

Mystery Mishaps

Chapter One

The Jack McLanahan Incident

What began as a hot but otherwise normal August day in 1955 ended with a bizarre and twisted incident that touched the lives of many people in outskirts of a small Southern Ohio city known as Wilmington, Ohio

It was the heat and humidity that dampened an otherwise routine afternoon. Such weather conditions allowed terms like 'hallucinations' to be found in subsequent newspaper reportage of events happening on this day, dismissive efforts that would be recognized as a crude attempt to 'write off' such happenings nearly 43 years after the fact.

Only minutes before the clock was to strike noon in Southern Ohio on August 5, 1955, the sky was set ablaze over an area near Wilmington, close to the Clinton and Warren County borders, by events out of the ordinary.

A sound, that of a jet airplane, was heard by residents in the area of The Delbert Fisher Farm. The sound resonated loudly, preceding a great commotion which was to follow.

Judy Burton was nine years old at the time. Today, she still recalls the event well.

"I even remember what I was wearing at the time. The whole thing... it... it was real spooky," she said after being located in May of 1998 as this case was being investigated. -

Burton was the daughter of Mrs. Francis Price, who saw the plane fly overhead. Francis Price was referenced in the newspapers the following afternoon, which quoted her as saying that the plane exploded in the air and passed only about 75 feet from the ground. -

Mrs. Price had passed away several years before this current investigation began, so her daughter, Judy Burton, was the closest relative who had the best knowledge of the incident.

"I remember being outside and hearing this noise... like an airplane," Judy said. "My mother looked up and saw this airplane going over."

Judy said that her mother brought the subject up several times afterward, but beyond that, nobody ever mentioned what happened. She didn't see the plane herself, but heard it fly over and the powerful, earth-shaking explosion which followed.

"I heard the crash," she said. "It was simply a horrible explosion."-

Officially, there was a mid-air collision between two F-86 Sabrejets high above Wilmington, Ohio. The two pilots involved were John Goodwill and Howard Askelson.

Officially.

Goodwill's jet was fatally damaged, Askelson returned to Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, 28.5 miles northwest of Wilmington.

The two planes, practicing instrument flight at 20,000 feet, emerged from a cloud and collided.

One of the pilots involved in the accident was located for this investigation. He is Howard Askelson, now a resident of Colorado Springs, Colorado, and remained in the U.S. Air Force until 1971. He ultimately attained the rank of Colonel. -

"We were out testing in 'the dog,' an F-86D, and my chase pilot ran into me," Askelson recalled. "He bailed out... but I can't remember what his name is right now..."

Askelson, who was in the Air Force for 31-years, remembered that the accident, caused by human error, happened around noon. He explained that he was able to pilot his plane safely back to Wright Patterson Air Force Base, where he was debriefed on the incident. The two planes hit while trying to 'join up.' The mishap knocked the nose from Askelson's plane.

Askelson knew that the other plane crashed and the pilot bailed out, parachuting to safety. He also said that no one on the ground was hurt due to this crash.

"There was no civilian injuries on the ground associated with this crash," he said with certainty.

Meanwhile, the other plane piloted by John Goodwill spiralled viciously out of control after the violent encounter. Goodwill retained command of the doomed F-86D sabrejet as long as possible, guiding it to a low elevation and into an unpopulated quarter before ejecting from the plane. -

The pilotless plane flew brutally low, skimming treetops and housetops before plunging aggressively onto the farm property of Delbert Fisher.

The crash was witnessed by many people.

Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Bevan, now residents of Winterhaven, Florida, recall the event in dramatic detail. Mrs. Bevan says that the incident is still vivid in her mind. -

"Eugene was painting a barn with his father at the time," sharp and witty Mrs. Bevan recalled, "and I must have been out in the yard in back of our house, where the big barns were. It was around noon, when I heard something and looked up, and saw things falling out of the air."

When asked to explain the noise she heard, Mrs. Bevan described it as an explosive boom or a thud. "The noise is what brought my attention to the sky, and I looked up and saw this plane spiralling around."

