

IN MEMORY OF

*Sgt. Charles L. Glover*



*Lt. Col. Willard S. Sperry*

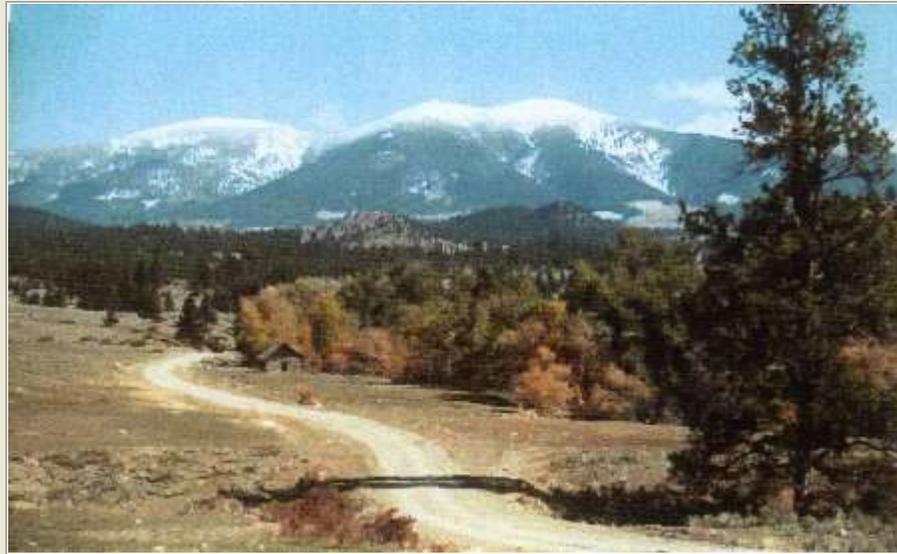


DIED IN THE CRASH OF A DOUGLAS A-26 INVADER  
AIRCRAFT IN THE BIG BELT MOUNTAINS OF MONTANA  
SEPTEMBER 16, 1947  
WHILE IN SERVICE OF THE

*United States Air Corps*

&

*Montana Air National Guard*



by Troy Helmick

### Great Falls, Montana



1940

Geographically the third largest of the 48 states, Montana had a primarily rural population, with less than half of the people living in cities or towns. Great Falls was the

second largest city in Montana, but at less than 30,000 people it was not large by national standards. As World War II loomed on the horizon, Great Falls, Montana suddenly became directly connected to events in the distant regions of the world.

The expansion of Japanese forces into the Pacific, and the Aleutian Islands in particular, had many U.S. officials very concerned. Inland transportation routes by air or ground that could be used to move people and supplies from the United States to Alaska did not exist. The need for an airway across the vast unmapped region had been recognized by General Billy Mitchell as early as 1920. Finally in 1940, work was under way to establish a string of primary and emergency airfields with radio range navigational facilities across northwestern Canada to Alaska.

On December 7, 1941 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the completion of the airway became more urgent, and the construction of a highway was also deemed necessary. Highway survey and construction crews were in the field by February 1942. The airway and the highway generally followed the same route, and in many ways, each complimented the other.

A year earlier, in March 1941, President Roosevelt had convinced Congress to approve the Lend-Lease law, which allowed the U.S. to provide supplies and materials to Great Britain to aid in their struggle with Germany.

Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June of 1941, which led to diplomatic exchanges between Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin. Within a few days the U.S. and Britain agreed it was in the best interest of all to extend the Lend-Lease law to include the Soviet Union. Aircraft production in the Soviet Union had been seriously reduced and warplanes were desperately needed.

Delivery of aircraft and other supplies to England and the Soviet Union was slow and encountered major difficulties. Single engine airplanes, due to limited range, had to be disassembled, crated and sent aboard ships, then reassembled at the receiving port. Damage to sensitive components was a risk due to the excessive handling. Many ships loaded with planes and other materials were lost to U-Boat torpedoes.

The airfields and facilities from the U.S., across Canada to Alaska were usable and on August 3, 1942 the Russians formally approved an agreement to allow delivery of Lend-Lease aircraft over the new airway to Alaska and on to Siberia.

