

Searching for answers at a Beech T-11 wreck site



Beech AT-11 Kansan Trainer Aircraft

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On April 12th, 1953, a Beech T-11 Kansan Trainer aircraft, serial number 42-37572, went missing on a flight to Portland Oregon. This is a story about searching for the T-11 aircraft wreck, but only finding unanswered questions. The wreck leads to more searches for the truth about what happened and finally discovering the details.

The pilot Captain Robert Vernon Blucher was recalled to active duty February 7th, 1953 and assigned to the 4704 Defense Wing, 567th Operations Squadron as Assistant Base Operations Officer at McChord AFB. Capt. He was from Caldwell, Canyon County, Idaho. Captain Blucher was an eager pilot who wanted to fly and he appeared confident in all his flights. He was checked out in the C-47, T-11 and L-20 aircraft and he had logged over 70 hours within a two month period while assigned to McChord AFB. This amount of flying was far above the time that an average pilot assigned to the base would have acquired. According to the Operations Officer, he had devoted much more time toward flying and not enough attention to his other duties. Capt. Blucher had a total of over 1800 pilot hours and over 560 hours in the T-11 aircraft.

The Beech AT-11 Kansan Trainer aircraft was a military version of the twin-engine Beechcraft Model 18 commercial transport. Modifications included a transparent nose, a bomb bay, internal bomb racks and provisions for flexible guns for gunnery training. The AT-11 Kansan was used to train Bombardiers during and after WWII and over 90% of all of the Bombardiers in WWII were trained in the AT-11. The AT-11 could carry ten 100 pound general purpose or practice bombs. Beech built 1,582 AT-11 type aircraft and AT-11 serial number 42-37572 was manufactured October 26th, 1943. In June 1948 it was re-designated as a T-11. The T-11 aircraft s/n 42-37572 had flown over 3700 hours since it was manufactured.



AT-11 being loaded with practice bombs at Victorville Army Air Force Base in CA



Inside AT-11 Kansan loaded with bombs and AT-11 dropping bombs

The history of the flight was detailed in the official accident report. Captain Blucher departed McChord AFB Washington, April 12th, 1953 in T-11, s/n 42-37572, enroute Portland Oregon. He safely landed at Portland and refueled. He then departed Portland at 1020 PST and landed at Eugene, Oregon at 1103 PST. He departed Eugene at 1247 PST enroute Redmond Oregon and landed at 1420 PST. He departed Redmond at 1953 PST enroute Portland via The Dalles (largest city of Wasco County, Oregon). He was last reported over The Dalles at 2025 PST, altitude 4000 ft. with an estimated time of arrival of 2056 PST at Portland, but he never arrived and was declared missing. Weather at the time was reported as 3000 scattered and 15 miles visibility, but the weather had deteriorated rapidly after the pilot had received his last forecast. The search started the next morning.

An intensive search for the Beech T-11 aircraft was conducted by the Air Force and the Civil Air Patrol. According to news reports, the pilot was last sighted over Hood River enroute to Portland. He radioed The Dalles that he was running short of gas and was returning to The Dalles. No further radio contact was reported. Over 20 civilian and military planes joined in the search over Skamania County and the Cascade Locks area to look for signs of wreckage. At first, the searchers hoped to find the missing plane on a river bar. As the search continued, the search planes examined the surrounding hills and several miles inland from the hood river valley. Heavy timber forest covered most of the search area and aircraft searched the same areas as many as five times to adequately cover the rough terrain. A total of 202 sorties and over 438 hours were flown searching for the missing aircraft. Searchers were generally of the opinion that the plane must have struck a hillside in poor weather. The intensive search was abandoned April 23rd, 1953, after no trace of the aircraft was found.

The plane and pilot were missing until October 24th 1953, when by chance, a deer hunter found the wrecked plane hanging from the trees in the middle of the forest. The badly broken and scattered wreck was located in the deep woods in a saddle at approximately the 3300 foot level between mountains. Examination of the wreckage revealed that the airplane had been under climbing power at the time of the crash and was flying in a southerly direction attempting to cross the ridge. Mountain peaks in the area were approximately 3500 feet high. Trees in the vicinity were 150- 200 feet high and the forward part of the fuselage was found hanging in the trees 20-25 feet off the ground. The aircraft did not burn upon contact with the trees, but the airframe was ripped apart. There was evidence of small gasoline fires, but they were evidently put out by the rain on the night of the accident. Dental records and personal effects were used to positively identify the pilot's remains. Captain Robert Vernon Blucher was 31 years old at the time of his death. He is buried at the Greenwood Cemetery, Bend, Deschutes County, Oregon. Plot Section 1; Block 1; Row L; Grave 32. Find- A-Grave-Memorial: <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/30867401/robert-vernon-blucher>



Crash site located in thick forest, photo from accident report



Wreckage of T-11, 42-37572 in the trees, photos from the accident report

Exactly what happened during the flight will never be known for certain. The Accident Investigation Board concluded that Capt. Blucher flew into deteriorating weather conditions while on a Visual Flight Rules (VFR) clearance. It was further believed that he then attempted to circumnavigate the weather and got off course to the north in an attempt to get back to the Columbia River valley. He crashed when he was unable to clear a mountain ridge. Despite the experience and skill of the pilot, the weather got the best of him. The Air Force felt that the inaccessibility of the aircraft wreckage precluded economical reclamation, so the aircraft wreck was left in place, written off and almost forgotten.