Mrs. Bevan stated that she did not see a second plane anywhere in the sky, but heard later that a second plane was involved. "We only saw that one plane, there was no second plane."

Mrs. Bevan said that Eugene nor his father Lewis, or herself saw a second plane.

"At that point, the pilot opened up his parachute and we saw the plane spiralling down toward the Fisher field," she said. "There were things coming out of the sky like the helmet and the ejection seat, and several things in the barnyard also came down that day."

Mrs. Bevan swiftly placed a phone call to the Wilmington Air Force Base, which was several miles to the east of the accident site. She was probably the first person to report the calamity. After placing the frantic phone call, she then hopped in the car with her husband, Eugene, and six-year old son Bruce Bevan, and pursued the descending pilot.

"We drove around and watched the pilot land, and we picked him up right after he hit the ground near my cousin's farm on Hadley road," Mrs. Bevan remembered. "The pilot was 'in shock,' when we picked him up. He was perspiring heavily. He was really quite scared."

Bruce Bevan, still residing in Wilmington, also recalls the disturbance. -

"I must have been there in the field playing or something, and I saw this pilot just floating down," he said. Bruce Bevan was humored to receive an inquiry about this event, which he had all but forgotten after 43 years.

Being so many years ago and only six years old at the time, his memory of the event is sketchy, but he does recall meeting the pilot after he landed, and that his father drove the pilot in his car after his landing. Bruce also thought that the pilot didn't talk much, and said that his mother would have greater recall of the incident.

Bruce's mother explained that the pilot behaved oddly.

"After he landed, the pilot emerged from the corn and climbed over a fence to get to the road where we took off with him from there," Mrs. Eugene Bevan said. "He climbed this fence and came to us, not saying too much.

While Mr. Bevan drove, the pilot sat quietly in the passengers seat and Mrs. Bevan and six-year old son Neil sat in the backseat of the car.

"He was sweating profusely, very shaken. He didn't talk much," Mrs. Bevan recalled. "About the only thing that he said was that the plane was full of ammunition, and heavily loaded. He said people should stay away from it."

Within moments after being retrieved by Mr. and Mrs. Bevan, a military truck was spotted on the road. They stopped the car and the pilot got out, hopped in the military truck and sped away.

"The pilot got this another vehicle about a mile from the crash site, not too far down the road from the Dick Snyder farm," Mrs. Bevan remembered. "The vehicle that he departed in was an army-type vehicle from what I remember." -

She thought the vehicle may have been from the Wilmington Air Force Base, and thought it was possible that the vehicle was already in the area, as it was only moments earlier that she placed the call to the base, alerting them of the plane crash.

After the pilot exchanged vehicles, the Bevans drove on to the site where the plane came down. Mrs. Bevan could see a crowd of people standing on the roadway, and cars parked alongside the highway. She mused that people must have come from miles around to spectate. The plane itself crashed in a field that was a good walking distance from the road. The crowd had gathered on the roadside closest to the accident scene.

Meanwhile, 18-year old Jack McClanahan, son of Mr. and Mrs. Walter McClanahan of nearby Clarksville, was working on the farm of Delbert Fisher when the plane impacted the ground.

Jack was an employee of Mr. Fisher, and was raking hay in Fisher's hay field with Danny Redfern and Donovan (Tuffy) Gray. Jack had only one shoe on, because the previous evening he had cut his toe on a piece of glass.

After the plane impacted the ground with great force to make a 25-foot crater, witnesses Harold Cox and farm owner Delbert Fisher said that it exploded and burst into flames. A fragment from the plane flew off from the detonation and tore a path across the corn field.

Within moments, others from the road or nearby houses began running to the location of the crash, crowding the setting. They converged on the scene with the intent to help the pilot.

Mrs. Delbert Fisher heard the tremendous peal, and thought every window of her house had been broken by the impact. -

In the midst of the energized scene of sudden, unanticipated bedlam, young Jack McClanahan found himself part running, part hobbling toward the plane, favoring his bad toe. While approaching the plane, he called frantically to co-worker Danny Redfern that the pilot was still trapped inside the burning wreckage. -

Seen in the smashed ruins was a parachute, so Jack was certain.

