

A Kid's-Eye-View of "A B-47 is Down Over the Atlantic"

Getting this tale on paper has been an exercise in procrastination. My name is Teri Kidd, my pop is Maj. John L. Brennan, USAF, and it's his story not mine. I thought it would be easy to tell this story but it turns out that my facts are not facts at all, only third party stories that overlay a kid's-eye-view of an event that changed my family's trajectory in 1960.

Luckily, Jim Diamond, from the B-47 Stratojet Association and my dad's co-pilot, Col. Dick Glogowski agreed that they'd add real detail, if only I'd get something down on paper, so I'm pressing on.

Jim, who maintains the Association's site, www.B-47.com added his own on-the-ground details of the event for me, beyond the well-researched report, *A-B-47 is Down Over the Atlantic*, by Sigmund Alexander. Thank goodness for the B-47 Association because they have a wealth of knowledge and connections everywhere. Jim led me to Col. Richard Glogowski, my dad's co-pilot. My conversations with Col. Glogowski and his wife, Donna, both who've agreed to help me with this, have been priceless, since they were close friends of my parents (which I was not aware of as a child). I'm quite grateful for their insights on this event in my dad's life, and moved by their warmth and willingness to share. Mine is a child's view, after all.

The morning of September 15th my mother was getting everyone ready for school. She was brushing my younger sister's hair and it seems to me she was in the hallway, but I'm sure it was the kitchen. The phone rang and she picked it up. Someone on the other end said something and my mother's face screwed up into a little twist, turning white almost, her dark brown hair seeming, in my memory, to be even darker than it was against her devoid-of-blood face. I remember her saying something to the caller. Then I don't remember anything, except that something was wrong, and daddy wasn't okay. Or he was okay, but only barely.

From B-47.com's report:

"Every Monday on various SAC B-47 bases in the United States three aircraft were sent to the UK, Spain, and Morocco to replace three aircraft and their crews that were on nuclear alert. The operation named Reflex started in 1957 and was an integral part of the 24-hour alert program. Prior to 1957, B-47 wings were deployed overseas for 90 days as their B-29 predecessors had been..."

The flight of three aircraft of the 380th BW at Plattsburgh, NY scheduled on Monday Sept. 13, 1960 to RAF Brize-Norton was cancelled to avoid hurricane Donna. The takeoff was rescheduled for the next day, Tuesday. The three aircraft in the flight were Holt 66, the leader; Holt 61, #2 and Holt 53, #3.

The two aircraft involved in the collision were Holt 61 and Holt 53. The aircraft commander of Holt 66 was Major Dick Blakeslee, Wally Barnes was the copilot, and Earl Moorehouse the navigator. The aircraft commander of Holt 61, 53-1967, was Capt. John L. Brennan, a veteran of World War II with over 4,500 flying hours and 763 hours in the B-47. His copilot was Capt.

Richard Glogowski who had graduated pilot school in March 1958 and had a total of 718 flying hours with 170 B-47 in the B-47. The navigator was 1st Lt. John A. Carnochan.

Holt 53, 51-7047, was under the command of Capt. Robert C. Huber, who had over 2800 flying hours of which 546 hours were in the B-47. The 380th BW was copilot 1st Lt. Duane E. Bartlett's first operational assignment after graduating pilot training in December 1957. He had 740 flying hours and 194 hours in the B-47-The navigator was 1st Lt. Gary I. Simpson.

Both crews involved in the collision could be considered as typical experienced B-47 crews of the period. However, Capt. Brennan was by far among the more experienced B-47 aircraft commanders.

The flight was proceeding as planned and the cell was given clearance to climb to 33,000 feet. Shortly thereafter Capt. Huber proceeded to fly in close formation with Capt. Brennan's aircraft. It is surmised that Huber's crew had come in close to take pictures. Taking pictures during flight across the Atlantic or during refueling was not an uncommon occurrence.

I remember her hanging up and everything was all emotional and helter-skelter as we trailed after her...then she was in their bedroom, and dad's cigar, which he ritually left in the ash tray on their dresser when he left on a trip was not there and she freaked out because he always left his cigar in the ash tray when he left. Only he had forgotten to leave it—the only time he forgot in all his leavings and my mom was panicked beyond words and out of her mind with anguish. She started calling anyone and everyone she knew, which of course were all air force pilot's wives. I don't even know their first names, since back in those days children addressed all adults by their last names...Mrs. Blakeslee, who lived across the way (her husband was the commander of Holt #66), Mrs. Glogowski, who's husband was my dad's copilot. Others, I'm sure. I don't remember if we went to school or not, but sending us to school makes sense, since then she could freak out in peace, without an audience. Later, the house seemed full of people, or maybe it wasn't, and Daddy was all right, but others weren't....

“Unfortunately, Huber positioned his right wing under the downwash from Brennan's left wing. To maintain his position, Capt. Huber had to pull back on his control column to overcome the downwash to fly straight and level. Reducing power slowly would have allowed Huber's aircraft to leave the downwash safely. Instead, Huber apparently increased power and once his wing was out of the downwash the nose of his aircraft rose dramatically since his control column was pulled back. Huber's aircraft then proceeded to collide with Brennan's aircraft and was last seen spiraling toward the sea...”

An intensive air and sea search was conducted by Air Force SA-16s, RAF Shackeltons and ships of the Royal and US Navies; but they failed to find any trace of Holt 53 that had gone down 250 miles off the Irish coast.”