The T-11 aircraft wreck was nearly forgotten until Armen Woosley became interested in it. Armen Woosley was born in January 1952 and early in his life, maybe as young as three years old, he remembers visiting the Sid Ostroski family. Sid Ostroski had found the military plane wreck on Grassy Knoll northwest of Willard, Washington while hunting. Sid had recovered a few artifacts from the wreck and he showed them to young Armen. The artifacts included cockpit gauges and the orange and white parachute. Armen thought the artifacts were really neat and they left an impression on the boy. He still remembers seeing the parts more than 64 years later.

In 1974, Armen and his friend Jeff Walker decided to go see the wreck for themselves and asked Sid for directions. They drove as close as possible to the location and hiked into it with no problems. At that time the wreckage remained where it had fallen and was all there. He recalled that the wreckage was scattered over an acre from when the plane was torn to pieces as it crashed through the timber. He recalls seeing parts of the instrument panel, a large piece of fuselage with the star and bar insignia and a radial engine. Unfortunately, they did not take any pictures at that time. They did not know the details about the accident and Armen had lingering questions about the plane and pilot.

Another 44 years passed before Armen had his interest rekindled about the wreck. Armen was a professional logger and he worked in the deep forest for many years. He never forgot about the wreck in the forest and he wanted to finally answer questions that he long held. In early 2018 he started gathering information and contacting people that might know more about it. By then he only had a foggy idea where it was located, but he was determined to revisit the crash site and this time learn the story behind the wreck.

Armen contacted his friend and Aviation Archeologist David McCurry from Pasco, WA. A search was planned for early spring but last minute illness caused David and his wife Vicki and their friend Don Hinton to cancel. On May 21st, 2018 Armen and his friends Lyle Schwarz and fellow logger Greg Koch once again drove to as close as possible to the location and hiked into the forest. Lyle was the first to find a piece of aluminum with rivets in it so they knew they were close. Within 45 minutes they located the central mass of the wreckage. This time they photographed the major pieces before departing and scouting a better trail back to the crash site.

In June 2018 Armen did further research in the Skamania County Pioneer Newspaper for information about the wreck. He discovered articles from when the plane was lost

and found in 1953. He learned that his friend Sid was not the first one to find the plane as he had always been told. Instead, it was a man named Louis Larson who was another person Armen had also known when he was a young man. He also found stories about how the Grassy Knoll Lookout was rebuilt during the summer of 1953 by the Forest Service. They had planes from the military dropping supplies into the crews working on the lookout during the summer of 1953. The crash site is roughly a mile from the lookout, so planes flying in supplies would have flown over the crash site repeatedly throughout that summer and never noticed the wreck.

Armen kept in contact with David McCurry in hopes of learning more about the wreck and to obtain a copy of the official accident report planned a new search mission. On the morning of July 21st, 2018, a group of Aviation Archaeologists led by Armen began the hike to the T-11 wreck. To reach the location of the crash site required hiking up 900 feet of a 3500-foot mountain, then descending down several hundred feet into a saddle between mountains. The following are pictures of the wreck site:



The weather cooperated and it was a beautiful day to go hiking. The wreck is located in a saddle at approximately the 3300 foot level between mountains near Grassy Knoll northwest of Willard, Washington, photo by Dave Trojan



Hiking down through thick timber required climbing over huge fallen trees. Trees that were 200 feet tall in 1953 were 300 feet tall in 2018, photo by Sam Parker



The wreckage remained hidden until the group was almost right on top of it. Most the plane was there, but it was quickly apparent that it had been partly salvaged. The entire cockpit section and one of the engines were missing. The aircraft wreckage was shredded and scattered among the trees, photo by Dave Trojan



The largest piece of wreckage, photo by Armen Woosley



The letter "U" from USAF on the wing, photo by Armen Woosley



The one engine was missing several cylinder heads that had been unbolted and removed. Who salvaged the wreck and when is unknown, photo by Sam Parker



Several large pieces were marked with yellow X's indicating a known wreck. Overall, it was an amazing wreck site because so much still remained. Photo by Dave Trojan



The group carefully examined the wreckage. Aviation Archaeologists were able to identify all the major parts and several details that Armen had missed during his previous trips to the wreck, photo by Dave McCurry



Numerous bomb racks and shackles were at the site. They confirmed that the Beech T-11 was in the bombardier training configuration, photo by Dave Trojan



Weather-beaten star & bar insignia on a piece of wing, photo by Armen Woosley



Large empennage section upside down against a tree, photo by Sam Parker



Several Beech part numbers were found along with a couple of data tags. Found on one box was a data tag for the “CS-47” dated 1942. It was the case for the BC-230 Transmitter Coil Set, part of the SCR-183/283 radio, photo by Dave Trojan.



