

# Bethlehem Pays the Price for Freedom 1961

The Bethlehem Gadfly Bethlehem Moments, Fun Stuff, Gadfly's posts November 18, 2018

*See also the “Veterans Day, Bethlehem, 2018” (Nov. 11) and “Developers, leave this park alone” (Nov.16) posts. Gadfly stumbled on to this story while researching Triangle Park. Thanks to Dana Grubb.* On November 8, 1961, 14 Bethlehem “boys” died near Richmond, Virginia, in what was described as the “Lehigh Valley’s worst toll” in a plane crash, as “the greatest single air tragedy ever to affect the Lehigh Valley,” and as “the second worst for a single non-military aircraft in U.S. history.” The 14 boys — young men, really, ages 17-22 — were part of 29 from the Lehigh Valley and 77 overall who died — new Army inductees and crew members headed to basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

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The “happy-go-lucky” Bethlehem residents gathered early morning at the Salvation Army, bused to Wilkes-Barre where they were inducted in the afternoon, then boarded a plane, which after a stop in Baltimore to pick up more recruits, crashed near Richmond shortly after 9pm. All died in the fire subsequent to the crash except only two crew members. News reports described “the fuselage [of Imperial Airlines’ Lockheed Constellation], looking like a crushed cigar, gaping gash in its top, mired in the muck” on the outskirts of the airport.

The tragedy hit our town hard. There were stories of joking at departure about heading to “warmer southern temperatures,” of promises to be home for Christmas, of last words to mothers like “I love you, Mom.” It was the first plane ride for some. Two brothers and their next-door neighbor — life-long buddies — were among the victims. One victim lived “a few doors away” from Mayor Earl Schaffer. Some had joined the service because “unable to find steady work.” One had two jobs, supporting a struggling family. One was engaged. One had a girl whom he liked a lot and didn’t want to leave. One had a girl who loved him like a sister. One had enormous hands and was nicknamed “Duke” like John

Wayne. One had a pet dog, his “pride and joy,” who “cried pitifully all morning” after the news.

The father of the brothers regretted turning down a last drink with his sons: “I would give anything to be able to have one last drink with them.” A grieving mother ran from her house — a doctor had to be called. She was never the same. There were reports of premonitions of disaster among the parents.

Communication about the tragedy was chaotic. Many families were awakened from sleep in the early hours of November 9 by phone calls from reporters. Because of the fire, identification of the incinerated bodies was difficult. One was identified only by a class ring. Telegrams from the Army were slow in coming. After agonizing waits, some families weren’t notified officially till 8am. 6 listed as dead turned out not to be so. They had not made the trip.

These Bethlehem men were victims of our Cold War with the Communists. The Berlin Wall was erected in August 1961. President Kennedy increased the draft in response. The *Bethlehem Globe-Times* editorial provided the larger political frame around this tragedy:

The lives which these young men gave before they ever donned a uniform is one of the ironic tragedies of the Cold War. While they were headed for duty as part of a tactical military build up which is destined to save us from a hot war, their death is a grim reminder that there is no such thing as a “bloodless war.”

To the families, no words can be written that will ease their pain and suffering. To the rest of us, no incident could illustrate with more impact the price which we as a nation must pay in the protracted struggle between the free world and the Communist world.

In a bitter punctuation to this local tragedy, however, the death of these young un-uniformed soldiers has been described as a “useless sacrifice.” The horror of the crash triggered a national investigation of the way U.S. military were transported on substandard, unregulated private airlines called “supplemental carriers.” The Civil Aeronautics Board soon issued a report that was as devastating as the crash. *Time* magazine reported, “it seemed a wonder that Imperial’s Constellation had got off the ground in the first place.”

The *Time* article cited the following problems: the pilot had failed some of his flight tests, and Imperial Airlines planes regularly had so many problems they routinely took up half the time of a Federal Aviation Inspector who reported hydraulic leakages, faulty fuel indicators, improper rigging of fuel mixture controls, bald tires, and fuel seeping out of the plane and onto the ground. In addition, *Time* noted the doomed plane's fuel was contaminated with rust, that the crews couldn't determine the condition of the plane because the logbooks were not up to date, and the confusion in the cockpit that led to the loss of the fuel-starved engines. Perhaps the revelation most indicative of the miserable quality of airplane maintenance was that of the Chief Flight Engineer, who recounted not having a part for a motor on an Imperial Airlines plane and substituted a piece taken from a 1954 Mercury automobile. It's small but at least some solace that the "useless" deaths of these Bethlehem residents and others led to useful reforms in military transport operation that would protect the lives of similar young "boys" into our day.



Our town marked the tragedy with a monument dedicated June 8, 1962, that for a long time resided at Triangle Park, 3rd and Wyandotte, was rededicated June 8, 1986 (State Senator Fred B. Rooney and Mayor Gordon Payrow presided), and now resides on the edge of the Rose Garden near the corner of 8th Avenue and Union Boulevard, and can be readily seen there and, more importantly, reflected on as you drive by. The monument was meant to serve as a reminder. Sometimes we have to be reminded about the reminder.

*This event will be the subject of the next Bethlehem Moment at City Council.*

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See:

“29 Area Army Recruits Killed in Fiery Virginia Plane Crash.” *Bethlehem Globe-Times*, November 9, 1961: 1.

“A Few Discrepancies.” *Time*, December 15, 1961.

Monument Honors 14 Plane Victims.” *Bethlehem Globe-Times*, June 9, 1962: 13.

Jennifer Rittenour, “25 Years Later, Pain Of Air Crash Lingers.” *Morning Call*, November 9, 1986.

Frank Whelan, “1961 crash brought regulatory changes.” *Morning Call*, December 2, 2001.

Daniel Patrick Sheehan, “When the Lehigh Valley lost its youth in a Virginia marsh.” *Morning Call*, November 7, 2011.

Kauffman, Louis R. “50 years later, airplane crash stirs memories of best friend.” *Morning Call*, December 12, 2011.

Seldon Richardson, “Richmond’s Worst Airplane Disaster: Flight 201/8 – November 8, 1961.” *The Shockoe Examiner*, November 14, 2013.

David H. Stringer, “Non-Skeds: The Story of America’s Supplemental Airlines Part III.” *Airways*, May 26, 2016.