

Plane crash brings back horrific memories

BY MAC MCENTIRE
NEWS STAFF WRITER

STURBRIDGE — Army Air Force Lt. Charles Collins was from Baraboo, a small town in Wisconsin, but he has become a part of this town's history.

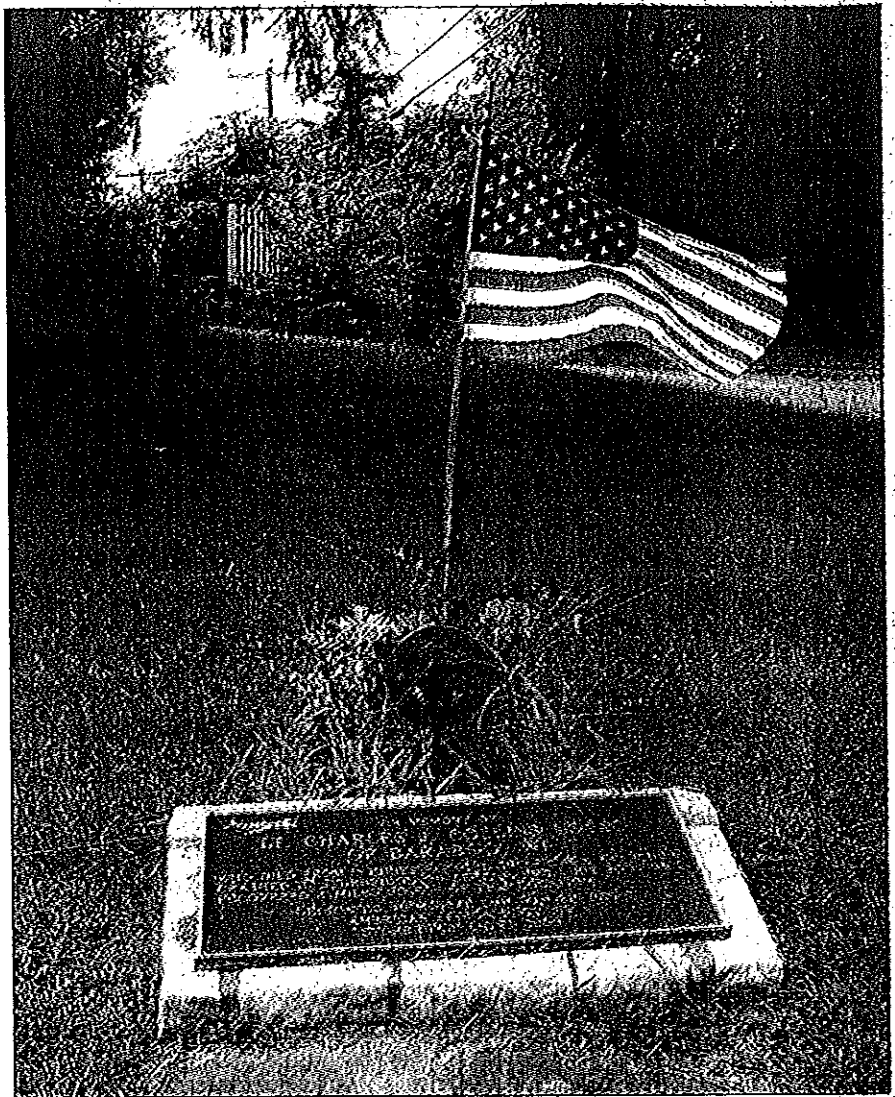
While flying over the area, Collins' plane, a P-47 Thunderbolt, crashed in Sturbridge, starting off one of the most frightening and exciting periods in the town's history.

Yesterday marked the 60th anniversary of the crash. Bob Briere of the Sturbridge Historical Society and resident Lillian Palmer, whose home is just down the road from the former crash site, met this week to reminisce about the crash.

Briere said he was 10 years old Sept. 1, 1943, living on Farquhar Road, and was helping his mother do the dishes when he heard the plane.