It's very spooky to be so afraid of...what? Now, as a grown woman, I understand what my mom feared, but then, my mom wasn't only a mom...she was a barometer. And if she felt fear, so did I. I'm not sure I fully understood anything at the time. I don't know if military families purposely shield kids from the danger their parent(s) face, or if as kids, you don't imagine your pop “spiraling toward the sea” and what that might mean to your life. But if those who were on Holt

#53 had kids, their kids found out what it meant. Their wives found out what it meant. I had not a clue then, but today I imagine other kids in other military families experiencing that drama. They'll know a life diverted from the one they expected.

“Brennan's aircraft sustained major damage but with exceptional skill he kept his aircraft in the air. The rear mount on the #1 engine broke and the nose of the engine pivoted upward creating considerable drag. The left fuel tank was torn from the aircraft. The ECM access door was forced open, and only ten feet of the left horizontal stabilizer remained, control of the left horizontal stabilizer was gone, the #2 engine, though damaged, continued to operate at 70 %.”

My dad loved flying. He enlisted in the Army Air Force in August 1940, just out of high school. The family myth is that he truly flew to live. During WWII he earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and several other awards. My mother had a photo on the living room wall with him and his crew kissing their parachutes, which leads me to believe he was shot down (I'm continuing my research on this). He served in Korea, too. I remember after this mid-air collision people saying that the only way they survived was because he was one of those “fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants” pilots who knew flying and knew his aircraft. Sorta Jimmy Stewart in that 1955 movie, Strategic Air Command. Only my dad was way handsomer and braver. For sure.

“Capt. Brennan had done a superb job of flying and landing the airplane at Shannon despite the drag created by the damaged number #1 engine, damaged left horizontal stabilizer and the lost horizontal control of the left stabilizer. The next day articles and pictures appeared in both Irish and English papers. The September 15, 1960 copy of the London Daily Mirror carried a headline “The Pilot is a hero” along with a picture of Brennan and his crippled aircraft.”

My mom always talked about the great luck that he landed at Shannon, because my younger sister's name is Shannon. Her game would go like this: she would ask out of the blue, “Question: “Coincidence?” To which the proper response was, “No! It's because Shannon is our sister's name, so it's a miracle.” In those less cynical days, we believed in miracles and God's intercession if it wasn't your time. And we were so grateful to get our dad back.

While the Irish hailed my pop as a hero, SAC certainly didn't think he was...

“On his return to Pittsburgh, Capt. Brennan faced an accident review board. Capt. Brennan did not receive any accolades as he had in the English and Irish newspapers but was discharged from the Air Force.

Having an accident in SAC was a heinous unforgivable sin and Capt. Brennan was a sinner. A former member of the accident board cynically summed up the action of the accident board as Capt. Brennan being told to take a hike on interstate 85, the highway that was located in front of Plattsburgh AFB.

With his jet experience, the FAA, (Federal Aviation Authority), hired Capt. Brennan to fly check rides on commercial 707 pilots. John Brennan retired from the FAA and died a few years ago (1990).

Capt. Richard Glogowski stayed on with the 380th where he became an aircraft commander. In an ironic twist of fate Dick flew Holt 61, 53-1967, to the bone yard in 1965. Walking away from

the aircraft he recalled the surprise, fear, the prayers and grief he experienced the day of the accident. “

Col. Glogowski tells me that the “surprise, fear, the prayers and grief he experienced” didn’t end on the day of the accident. Everyone felt badly about the lost men on Holt 53. They weren’t just co-workers, they were friends, too. “Your dad performed one hell of a job of airmanship,” he told me recently. “We lost some friends and it hurt. Your dad took it to heart.”

She came to our house, one of the wives of the downed plane’s crew...I expect she wanted to know what happened, a personal explanation beyond the sanitized official report. Maybe she wanted to face my dad and hear his words. Did she blame him? Was she angry? With a child’s view, I only saw and heard them from down the hallway and after a time, as she was leaving, I could see my dad was visibly distressed. The woman’s back was to me and in my memory she’s wearing a red dress, and has dark hair. Maybe they hugged for a moment as he walked her to the door. I saw her put her hand out and he took it, she said goodbye and was gone.

My mom was so protective of my Pop. I’m sure they shared many private moments of healing tenderness over this. Do you feel guilt when it’s you that comes home? When it’s you that’s not the widow? Do you hold your head up, grateful for your life and spouse, or do you look away, thinking you don’t deserve your good fortune? You read in hero’s stories that returning warriors experience this. Is that how my parents felt? As their child, I felt no guilt, I suppose because I didn’t recognize the passing of the Holt 53 crew. In retrospect, I’m not sure I recognized that my father survived. All I knew is what all military kids know: my dad came home again, like he had tens of times before.

My mom never felt that the Air Force treated him right. For as long as I can remember, she always said that without his skill as a pilot, his plane would have gone down, too. Col. Glogowski told me that my dad “saved our lives that night,” and I believe his memory of the event is true.

I believe it to be true because my dad, Capt. Brennan, was one of the most “get-it-together” people I ever met. As a dad, he wasn’t much for emotion; he was always good when the chips were down, and believed that you didn’t have to feel like doing something in order to get it done. He was extraordinarily self-disciplined. As his daughter, I remember the utter unimportance of thinking I couldn’t accomplish a thing if he said I was capable of it; he considered it done and I and my siblings never imagined to tell him he was wrong. We accomplished lot of things we never thought we were capable of, because of him. I am confident his self-discipline was in great evidence during that flight.

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