

Three Luke Pilots take off and never return



Three AT-6 Texan's from Luke Field Arizona in flight during WWII

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March 25, 1944 started out as a routine day at Luke Field. Three pilots, 2nd Lt. Harold E. Brinkman, age 20, 2nd Lt. John L. Hesse, age 20, 2nd Lt. James M. Akridge, age 19, and passenger 2nd Lt. William T. Johnson, age 23, checked into the Luke Base School Operations Center. At 2:45pm they obtained individual local clearances to fly until 6 pm. The three pilots were not assigned to fly with their groups that day, but they wanted to get more flight time practicing their pilot skills in the AT-6 Texan trainer, known as "The Pilot Maker". It was a great day to go flying, the weather was clear and visibility was unlimited. The three AT-6C planes, serial numbers 42-49038, 41-32938, and 42-49009 took off at 3: 55pm with enough fuel aboard for a 3 ½ hour flight, but never returned. At 9:45 they were officially reported as missing. There had been no radio contact since departure. There was speculation that the three aircraft had exhausted their fuel and landed in a remote area somewhere.

An intensive search of the local area and sections of the state within flying distance was begun the next morning at 9 am. The search consisted of approximately 147 flights of over two hours duration in other AT-6 aircraft using an observer aboard. All possible areas were covered twice, and some rugged landscapes, like the San Francisco Peaks and the Grand Canyon were searched 3 or 4 times. The search continued until 12:25pm on April 1st, 1944. No trace of the three aircraft or pilots was discovered. The planes and men were lost, but not forgotten.

Just over four months later on July 28, 1944, the wreckage of one of the planes was spotted from the air near the town of Crown King in the Tower Mountains. When investigators arrived at the scene they found that one of the planes had gone down on the side of a steep canyon, but was in relatively good condition. The aircraft was confirmed by serial number to be 42-49009, the AT-6C flown by Akridge and Johnson. 2nd Lt. William T. Johnson had been killed instantly by the impact and was still in the wreckage. What mystified investigator's was that 2nd Lt. James M. Akridge was nowhere to be found? Had he bailed out or did he survive the crash and become lost in the forest? While searching for him the investigators were able to locate the other two AT-6 aircraft about a quarter mile further up the canyon. The other two planes had crashed much harder and only remnants remained. The nature and cause of the accident is unknown. It is presumed the three aircraft tried to fly up the canyon just above the tree tops, not realizing that there was a strong down draft until it was too late for them to climb out.

On October 5, 1946, two hunters discovered the skeleton remains of 2nd Lt. James M. Akridge clad in a tattered flight suit. He had survived the crash and attempted to hike out despite being injured and made it to the top of a ridge over two miles from the crash site and passed away there. The terrible accident case was finally closed and almost forgotten.

The family members of pilot 2nd Lt. Harold E. Brinkman still feel the reverberations of the crash. Pamela (Brinkman) Burns, niece of Harold E. Brinkman had learned about him through handed-down family lore and was always interested in learning more because her birthday is the same as the day Harold died. For that reason she felt a special tie to him and she began researching his accident. Her great aunt, who lived in Arizona, provided her with newspaper articles about the accident. Pam said "When I looked at them, I always wondered who he was." She later learned that the crash site had been rediscovered and documented by aviation archeologist Craig Fuller. She contacted him and made arrangements to visit the site. Pam said "Visiting his crash site has been on my bucket list".