The 7TH Ferrying Group of the Air Transport Command was moved from Seattle, Washington to Great Falls, Montana, for transporting the aircrafts to Russia and other

locations around the world. The first contingent of the 7TH Ferrying Group arrived in Great Falls on June 19, 1942. Temporary quarters were provided at the Civic Center, and construction began to convert the Great Falls Municipal Airport into the Gore Field Military Airbase.

### **Gore Field**



The Al-Can Highway, as it became known, was one of the most significant engineering projects of the century. Although much work remained to be done and major improvements were still required, the highway was usable by November 1942.

Across town from Gore Field, East Base Airfield was constructed, and the 401ST Bomb Group began training a B-17 Flying Fortress outfit there. As the group grew to full strength, squadrons were located in Montana at Lewistown, Glasgow and Cutbank.

When

their training was completed, the Bomb Group shipped overseas and the 7TH Ferrying Group assumed control of what is now Malstrom Air Force Base.

Great Falls became the hub for the movement of people, equipment and supplies over the highway and airway. Aircraft funneled into Great Falls from factories and bases across the United States. Men and women— both military and civilians, arrived to inspect, modify, repair and service the planes and deliver them to distant destinations. Soviet technicians, pilots, procurement officials, diplomats and others were assigned to Great Falls.

The Lend-Lease aircraft, which were delivered over the northern route to Fairbanks from

1942-1945 totaled 7,983. Many more were ferried through Great Falls to other locations.

Thousands of men and women served in the operations during that period. The rural

setting of Great Falls and the refusal of the Soviets to admit that the U.S. was assisting them in their efforts against the Germans kept a cover of secrecy over the operations. However, the people of Great Falls understood the significance of the contribution of the many who served at Gore Field and East Base during those years.

#### Summer 1947

World War II had ended two years earlier, and the world was adjusting to peace after seven years of conflict. The United States of America had more than 16 million men and women in military service during the War and had suffered over a million casualties. Per capita, Montana had contributed to the war effort with more people in uniform than most other states.

By 1947, thousands of former service personnel had returned to civilian life, while some continued in peace-time service in the regular military, National Guard or the Reserve units. After the busy war-time activities at Gore Field, East Base and the AI-Can Highway, Great Falls, Montana was returning to a peace-time pace.

On June 27, 1947 the 186TH Fighter Squadron was activated at Great Falls International Airport. The Montana National Guard, established on March 10, 1885 added an Air Force unit to the existing Army component.

The U.S. Army Air Force assigned Lt. Col. Willard S. Sperry as Advisor to organize the squadron and serve as the first Montana National Air Guard Commander. The new Air Guard squadron needed members to bring the unit up to authorized strength, and on September 16, 1947—National Guard Day, a two month recruiting campaign was launched. A Great Falls Tribune article on that day stated a special emphasis on the enlistment of 270 local men for the Air Squadron. At the time, the squadron had a complement of fifty-six enlisted personnel and thirty-four officers. The unit had been active daily with the training of recruits in aviation.

Seven P-51 fighter planes, two A-26s, two trainers and one L-5 had been assigned to the unit. At full strength, the squadron would have 303 enlisted personnel and fifty officers,

twenty-eight P-51s, four A-26s, four AT-6 trainers, two L-5s and two C-47s.

Early on the morning of Tuesday September 16, 1947 a Douglas A-26 Invader aircraft took off from Great Falls International Airport. Lt. Col. Willard Sperry, Air Guard Commander, was at the controls and he was accompanied by Sgt. Charles L. Glover, an aircraft and engine mechanic with the new Air Guard Squadron.

The mission that day was to fly to Helena, Montana, pick up Brig. Gen. S.H. Mitchell, Adjutant General of the Montana National Guard, and fly on to a conference at Columbus, Ohio. Flying time from Great Falls to Helena in the A-26 aircraft should be less than thirty minutes. The route would generally follow the course of the Missouri River along the Big Belt mountain range. The Helena airport is located in a wide valley at the foot of the Continental Divide, which rises to the west.

