

Remembering the souls of Flight 214 ** Pam Am plane burst into flames over Maryland 50 years ago, killing 11 from Lehigh Valley region.

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Abstract: The president had been assassinated in Dallas two weeks earlier, and the nation was little more than a year removed from the Cuban Missile Crisis that had brought the Cold War world to the edge of nuclear war. After Thanksgiving, McCarty, a kind and sociable man who ran the Bethlehem Steel Club (now Silver Creek Country Club), left for a golf outing in Puerto Rico with three buddies, promising to "sort everything out" when they returned.

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Full text: Due to newsroom front-end system production difficulties the entire text could not be electronically captured for the online archive. Please see microfilm or PDF for complete map.

On a stormy Sunday night 50 years ago, an explosion over Elkton, Md., created a fireball so bright it caused street lamps in the rural town to shut off.

Residents who had been readying for bed ran into the streets, scared and confused. Times were tense: The president had been assassinated in Dallas two weeks earlier, and the nation was little more than a year removed from the Cuban Missile Crisis that had brought the Cold War world to the edge of nuclear war. Had Washington -- 90 miles away -- been bombed?

It was nothing as dramatic as that, but it was terrible enough. On Dec. 8, 1963, Pan Am Flight 214 -- a four-engine jet called "Clipper Tradewind" with 81 people aboard -- had been struck by lightning, exploded and crashed into a cornfield in the rural town.

There were no survivors of the crash, which killed three couples from Allentown who had been vacationing together in Puerto Rico and were heading home to prepare for Christmas: Charles and Virginia Hefele, Robert and Joyce Gilbert and Francis and Kathleen McKernan. They were longtime friends and veterans of the same bridge club.

Other locals on board were: Austin McCarty of Bethlehem; Michael Ciocco, who owned Allentown's popular Boulevard Inn; Michael Geiger of Fountain Hill; and a Quakertown couple, Robert and Florence Haines. Like the Allentown couples, all had been vacationing in sunny Puerto Rico as winter came on.

It was a tragic time for McCarty's niece, Mary Bogle, who was in ninth grade at the time. Her father had died weeks earlier of cancer, and her uncle Austin, who was single, had planned to step in and help her mother raise her and five siblings.

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On Dec. 8., a bulletin came across the television mentioning the crash. Then later that night, the phone rang. Bogle was putting her hair in curlers.

"My mother screamed the most bloodcurdling scream you could imagine," Bogle said.

Her mother, a nurse, soldiered on, raising six sometimes-challenging children by herself. Bogle was left with a strong need to be self-sufficient. Later, the experience would help her relate to the troubled children she sometimes came across in her role as a guidance counselor in the Quakertown schools.

"I think it taught me especially that I had to be very self-reliant and take care of myself because I never knew if the person who was taking care of me was going to be there," said Bogle, who lives in Upper Saucon Township.

Charles Hefele was probably the best-known of the group. An obstetrician who delivered countless babies at Sacred Heart Hospital, his name rings bells even today.

"Every now and again a little old lady will see my name and say 'I had a doctor named Hefele,'" said Steven Hefele of Allentown, a financial adviser for Santander Bank who was among the 11 children orphaned by the crash.

Steven's younger brother, Bob, remembered being in bed that night -- he was 6 -- and hearing his grandmother weeping.

"Fifty years can soften the blow," he said, "but you wish they were there."

The Hefele boys and their sisters, Susan and Patty, had many local relatives and were raised together. Bob Hefele said some children of the other victims were scattered among relatives elsewhere in the country.

"All my cousins became siblings to me," he said. "We had a good upbringing."

The plane, a Boeing 707, had stopped at Baltimore to refuel before making what would have been a short hop to Philadelphia. The refueling was necessary. Winds were heavy in Philadelphia and the plane, fifth in line for landing, would have to circle for a time. The death toll might have been worse, but 65 people had left the plane at Baltimore.

At two minutes before 9 p.m., as the plane circled at 5,000 feet, lightning struck and the control tower at Philadelphia heard the final words of the pilot: "Clipper 214 is going down in flames. ..."

Only a few weeks before, Elkton had celebrated a visit from President Kennedy, who dedicated a portion of Interstate 95. That was eight days before Kennedy's death in Dallas.