Plugs and wiring were all there, but the radio equipment was missing. It looked like all the equipment had been unplugged and salvaged, photo by Dave Trojan.



Remnants of fabric remained on one of the wing flaps dated August 1952. They must have stenciled a date on it after it was changed, photo by Dave Trojan.



This large piece is the floor of the aircraft. Both sides and the top of the fuselage were ripped off. A 35mm motion picture camera was mounted in the round hole to film each bomb run to record students bombing scores, photo by Sam Parker.

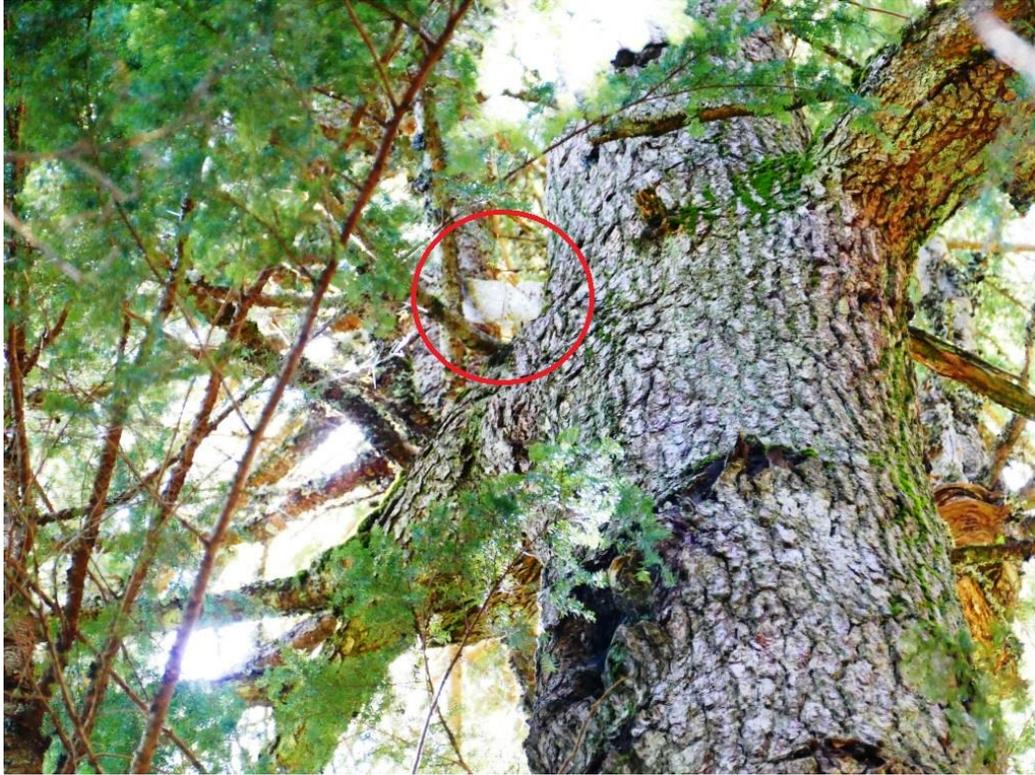


Trees have grown up right through the wreckage, photo by Dave Trojan



Further downslope, we spotted trees that had their tops cut off from when the plane cut through the timber. In one tree near the top, we spotted a piece of aluminum still stuck in the tree (circled in photo). The piece was a reminder of the violent collision as the plane crashed through the thick timber.

Photo by Armen Woosley



Aluminum high up in the tree zoomed in circled in red, photo by Armen Woosley



Vicki uncovering parts of the wreckage, photo by Dave Trojan



The group was able to prop up the left side of the fuselage. In the photo are Vicki McCurry, Lyle Schwarz, Dave Trojan, Don Hinton, Dave McCurry and Sam Parker



Before leaving the site, a couple of American flags were left behind in memory of the lost pilot. May he rest in peace!

Through all these many years Armen Woosley had always wanted to know the details of the accident and also the human-interest side of the story. The Air Force accident report and this story have immensely helped tie the details together for him. Also by having experienced Aviation Archaeologists clarify details at the crash site helped bring closure to his quest for answers. He now feels that by having visited the crash site three times, the questions were finally answered.

PS. Armen is working with the son of Sid Ostroski to locate the box of gauges and other artifacts from the wreck that he stored after his dad passed away. He would really like to persuade him to donate them to the Skamania County Museum along with this story and accident report to fully convey the local history event.