A few moments had passed and after the flames had died down somewhat, others also thought they could see a parachute in the plane and feared that a pilot was there. Heroically, Jack plunged toward the flotsam to help what many thought was a downed pilot, when another explosion suddenly happened. -

Service veteran "Tuffy" Gray noticed a white flame in the crater and yelled at everyone to hit the ground. -

Patty Fisher already had left the scene and was climbing over a fence to get out of the corn field when the first rocket exploded, sending her tumbling away into a ditch.

Missiles, rockets and live ammunition began to blow up, sending so many drawn to the scene now fleeing for cover. Danny Refern dropped to the ground and crawled away from the thunderous din as explosions began erupting everywhere about them. -

Jack was hit, struck in the chest by an exploding rocket. He had shielded Danny from being hit by the maniacal projectile. He felt a sting in his right chest, looked down and saw blood.

L.J.Gray said that rockets continued to explode for many hours after the crash. -

State Highway Patrol officers from the Wilmington post were the first respond to the situation. They arrived and cordoned off the area, keeping spectators away as, according to the August 5, 1955 Wilmington New-Journal states, "the 24-rockets the plane was carrying continued to go off for over an hour."

The injured Jack McClanahan was carried to the edge of the corn field, where he was later taken away in a jeep to the road and placed in a car. He was taken from there to Clinton Memorial Hospital. -

PROBLEMS WITH THE OFFICIAL SCENARIO:

Mrs. Francis Price stated that the plane exploded in the air, but other witnesses Harold Cox and Delbert Fisher did not give this account (The Wilmington News-Journal, August 5, 1955). Mrs. Eugene Bevan said that there was an explosion heard prior to spotting the plane in the air (Interview, April 25, 1998).

Mrs. Eugene Bevan said the plane was spiralling down from high in the air (Interview, April 25, 1998). Mr. Lewis Bevan also employed the term 'spiralling' in The Wilmington News-Journal, August 5, 1955. However, pilot John Goodwill supposedly 'guided the plane down' and controlled the plane's descent to take it into an unpopulated area (The Lebanon Western Star, August 11, 1955) Goodwill reportedly said that he wanted to make certain that the plane crashed in an uninhabited area (The Wilmington News-Journal, August 6, 1955. The physical observation of a 'spiralling plane' is not consistent with a plane descending to earth under partially controlled flight.

Goodwill guided his plane down to a few thousand feet before bailing out. Askelson reportedly followed Goodwill's craft down until he saw the pilot bail out prior to returning to Wright-Patterson AFB. (The Wilmington News-Journal, August 6, 1955) . This conflicts with the statement given by

Mrs. Eugene Bevan on April 25, 1998, who said that there was 'no other plane' in the sky. An explosive thud caught her attention, and she looked up to see a plane spiralling downward along with an ejecting pilot. Mrs. Bevan added that she saw his parachute open, but was certain that there was no other aircraft in the sky. Assuming that Askelson pursued Goodwill until he parachuted to safety, a second plane should be visible to ground observers.

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Wilmington News-Journal photographer: 1955

- Telephone interview with Judy Burton, May 6, 1998
- The Wilmington News-Journal, August 5, 1955: page 1
- Follow-up telephone interview with Judy Burton, May 31, 1998

- Telephone interview with Howard Askelson, USAF ret, April 11, 1998
- The Lebanon, Ohio Western Star newspaper, Thursday, August 11, 1955: page 1
- Telephone interview with Mrs. Eugene Bevan, April 25, 1998
- Telephone interview with Mr. Neil L. Bevan, April 25, 1998
- Telephone interview with Mrs. Eugene Bevan, May 31, 1998
- The Lebanon Western Star, August 11, 1955: Page 1
- The Dayton Daily News, August 6, 1955 article by Bob McNemar
- The Wilmington News-Journal, August 6, 1955: page 1
- The Wilmington News-Journal, August 6, 1955: page 1
- The Wilmington News-Journal, August 5, 1955: page 1
- The Lebanon Western Star, August 11, 1955
- The Wilmington News-Journal, August 5, 1955