Now, as the town mourned the president's death, "another tragedy unfolded on our doorstep," said Mike Dixon, who was 11 at the time and today leads the Cecil County Historical Society.

"This was a town of 5,000 people," Dixon said. "It was a quiet Sunday night but a thunderstorm was rolling through. Suddenly there was an explosion."

One Elkton resident, Raymond Gregg, told a reporter the flash had nearly blinded him.

"It was like the sun was coming at me," he said.

Other witnesses reported seeing bodies tumbling from the sky.

The town's first responders were state troopers and volunteer firefighters. Some of the latter group were only in their late teens. They raced to the cornfield to find tons of scattered, flaming wreckage, body parts, luggage and other debris.

The stress and trauma proved too much for one firefighter, Steward Godwin, who died at the scene of a heart attack.

Officials suspected that the explosion might have been caused by lightning, but didn't rule out the possibility of sabotage or a terrorist bomb.

The news reached the Lehigh Valley quickly.

Joyce Gilbert's brother, Reuben Miller, now 85, received a call from his father, who said he was sure Joyce was aboard the plane.

The Morning Call and Evening Chronicle ran front-page stories, one of which included an unbearably poignant note: "In at least one of the Allentown victims' homes, children were wrapping Christmas presents as the doomed airliner left San Juan."

Miller, 35 at the time, drove from Easton to Elkton the day after the crash.

"They had an armory there used as the control center," said Miller, a retired dentist who lives in Easton. "We were interviewed by federal people and their main thrust was to help with identification. They asked what seemed to be strange questions: What type of underclothing would they be wearing, how would their fingernails be groomed, etc. It was quite lengthy."

After finishing that process, "we were still in a bit of a daze," Miller said. "A gentleman came up to us and said 'Can we help you with anything?' We told him we still had some concerns. ... He said 'The remains of your loved

ones that you get back, you can be assured it's them.' "

"We did get back their wedding rings," Miller said.

The crash was the second such incident to stun the Lehigh Valley. Two years earlier, in November 1961, 29 young military recruits from around the Lehigh Valley had perished when their plane crashed in Richmond, Va. The Elkton crash had a practical impact on aviation. After a two-year investigation, the Civil Aeronautics Board determined the cause to be "lightning-induced ignition of the fuel/air mixture in the No. 1 reserve fuel tank with resultant explosive disintegration of the left outer wing and loss of control."

The board recommended modifications to aircraft design: mixing inert gases with fuel or adding circulation to reduce volatility, and adding discharge wicks -- lightning rods -- to mitigate the effect of strikes.

This weekend, Elkton scheduled a series of events to commemorate the crash, asking residents to record their memories and welcoming the families of the victims to a memorial service. Buses were to carry them to the site of the crash for a few minutes of reflection.

The Hefele brothers planned to go. So did Bogle and her cousin, Joanne, and Miller, who said about 20 of his widely scattered relatives were supposed to join him.

"It's going to be joyful," he said, looking forward to reuniting with the living even as the families and the community honor the dead.

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Morning Call reporter Scott Kraus contributed to this story.

Credit: By Dan Sheehan Of The Morning Call

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Illustration

Caption: **1. Archived pages from The Morning Call reveal the story of Pan Am Flight 214, which crashed in Elkton, Md., on Dec. 8, 1963, killing 81 people, including 11 from the Lehigh Valley region. **2. Mary Bogle of Upper Saucon Township displays newspaper articles about the Pan Am plane crash on Dec. 8, 1963, that claimed the life of her uncle, Austin McCarty of Bethlehem. **3. Two of the victims of the Pan Am Flight 214 crash 50 years ago -- Charles and Virginia Hefele of Allentown. **4. Austin McCarty of Bethlehem was described as a kind and sociable man who ran the Bethlehem Steel Club (now Silver Creek Country Club). He was en route to a golf outing in Puerto Rico when he was killed in the Dec. 8, 1963, plane crash. **5. Map shows the Fire in the Sky - The path of Pan Am Flight 214 on Dec. 8, 1963. [4 Photos and Illustration by Craig Larimer, The Morning Call, KEVIN MINGORA, THE MORNING CALL and CONTRIBUTED PHOTO and Map by Craig Kackenmeister, The Morning Call]

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