Clarksburg, has been registered as a Historical Archeological Site with the Maryland Historical Trust.

Cohen, 46, has found artifacts at the crash site and written a detailed account of the accident. The account, "Dark Day In Clarksburg," tells the story of what caused the crash, the three men who died and those on the ground who witnessed it.

Cohen's efforts brought the crash and the people involved in it back to life 57 years later.

He did it through phone interviews with 21 people, including one with the then 93-year-old mother of one of the victims. To get the story, he combed through numerous newspaper articles on the crash and visited the site where he found artifacts from the plane.

By accident, he ran across a video of the wrecked plane taken soon after the crash.

The project is something he has worked on for two years and he's still revising the account of the crash.

“When I first started this project I was looking for parts of the airplane,” said Cohen, the chief financial officer of the Washington Talent Agency and a member of the band ONYX. He lives not too far from the crash site in Damascus with his wife Margie and 11-year-old daughter, Jessica. “When I began to learn about the human side of this story, I found this far more interesting than any pieces of metal that I may end up finding.”

Cohen first learned about the crash in July of 2012 when someone sent him a database on airplane crashes.

He discovered the one in Clarksburg. Because it occurred near his home, he decided to research what happened.

As a volunteer with the Maryland National Capital Park Police for many years, he had contacts with many of the officials who worked at Little Bennett Regional Park, where the crash site is located.

They told him to talk with Doug Edwards, retired chief of the Hyattstown Volunteer Fire Department. Edwards was a member of the department when it responded to the crash on the morning of June 22, 1957.

“He recounted some of the things about the aftermath of the crash,” Cohen said. “He told me where it happened.”

In talking with Edwards and others he discovered the plane involved was a Capital Airlines DC-3. The plane was on a training mission at the time. Two airline officers, World War II veteran Henry Podgurski and Robert Thomas, were on a training mission, hoping to be upgraded to the rank of captain.

The instructor was World War II veteran Carl Burke.

Lives lost, lives saved

Cohen talked with numerous former pilots and employees of Capital Airlines to try and learn what led to the crash. According to his account, during the training mission the plane attempted a “canyon approach,” which is done to simulate landing at an airport that is surrounded by obstructions followed by an emergency pull-up.

But something went very wrong. The plane fell below the airspeed it needed to keep flying. The plane was going to crash, possibly into some nearby houses.

“They cut the fuel supply to the motors and tried to maneuver away from the houses,” Cohen says in his account. He said the trio’s action saved the lives of many people on the ground.

The plane then struck some trees and flew into the ground, killing all three on board.

It crashed into the backyard of a home owned by John Anderson, who was loading potatoes into his Studebaker at the time. Anderson dived behind another car as the plane approached. That move probably saved his life, because the left engine of the plane hit the Studebaker. The right engine went down Anderson’s well.

Across the street, 15-year-old Otis Norwood watched as the plane crashed.

Local fire and police officials rushed to the crash, but nothing could be done. It took rescue workers two hours to find two of the bodies.

Much of the plane wreckage was removed and the Anderson family later moved away from the house.

“Ruth Anderson was insistent that she did not want her family to live in a place where three people lost their lives, literally in their backyard,” Cohen says in his account.

The land eventually became part of Little Bennett Regional Park.

In 2013, Cohen got in touch of Podgurski's widow, who was living in Springfield, Massachusetts, and talked with her. She died earlier this year.

"Henry Podgurski, in particular, needs to be recognized for his extensive World War II combat record," Cohen said. "It seems ironic that a man who survived so much combat without a scratch would end up losing his life in a civilian training accident on a clear, sunny day."

Cohen also spoke with Norwood, who now lives in Frederick. "He had the best view of all of it," Cohen said. "From his vantage point, all the pieces came together."

Crash remnants

In October of 2012, Cohen went out to the site, hoping to find some artifacts, but at the time, he found nothing. The house is now owned by Montgomery Parks and a garage has been built over the site of the impact.

About a year later, however, he was out for a drive with his daughter when he noticed the house was boarded up. He learned from his friends at Little Bennett Park that the septic system has failed and the house and garage were being torn down.

"I put in a request that when they demolish it, could I look through the area," he said. "I asked if I could look underneath the concrete pad (below the garage) where I believed the point of impact was."

Park officials agreed to his request. In January of this year, he and local archeologist Don Housely went out to the site.

With help from the excavation team, they looked under the pad and found seven or eight artifacts from the plane, including part of the radio antenna and aluminum pieces that were obviously parts of the plane.

"We weren't sure what part of the plane they came from, but we knew they were part of the plane," he said.

Because of the finds, Housely then filed an application that the site be registered as a Historical Archeological Site with the Maryland Historical Trust. Registration became official on Feb. 20. It was the first plane crash on dry land so designated as a historical site by the state of Maryland.

"It became an historic site because of what we found and the story behind it," Cohen said.

Early on in his research, Cohen came across a video of the plane, taken soon after the crash, on a website, but the video later disappeared. There was no record of who made the video and he thought it had been lost.

But while talking with some friends at the park service, he found out that Ernie Newman, who worked for the service, had a copy of a DVD which included footage of the plane wreckage on the ground. It had been made by his uncle, Frank Parks, about two hours after the crash.

"He had lived in Rockville, heard about the crash and came up with his camera and went up there," Cohen said.

Newman gave Cohen a copy of the DVD, which included a bunch of old videos.

It was an hour and a half long and included everything from one of President Eisenhower's inauguration to family gatherings. But there was also two minutes of footage of the plane wreckage.

"I started this to see how far I could take it," said Cohen. He took it a long way.