Great Falls is noted for having 300 good flying days per year, which was one of the factors considered when the 7TH Ferry Group was transferred from Seattle in 1942. Normally, many of those clear days occur in September— with the Big Sky a brilliant blue, the river valley and mountain sides colored with the golden leaves of an early autumn, and the lofty mountain peaks covered with snow. It should have been a simple and pleasant flight. No one could have predicted the tragedy that was about to unfold...

In Montana, it is not unusual to have snow by the middle of September. In fact, snow can fall during any month of the year. Tuesday, September 16, 1947 an early snow storm moved into the state, but this particular storm was much more intense than the average September snow shower.

Snow was reported that day in Helena, Butte, Great Falls and many other parts of the state. The storm continued for several days, and by Wednesday, snow was reported in a 150 mile wide belt— from Canada down the Continental Divide to Wyoming. Hundreds of tourists were marooned in north central Montana, and a bus driver and his passengers spent seventeen hours in his bus, bogged down in snow drifts south of Browning, Montana. Children in the Greenfields School on the Fairfield Bench spent a night at the

schoolhouse, as school buses could not operate in the storm. Sheepmen reported difficulty keeping their flocks together, and the trees in the area suffered as branches broke under the weight of the moisture laden snow. By Friday September 19, 1947 every weather bureau reporting station in the state had received snow or rain from the storm.

It was this early winter freezing rain and snow storm into which Lt. Col. Sperry and Sgt. Glover flew the Douglas A-26 Attack bomber that September morning.

About twenty minutes after leaving the Great Falls airport, Lt. Col. Sperry contacted the Helena Civil Aeronautics Administration radio tower and was advised that visibility at the Helena airport was poor. The weather at that time was unfavorable for an instrument landing. Lt. Col. Sperry reported icing conditions and told the tower that he was starting to descend and would contact the tower radio station at each thousand-foot level of his descent.

The Civil Aeronautics Administration said Sperry reported at 8:32 A.M. that he was flying at 12,000 feet over the Helena range station and was turning to proceed out towards the southeast leg of the Helena radio range. The tower later gave clearance for an instrument landing, but radio contact with the A-26 was lost.

The storm that contributed to the loss of the A-26 aircraft that carried Lt. Col. Sperry and Sgt. Glover continued to rage, and the search efforts were conducted under extremely difficult conditions. Aerial search was prevented in most areas, and wherever possible, was very limited at best. Helena and Townsend pilots took off during a brief break in the bad weather to scan the valleys on the mountain sides.

On Wednesday, September 17, National Guardsmen driving jeeps skidded through snow on mountain roads, while others traveled on foot along mountain trails south and east of Helena. Reports had been received that a low-flying plane was heard in that area on Tuesday.

Brig. Gen. S. H. Mitchell said every available National Guard aircraft and Great Falls-

based

Army Search & Rescue planes, along with civilian planes, were waiting for the storm to end so the aerial search could begin. The Weather Bureau offered little hope that the sky

would clear any time soon. The searchers and their aircraft waited.

Friday, September 19, 1947

The storm clouds finally cleared, and an extensive aerial search was underway. Headquarters for all aerial activities was located at the Helena airport, where the Army search and rescue unit set up co-ordinate radio facilities to maintain constant contact with those engaged in the search operation.

Capt. D'Jack Klingler, an officer attached to the Army Air Force Search & Rescue Unit in Great Falls, directed the search by military aircraft, while Harland Herrin of Helena directed the civilian planes that joined the search effort from Helena, Great Falls, Butte, Townsend and Bozeman. Frank Wiley, Montana Aeronautics Commission Director, along with Army National Guard officers aided in co-ordinating the efforts of air and ground crews.

Ground search headquarters was located at the Montana City schoolhouse. More than 100 military and civilian personnel, including U.S. Forest Service employees, traveled in vehicles and on foot to search the rugged terrain in the area. Aerial searchers criss-crossed

an area bounded by Garrison, Butte, White Sulphur Springs and Wolf Creek, more than 2,000 square miles. Altogether, forty-two planes were involved in the search, including

one twin-engine C-47, three single-engine L-5s (from the Army Air Force), two single-engine AT-6s, one L-5, five P-51 Mustang Fighters (from the National Guard unit) and thirty light single-engine planes which were owned and flown by civilian pilots. The aerial

search was a cooperative effort, utilizing Army Air Force, National Guard and civilian pilots and aircraft.

