

SIXTY-FOUR YEARS AGO

(August 1944 - 2008)

By Marvin O. Maul

August 9, 1944 began a lot like any other summer morning to an eleven year-old boy growing up on a ranch in Colorado. The cows had had their early morning milking, we had eaten the usual fried eggs and bacon breakfast, and my parents, brothers and I had set out upon our usual tasks for the day.

This was haying season and the big meadow had been freshly mowed. It was time now to harness the teams of horses and get ready for a day of raking hay on the bumpy seats of the 12-foot dump rakes. Things progressed pretty much as normal through our lunch hour with the usual harness repair, visit from the Raleigh man (they sold great tasting vanilla) and other routine developments in the afternoon. Things were normal that is, until about 5:25 p.m.

At that moment, we were wrapping up the haying operations for the day, with one team having been unhitched, watered, unharnessed and fed, and the other team was closing down as well.

Our attention was diverted however, to the agonizing roar of an airplane engine out of control. About two miles south of us, we saw a large bomber with an apparent engine fire, trailing smoke! Within a few terrifying seconds, we saw a wing come off, and the giant bird began its final death spiral into the ground. Upon impact the plane exploded with an ensuing column of dense, black smoke.

We drove to the crash site as rapidly as possible, but it was obvious that there would be no survivors. The only recognizable parts of the plane were the left wing with its attached engines, and the twin vertical tail stabilizers characteristic of the B-24 Liberator bomber.

Air Force records indicated that the B-24 had been part of a flight of six B-24's based at the Pueblo Army Air Base and were on a camera bombing mission at an indicated altitude of 20,000 feet.

According to a written accounting of the crash, one of the pilots in the flight had noted that the number four engine on the ill-fated plane was afire. He radioed a warning to the

pilot of the craft, who responded that the number four propeller was "running away". The pilot immediately left the other five planes and descended to a level of about 3000 feet with the engine and nacelle enshrouded in flames. Shortly thereafter, the wing with the number four engine separated from the plane with the rest of the craft plummeting in a clock-wise spiral downward into the ground.

Local folks had begun to gather around the raging fire consuming the wreckage, but we were pitifully unable to help, with no fire extinguishing equipment within at least nine miles. Instead, we were only able to recover two of the bodies of the ten men that perished that day, August 9, 1944. A horrible thing for anyone particularly a child, to witness, and it is seared forever into my memory.

Fast forward to sixty-three years later, August 9, 2007.

On August 8, we had received a telephone call from Larry Carpenter, an individual from Estes Park specializing in aviation research who wanted to bring some visitors to the site of the wreckage for both historic and personal reasons. Apparently the site of the crash had never been accurately pinpointed for the official historical record of the sad event.

What followed is a remarkable series of events characterized as solid research combined with a good measure of astounding luck.

Mr. Carpenter had been put in touch with Bryce Gresham, an Elbert rancher with deep roots in Elbert County, who not only remembered the event 63 years ago, but witnessed the crash as well! He had a good recollection of the actual site of the wreckage. Bryce contacted Walt and Marv Maul, brothers living on the family ranch southeast of Kiowa at the time, who also witnessed the crash, so here were three sources of information of use to Carpenter who were readily agreeable to assisting in the hunt.

Here the story continues, with exciting developments beginning to unfold. Initially, Carpenter had been contacted by Chuck and Bill Marvel, a father-son pair with more than a passing interest in the ill-fated B-24, and this triggered the ensuing events.

During World War II at the Pueblo base, Chuck Marvel, a battle hardened veteran from earlier South Pacific campaigns met up with Harold Humphrey, another veteran from European campaigns, and they rapidly formed a fast friendship. During the all-too-

short duration of their friendship, "Humpy" as he was known to his friends, actually introduced Chuck to his future wife Val,

As the senior radio operator at the Pueblo base, Chuck was responsible for assigning radio operator trainees to the different flights from the base.

On August 9, 2007, after the initial contact among our search group and on the day marking the 63rd anniversary of the crash, thirteen of us gathered in the vicinity of the site. We fanned out armed with metal detectors and began the search, not knowing what to expect on a location that had been plowed as farm ground many times over the years.

After about half an hour of searching, my wife Nancy and I along with the others were getting a little discouraged after having found only bits of barbed wire and other non-crash related artifacts. However, at almost exactly the same instant Nancy came across a sizable piece of aluminum angle-iron, while Carpenter came across other unmistakable pieces of the plane. We now knew that we had located it!

After assembling several dozen pieces we all gathered around to absorb what we had accomplished, a now tightly-bound group who, twenty four hours earlier had no idea of each other's existence.

For each of us there, the most heart-rending moment happened as Chuck Marvel kneeled next to the small stack of B-24 remnants and lovingly placed several pieces of the craft into a special pouch that he had brought along. Following this, we observed several moments of silence in respect to the ten airmen who perished that day.

And it represented closure at last, to the special relationship between Chuck Marvel and Harold "Humpy" Humphrey.

In commemoration of the event, we planned at that moment to place a monument adjacent to the crash site, and to schedule a date for dedication of this monument.