

A COLD WAR VETERAN'S MEMORIAL FOR A B-52 CRASH

By Noel Allard

The sun was going down at 8:00 on a warm September evening in 1958. August Kahl and his 15-year-old son, Loren, were loading tomatoes into their farm truck so they could get an early start from their farm in Inver Grove Heights to the market at South St. Paul, Minn., the next morning.

The sound of jet engines high overhead was nothing new to the Kahls. They had heard the sound before. There were the new jet airliners landing at Wold-Chamberlain Field 15 miles away, and there were the Air Force bombers on training missions that could be heard every so often. But tonight, the sound seemed unusual. Loren Kahl followed the path of the sound as it circled around him. It was getting louder. And louder. And all at once there was a heavy “boom” from an area on the other side of the barn.

For an instant, the farm lights blinked out, and then the Kahls were enveloped in a fireball that swirled around both sides of the barn. They began to run toward the farmhouse a hundred yards away...but the fireball seemed to surround them. The ground was on fire and a noisy hot wind was blasting at their unprotected skin. Loren could feel the skin on his face tighten from the heat. August Kahl tripped on something and fell headlong into the roaring ground fire, regained his footing and managed to find his way to the house.

Inside the house, six other members of August's family were struggling to understand what had happened and the house was a roaring inferno. Part of the stairway had been carried away and grandpa Kahl needed help to get to the bottom. They managed their way out of the house and staggered some distance away from the heat to look back and catch their breath, most of them in shock and aghast at the scene.

Only scant minutes before, the cause of the massive explosion and fire had been an Air Force B-52D Stratofortress maneuvering at 36,400 feet overhead. On a Cold War training mission to simulate a nuclear strike on the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul, the plane had been home to six flight crewmembers and two instructors. The plane, from the 69th Bomb Squadron, 42nd Bomb Wing of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), had departed Loring AFB, Limestone, Maine, earlier in the day. It had made ECM runs at Bath, Maine, Albany, N.Y., Williamsport, Pa., Youngstown, Ohio, and Bellefontaine, Ohio. The flight had continued to Richmond, Va., where a GPI Nav-Bomb run was started that was to terminate at Minneapolis.



Jake Ebertz sits beside the stone monument at the 1996 dedication. The B-52 model hanging above it casts an eerie shadow. Ebertz and the author created the monument and convinced the Inver Grove Heights City Council to provide space for it on the Kahl farm, now city property. (Noel Allard photo)

There it would be scored for bombing accuracy by the Air Force Bombing Radar Site at Wold-Chamberlain Field.

Four times the big plane crossed the target, with “bombs away” for the fourth run at 2016 CST, Minneapolis. As it rolled off the last bomb run, something went wrong. An elevator trim “excursion” began to send tremors through the ship. Whatever happened will never be known, for at this point, parts of the tail assembly broke off the airplane, and it began a high-speed plunge straight for the ground. There was no remark heard from the crew, no cockpit voice recorder or black box to record the last moments. From 36,400 feet, the ship dove toward the earth, and in no more than 108 seconds radar showed it had crossed through 8,000 feet. Moments later, control tower personnel at Wold-Chamberlain witnessed an explosion in the direction of Inver Grove Heights. The plane's main structure had impacted on the August Kahl farm, just a few miles south of the South St. Paul Airport.

Though the crew had remained silent, they had never-the-less taken action. Four crewmembers had ejection seats and



An aerial photo shows the still smoking Kahl farmhouse and the five craters at the impact point just east of Highway 52 in Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota. (Noel Allard collection)

fired themselves out into the dusk almost immediately. The other four crew members, including the two instructors, had no ejection seats. It was for them to find an open hatch and leap to safety. Perhaps the centrifugal force of the planes gyrations kept them pinned to their crew positions, for they were unable to exit and rode the plane into the ground, being consumed in the explosion and fire.

Of the four that ejected, all were subjected to a 600-mph jet stream outside the ship. Flailing arms and legs and contact with the aircraft structure produced fatal injuries to three. They were found long after the searchers and investigators arrived, still strapped in their useless seats, their parachutes ripped to shreds by the air blasts. The copilot was the singular survivor. And he landed in a tree on a farm adjoining the Kahl property. Neighbors helped him walk to a waiting ambulance sometime after the crash.

Aerial photos taken the morning after the crash showed that the plane had come in at a flat angle, clipping off the top of a billboard alongside State Highway 52, just 50 yards from the impact spot. Five craters marked the positions of the fuselage and each of the four twin-engine pods. One of the engines had bulleted through the Kahl farmhouse, smashing off the lower staircase. Pieces, large and small, littered the entire farm and spread across neighboring farms. Parts of the aircraft's tail were found some three miles to the west. The Kahl family survived, though each member was horribly burned. Loren Kahl's face and arms bear witness to the awful event.

Though this event was traumatic, and carried as front page news in the local papers for the next two days, apart from convincing the local citizens that the plane was not carrying a nuclear weapon, the accident was soon hushed up. The area had been cordoned off, recoverable pieces of the aircraft were taken

to the big air force hangar at Wold where they were laid out for the air force accident investigation team. No further news was given to the public. Very little information about this accident reached the major media. *Aviation Week* magazine, for example, never carried a single mention of the event.

But the USAF did take action. As a result of the investigation, numerous changes were adopted in both the B-52 ejection procedure and in the design of the ejection seats themselves. B-52s are expected to be the mainstay of any bombing campaign in the Middle East.

The accident had happened on September 16, 1958. Thirty eight years later, on September 14, 1996, a

stone memorial was dedicated on the spot where the bomber had crashed. Under the sponsorship of the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame, with help from many other aviation organizations in the Twin City area, support both physically and financially was realized. After 38 years, a marker was finally dedicated to honor these Cold War veterans who gave their lives for their country. Today, the stone with a fine etched tablet reminds all visitors to the site of the sacrifice made by these men. The stone marker and plaque can be found very near the intersection of Brooks Blvd. and Broderick Blvd., near the Inver Hills Community College, alongside Highway 52 in Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota. ➔



View of memorial site in Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota. (Noel Allard collection)