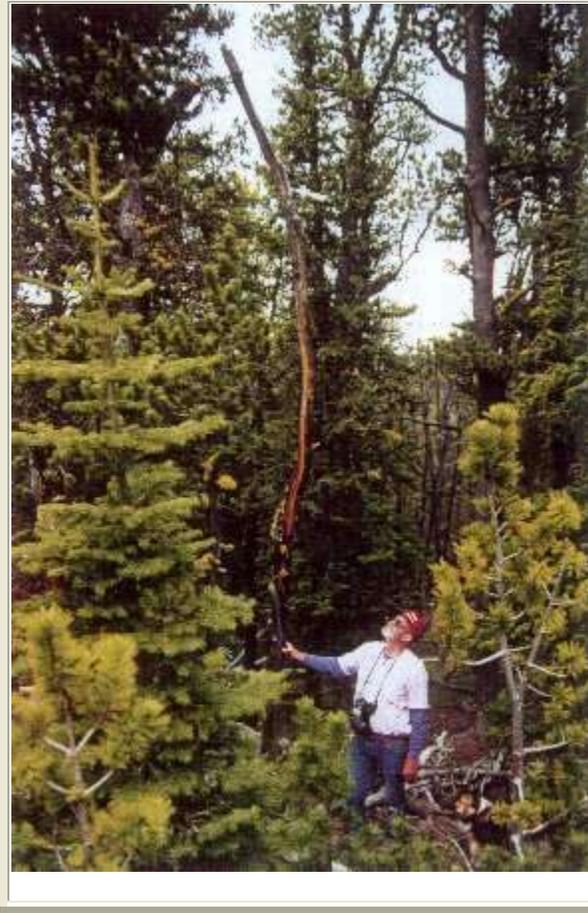
**Crash Site, 1948**



This was the largest coordinated ground and air search operation ever organized in Montana, but the missing aircraft could not be located. The secluded nature of the heavily forested mountains and the deep snow cover kept the location where the plane went down a secret. In 1947, there were no crash locator beacons, controlled by navigational satellites and global positioning systems, nor rescue helicopters, but the search was extensive. Military and civilian pilots in the air and others on the ground continued to search into autumn, long after the co-ordinated operation had been called off.

Frequently, when persons, vehicles and aircraft are lost in vast forested mountains, they are located during the annual big game hunting season, when thousands of hunters go into the remote areas in quest of game animals. When big game season for 1947-48 opened, the hunters headed into the mountains. But as hunting season ended several months later, the aircraft was still missing. The unusually high level snowfall that began in September that year kept the missing plane covered throughout the fall, winter and spring. A 1948 weather summary reported precipitation at Great Falls had been 39% above normal since January 1, 1948. Normally, most precipitation in the high mountain elevations during that season of the year falls in the form of snow. The plane had been well covered for many months.