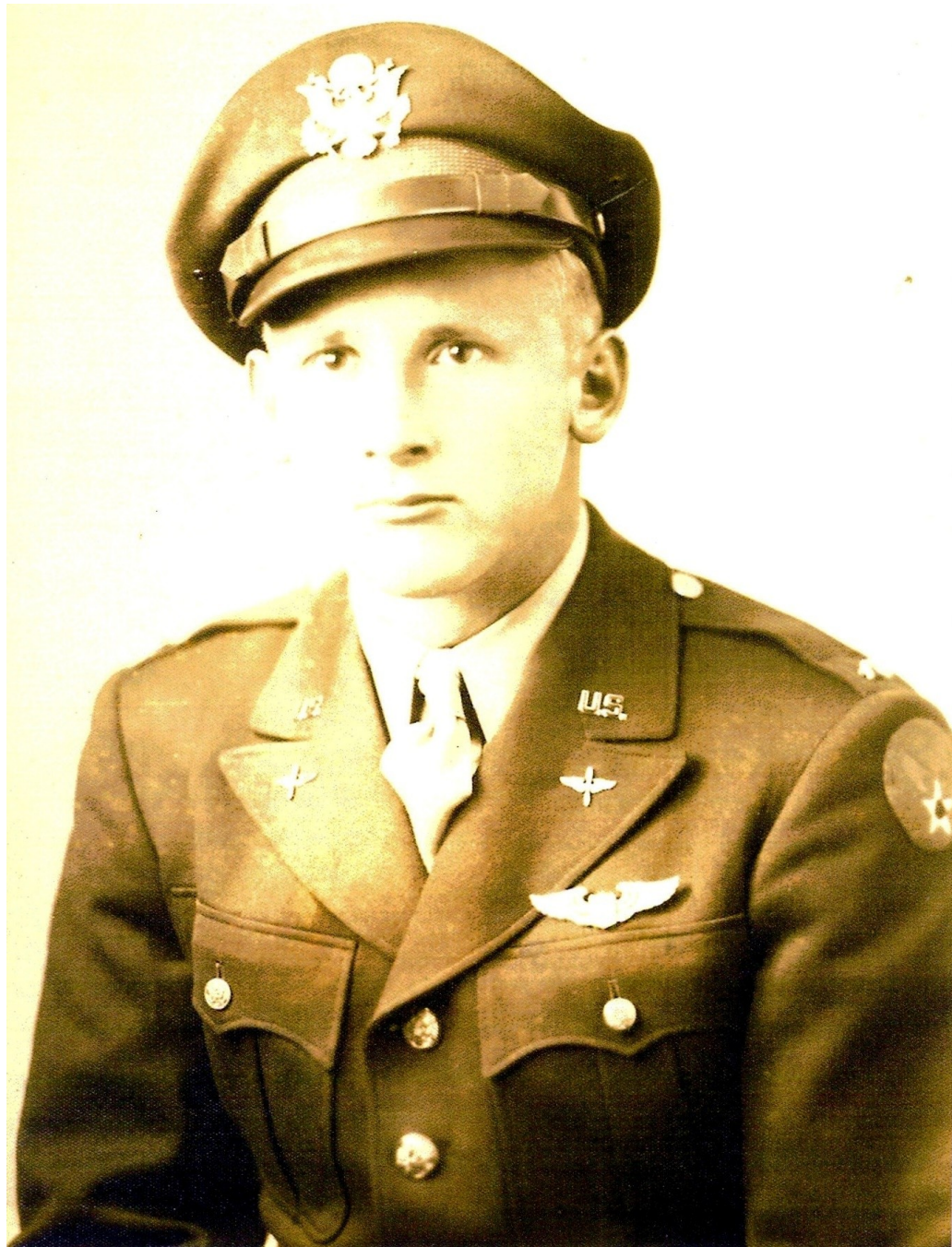
On 25 March 2009, 65 years to the day, family members traveled all the way from Iowa to visit the crash site. A local Channel 5 news crew, led by two aviation archeologists, Trey Brandt and Dave Trojan all made the difficult trip to the crash site. The hike to the remote crash site was hard, but it was a beautiful and peaceful day, probably like the day the planes crashed. After a long hike the group came upon the aircraft wreckage. Pam Burns, Don Burns and Jay Burns began exploring the wreckage and reflecting on what had happened there. As they explored the debris the aviation archeologists were able to identify the wreckage pieces and tell them what part of the plane they came from. Pam said "I think it was meant to be, for the 3 of us to go to his crash site. I was born on the day he died, March 25th. My husband Don's birthday is on July 28, the date the crash site was found. Their son Jay's birthday is October 4th. They found Lt. Akridge on October 5th."

There's something weirdly poignant about the decay that takes over a place that was once quiet and peaceful, then for a few shocking moments was the site of a terrible and violent event, and has since gradually returned to peace. Watching Pam realize one of her life long goals was a profound experience for all in attendance. She had always wanted to honor 2nd Lt. Harold E. Brinkman for his years of service by visiting the crash site of her uncle who made the ultimate sacrifice in serving his country. Pam said "I wanted him to know that he was missed and an important person in our family history. I felt it was important for a family member to visit the site and leave a memorial in honor of his short life." Pamela (Brinkman) Burns now feels a sense of peace and accomplishment, in honoring Harold, he is not forgotten. She hopes to return someday to Arizona to visit Luke Air Force Base.

If you ever visit the town of Crown King, be sure to stop in at the general store and look in the back room. A piece of one of the AT-6s is mounted on the wall as a memorial reminder to the lost crews.



Memorial to the lost crews made from one of the planes is on display at the Crown King General Store, photo by Dave Trojan



2nd Lt. Harold E. Brinkman, photo from the Burns Family collection



Hiking to the crash site, photo by Dave Trojan



Family members placing memorial near the crash site, photo by Dave Trojan



From left to right standing, Trey Brandt, Jay Burns, Don Burns, seated Pam Burns at the tail section of 2nd Lt. Harold E. Brinkman's plane, photo by Dave Trojan



Pam Burns sits in the location of the pilot's seat in the wreckage of 2nd Lt. Harold E. Brinkman's AT-6, photo by Dave Trojan