

Crash of the Mountain King

(And the ghost of the Molly B.)

By Capt. D.R. Rhein

High on a hilltop

The old king sits

He is now so old and grey

He has nigh lost his wits

[The Fairies, by William Allingham](#)

Introduction

The Consolidated B-24 Liberator was an American heavy bomber used by allied forces during World War II. Over 18,000 were built, and it is not well known that almost as many were lost in non-combat crashes as in actual combat, either through training accidents or mechanical malfunction. The aircraft was difficult to fly, and often in the hands of pilots with little time in type. Many of these crashes were within the United States, including one on the side of Mt. Mitchell North Carolina, the skeleton of which remains today. The crash of the “Molly B” in our story is fictitious but based on actual crashes of the time and place.

The Beechcraft B200 King Air is a twin-engine turboprop flown extensively for charter and corporate use, although many are owned by private owners for personal use. An all-weather aircraft the B200 evolved from the earlier Beechcraft model 200, which was introduced in 1969. Today’s prices can run between one to two million dollars, depending on condition, and time remaining on the engines until they reach life limits, when the engines must be overhauled or replaced. This can cost over a million dollars for two new engines, and seriously impact the value of the aircraft.

Prologue

February 14th, 1944 04:00 Zulu, military time. Approximately 200 miles northeast of Atlanta Army Airfield, B-24 Bomber ‘Molly B’ registration number 442146.

“Navigator to captain.”

“Go ahead.”

“Skipper, I’m having trouble keeping the Atlanta range tuned; are you receiving the tone okay?”

“It’s been cutting in and out, and I see ice forming on the wings. All the de-ice stuff is on. Engineer, take a look to see if the loop antenna is iced up.”

“Yep, it’s iced up pretty good, Skipper.”

“Radio, any luck with Atlanta?”

“Nothing Skipper, everything’s dead, I think we’re iced up pretty good.”

“Pete, let’s climb up to fourteen,” said the pilot as he puffed on his Camel and inflated the de-ice boots yet again.

“Okay, Skipper, but we don’t have clearance for that altitude.”

The co-pilot increased the power on the four engines raising the nose to climb attitude. A sudden shudder coursed through the airplane.

“Uh-h, Skipper, we’re not indicating a climb. We’re getting a lot of vibration, and we seem to be stuck at ten thousand.”

“Crap! We’re building up too much ice! I have the airplane, Pete,” said the captain as he took the controls.

“You have the airplane, Skipper,” stated the co-pilot as he released the controls.

“Skipper, there goes number four.”

“Carb heat on!”

“It is on! There goes number two!”

“Atlanta, Atlanta, Atlanta, Army two one four six, in the blind, Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. Iced up, two engines out, losing altitude in the vicinity of....”

February 14th, 2014 03:30 Zulu. Greenville, South Carolina

Bruce paced the pilot's lounge to the point that a track was worn in the carpet. He'd been here two days and was ready to go home, a condition often called 'get home itis' by experienced pilots. The King Air gleamed under the hangar lights but still had mechanics hovering around it, now way past the promised delivery date. Authorizing overtime seemed like a good idea at the time, yet Bruce was getting worried what his boss would say about it now that so much had been used with no end in sight.

Finally, with the clock showing just past eleven pm (03:30 Zulu), Bruce couldn't stand it any more and swiftly walked past the security line on the hangar floor, prepared to confront the staff.

"Hey Bruce, we were coming to get you," said the lead mechanic, Mike, who Bruce had known for a number of years.

"Ok, what's up Mike?"

"When we called you two days ago to tell you the part was in, and we'd have it installed by the time you got here, we didn't know the wrong part was sent." He waved his hand at the plane in frustration. "The original problem was that the circuit breaker for the pitot static system kept tripping, which was caused by a short in the electrical harness for a portion of that system, and we ordered parts to correct that."

"Yeah, I know it kept getting worse." said Bruce, "I was worried about a fire every time I flew this bucket."