"We could hear it climbing and diving, over

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Mac McEntire photo

A plaque remembering Lt. Charles Collins and his doomed flight, which ended with a crash and the loss of his life in Sturbridge, has been on display at the Center School since 1995.

Historians recall horrific day for Sturbridge

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and over," he said. "I could tell it didn't sound right."

This was followed by a loud boom from off in the distance, he said.

At that moment, Palmer was in a car, on her way home from choir practice at the Sturbridge Federated Church, when she and the others in the car saw what looked like a red streak of lightning, followed by a bright red glow on the horizon.

"I thought to myself, 'It couldn't have been a plane, planes don't crash,'" she said.

Palmer's husband, Thomas Palmer Jr., was one of several volunteers who headed to the crash site to put out the flames and look for survivors.

"I was torn," she said. "I had to stay here with my children, but I knew my husband was out there in the darkness."

Volunteers managed to put out the fire, mostly by throwing dirt on it. The impact of the crash had left a crater 10 feet deep and 25 feet in diameter.

"No one was hurt, but everyone came back dirty," Palmer said.

The fire had been put out and the wreckage was searched, but Collins was nowhere to be found.

The crash occurred at around 9 p.m. The Army arrived at the crash site sometime between 2-3 a.m., and started the rescue efforts. For the next 10 days, more than 1,500 soldiers took over Sturbridge, all in a search for Collins.

During their stay in town, the soldiers stayed at the building that would eventually become the Publick House on Route 131.

Having hundreds of soldiers in town was not something the residents of Sturbridge were used to.

"It was a little scary," Palmer said. "I remember looking out my window just as two of them walked by."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Palmer said the soldiers were friendly, and visited her house a few times for a glass of water.

"They had a rule that they

couldn't fill their canteens with town water, but they did it anyway," she said. "When I asked one of them about it, he just shrugged."

After a few days, search parties had their first results. Collins' severed leg was found on Shattuck Road, leaving little hope for his survival.

Briere said a P-47 Thunderbolt has to be turned upside down for a pilot to bail out safely. Collins' plane was flying right side up, and he likely lost his leg after it caught on part of the plane while he ejected.

The search continued. Soldiers walked shoulder to shoulder through the woods and fields, with the help of bloodhounds.

Army blimps flew overhead looking for Collins' parachute. A large "S.O.S." was spotted, outlined in clay in a field in Brimfield, but an investigation proved it was the work of some local children.

Then, on the morning of Sept. 10, Collins' body was found off Mashapaug Road, hanging by his parachute

from a tree. The foliage was so thick around him that he was well covered, and could not be spotted until up close.

Briere said that before Collins died, he had taken off his helmet and placed it over where his leg was missing, probably to stop the bleeding. According to the Army's official report, Collins was flying from Bedford to Westover, when he got lost. His plane crashed when he ran out of fuel.

Collins was 26 years old. Before joining the Army, he ran a tavern in Baraboo, and was a high school boxing champion.

This was not the only wartime tragedy to befall the Collins family. In October 1944, Charles' brother, Tech. Sgt. Joseph Collins was killed in action on Leyte Island in the South Pacific.

Charles and Joseph's mother later received a Purple Heart and the Elks Medal of Valor on behalf of her sons.

Sturbridge's churches held memorial services for Collins. Although no residents had met Collins, he would always

be remembered.

In 1955, a stainless steel shaft bearing Collins' name was erected at the crash site in Sturbridge. When it was put in place, Briere said the Collins family visited the town, and took home some small pieces of metal found at the site.

"I know that sounds gruesome, but it meant a lot to them," Briere said.

On Memorial Day in 1995, the American Legion Post 109 and the Sturbridge Lions placed a plaque at the Center School building, across from Town Hall, commemorating Collins.

Among the Historical Society's records of the crash is a photocopy of a postcard Charles Collins wrote to his brother, when he was in an Army Air Force training detachment in Oklahoma. It reads: "Dear Joe, started flying today. Will tell you about it later. Love, Charlie."

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