**Crash Site, June 2000**

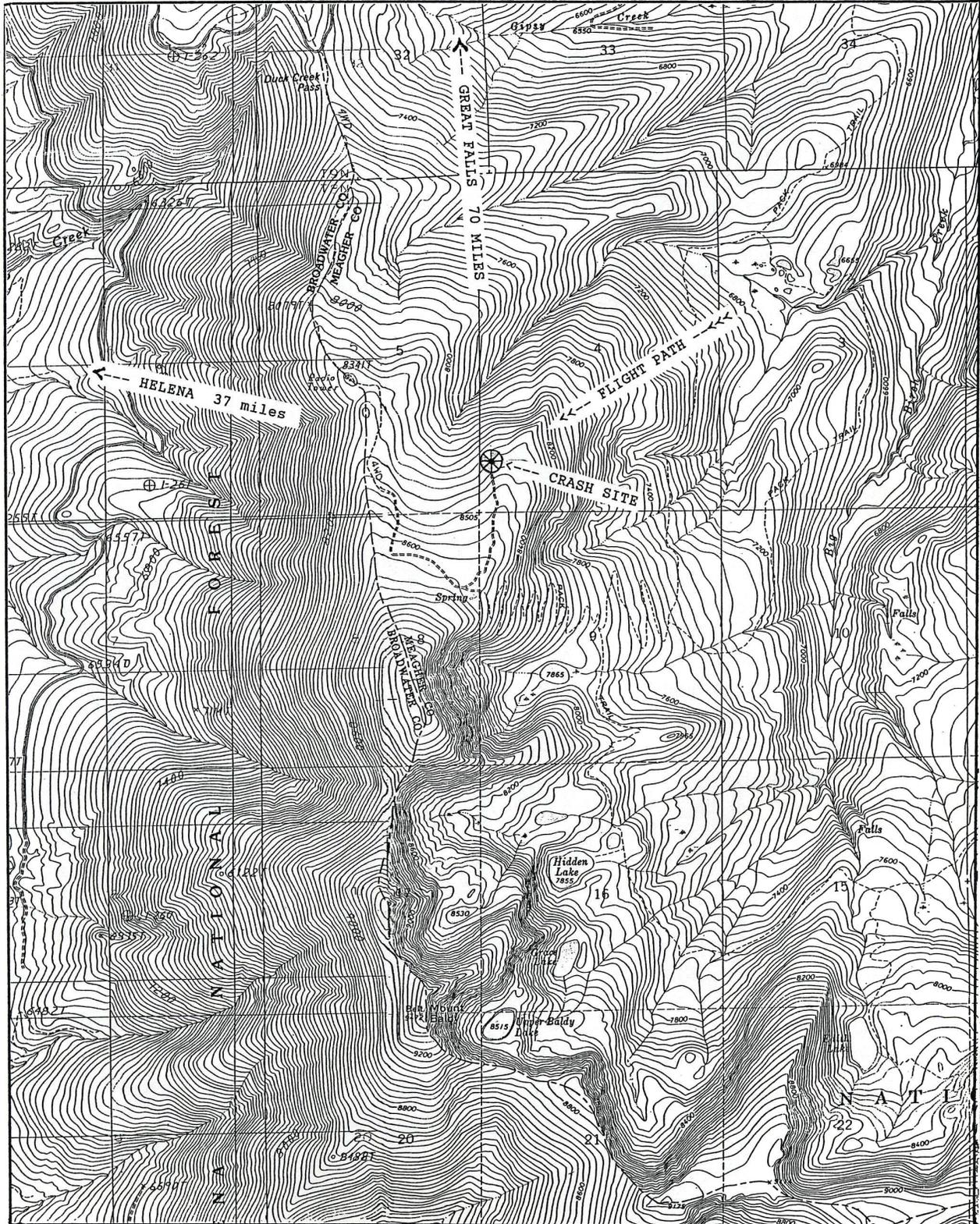


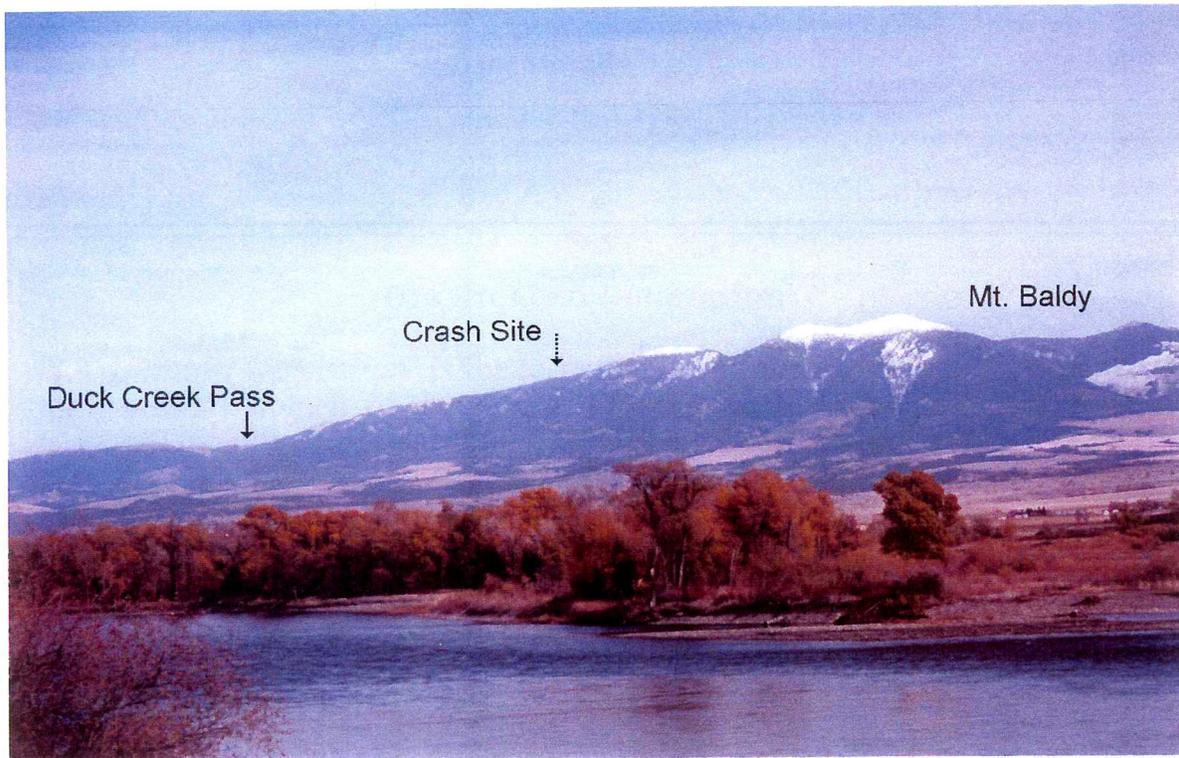
The missing aircraft, a Douglas A-26 Invader, was not a small plane. The twin engine attack/light bomber was 51 ft. 3 in. long, 18 ft. 3 in. high and had a wing span of 70 ft. Empty, it weighed 22,850 lbs.

In 1940, the U.S. Army Air Corps anticipated the need for a light bomber with fast low-level capability, medium-altitude precision bombing capacity, and heavy defensive armament. Ed Heinemann and his team at Douglas Aircraft took on the challenge, and the Douglas A-26 Invader was developed. The Army Air Force had hoped that the new plane would eventually replace the A-20, the Martin B-26 Marauder and the Mitchell B-25. The A-26 Invader met and exceeded that hope.

The A-26 made its battle debut in the Pacific Theater in July of 1944, and on November 19, 1944 it began operational service in Europe. Pilots soon found it to be a remarkable warplane. It was the fastest bomber the U.S. had during World War II. It had a cruising speed of 284 m.p.h., and although not a dive bomber, it could permissibly hit 425 m.p.h. in a dive.

# Crash Site





A view of the west slope of the Big Belt Mountain Range from the Missouri River near Townsend, Montana.

The A-26 aircraft crashed on the east (far) side of the mountain range at the point indicated on the photo. A small increase in altitude or a flight course that was a short distance closer to Helena, and their flight would have ended with a routine instrument approach to the Helena Airport. The early Winter Snow Storm was the determining factor, and the consequence was the tragic loss of the aircraft and two veteran Airmen.

*Troy Helmick photo*

[opposite:]

Topographic map of the A-26 crash site showing the location of the plane and the flight path at the time of the crash, with the distance and direction to Helena and Great Falls indicated.

The performance and potential of the Invader was so impressive that it continued in service for decades after the conflict for which it was designed had ended. The aircraft served the Army Air Force, as well as the U.S. Air Force, the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Coast Guard and the Air Forces of many countries around the world. It saw extensive action in Korea, as well as Viet Nam, and later in other, lesser conflicts. Civilian companies converted some A-26s to executive aircraft that could carry 12 passengers, while others were converted to fire-retardant bombers and served well in that capacity for more than a dozen U. S. fire-fighting operators. Lynch Flying Service of Billings, Montana was one operator that flew them, and in 1999 they still had two A-26s in flying condition.