"Yesterday I told you the new harness was not assembled correctly for a B200 so we had to unwrap it, and get all the wires heading to the right pins in the connector - all this *after* we had it installed. It turns out the harness that Beechcraft shipped was for a different model King Air. Good news is that it all works now."

"Great! So can I get out of here soon? We have a lot of bad weather coming from the North."

"Yep, I think it safe to file for a departure about 11:30 - you need fuel?"

"No, the tanks are half full so that should be plenty, thanks," Bruce said as he walked into the weather room to file his flight plan. He had already received a thorough weather briefing from Flight Service to know what was coming.

Bruce had made this trip before and calculated he needed about a hundred gallons of jet fuel for the trip, leaving him about a hundred and fifty on arrival, which was plenty of reserve. He estimated the flight time to be a little over an hour and a half so a departure at eleven thirty should get him on the ground sometime after one, and maybe home by two.

He filed an IFR flight plan hoping to be approved to leave Greenville (GSP) then pick up V185 (Airways) and connect to V35 all the way to Charleston, West Virginia (HVQ). The minimum altitude was nine thousand feet because of terrain, so he filed that.

After the flight service briefer accepted the flight plan, Bruce gathered up his flight case and charts then headed out to the aircraft, which was now outside. Bruce signed the final maintenance paperwork before loading up.

Fifteen minutes later the King Air B200, with its Pratt and Whitney PT6A turboprop engines, was humming along in its departure from Greenville on its way to Charleston. Bruce loved the sound the engines made. The seventeen hundred combined horsepower could be felt coursing throughout the aircraft in its climb to nine thousand feet.

Traffic was light, and the ATC controller cleared the King Air on its way along the requested route. Bruce noticed that the pitot static circuit breaker stayed in, and the altimetry seemed to be working properly.

"King Air three three alfa echo, Atlanta Center," the King air's radio came alive.

"King Air three three alfa echo, go ahead," replied Bruce.

"Three three alfa echo, previous aircraft on V35 reported light icing at ten thousand - vicinity of BUSIC intersection."

"Roger, three three alfa echo." *Hmm*, thought Bruce, *that wasn't in the forecast*, turning on the windshield and pitot static heat systems. The breaker held fast, and the electrical load meter showed a rise in current indicating proper operation.

Bruce hated using V35, which went right by Mount Mitchell, the highest mountain peak east of the Mississippi. Notorious for turbulence, this mountain had a bad reputation among pilots, with numerous aircraft crashes on it and in the surrounding Smoky Mountains. Its reputation over the years was well-deserved. He knew he'd be a lot happier when he passed Holston Mountain, his next VOR navigation point along the

airway. Going around would have been an option, if the forecast had been worse, but he'd need more fuel, only adding to the cost.

"Three three alfa echo, report altitude."

"Atlanta Center, I'm level at niner thousand."

"Three three alfa echo, radar contact lost, two miles north of BUSIC intersection. We don't know why we lost contact; we usually have good radar coverage in that area at nine thousand. Contact Atlanta Center on 127.85 at ROANS intersection and ... confirm squawking four six one two at nine thousand."

"Roger, level niner thousand and squawking four six one two... Three three alfa echo."

Bruce turned on the wing leading edge lights and noticed ice had formed on the wings. He inflated the boots and the ice was shed. Grabbing his flashlight, he shined the light on the windshield noticing a layer of ice there, too. "Not good!" he shouted, "There should be no ice there if the heat was working."

Bruce reduced the power a bit waiting for the reduction in airspeed, but none came. He was still showing two hundred twenty knots with no indication of any altitude change. He raised the nose a bit, also no indication of a change, not vertical speed, not airspeed. Nothing! "Oh crap!!" *The pitot static system was clearly iced up*, he thought, as he mentally ran the emergency checklist. "What the heck is my altitude!" he mumbled as he reached for the alternate static source selector, just getting his hand on the handle when - **Bam!** The nose pitched down violently. It was all Bruce could do to hold it up, **Bam!** Tree tops and branches hammered the aircraft as Bruce lost control. "Oh shit!" The aircraft made its final plunge --- **Bam!**