### **A-26 Invader**



In June 1948, the U.S. Air Force deleted the “A” (for Attack) category from aircraft designation terminology, and the Douglas A-26 Invaders were re-designated as B-26s. Although the Martin B-26 Marauder was retired from service by that time, some confusion between the newly designated Douglas B-26 Invader and the retired Martin B-26 Marauder still continues to this day. In 1969 when Thailand would not allow American bombers to be based there but would allow attack aircraft, the B-26 Invaders were re-designated to comply with that requirement and became again what they were originally: A-26s.

On Saturday, July 10, 1948 the wreckage of the plane lost the previous September 16th was located. Air Guard Squadron pilot Capt. Warren M. Lee sighted the crashed plane and positively identified it as the missing A-26 Invader. Capt. Robert L. Dardis—

Squadron Commander, Major Clifford Owens— Operations Chief, Lt. Donald Schrammeck and Lt. D. Trudeau flew over the site and also identified the wreckage as the missing aircraft. The following day— Sunday July 11, 1948— Adjutant General S.H. Mitchell of the Montana National Guard directed the search, and U.S. Forest Service Ranger Verne Edwards led a small ground party to the wreckage of the A-26 Attack bomber. The party traveled by jeep and on foot to the top of Duck Creek Pass, then south up the ridge toward Mount Baldy. The crash site was down the east face of Baldy, deep in the timber. The plane had crashed at a steep angle in heavy timber at about 8000 feet elevation. None of the demolished and partially burned aircraft could be salvaged. The positively identified bodies of Lt. Col. Sperry and Sgt. Glover were taken to Croxford's mortuary in Great Falls, Montana.

The spot where the men and their plane were found was said to be one of the wildest spots in the Rocky Mountains. The east slope of Mount Baldy rises thousands of feet in naked cliffs and timbered canyons from the upper reaches of Birch Creek Basin.

Captain Warren M. Lee was a close friend of Lt. Col. Sperry. The two had developed a strong friendship after Sperry became Commander and the senior instructor of the National Guard Air Squadron at Great Falls, and they were closely associated in other avocations as well. Captain Lee had continually skirted the mountain ranges of central Montana searching for the A-26 Invader and his friend that disappeared into the storm on September 16, 1947. Finally, after nearly 10 months, the search that had consumed the time, effort and resources of so many, was finally over.

#### The Site of the Crash

Viewing the crash site, even now after fifty years have passed, it is not difficult to understand how the A-26 aircraft could have remained hidden in the Big Belt Mountains for ten months.

One of the front ranges of the Rocky Mountains, the Big Belt Mountains, are located thirty-five miles east of Helena, Montana. The Range trends in a northwestern direction and extends over a distance of about sixty miles. Mount Baldy, the highest point in the range, rises to 9,472 feet. (The Missouri River, nearly 6000 feet below, flows through the Townsend Valley just fifteen miles to the west.)

#### **Crash Site, on Mount Baldy**



Slightly more than a mile north of Mount Baldy, a small ridge projects northeast from the crest of the Big Belt range. The missing A-26 was located on the northwest slope of the small ridge one-half mile east of the main crest of the Big Belt range. The slope was steep and covered with tall dense timber. A few broken trees, quickly covered with snow, easily kept the site hidden from the view of the hundreds of searchers for all those months.

The plane was located at approximately 8,370 feet elevation. Mount Baldy, 2.2 miles south of the crash site, is 1,100 feet higher, and Duck Creek Pass, 1.8 miles to the northwest, is more than 800 feet lower than the crash site.

Why the plane hit the mountain at that site is not known. However, the difference between hitting the mountain, or flying free and clear into the Townsend Valley and back to the Helena Airport, was a very small difference in time and distance.

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Lt. Col. Willard S. Sperry

Willard Staples Sperry was born April 17, 1916 at San Francisco, California. He attended the Belmont Military Academy, Damon School, San Mateo College and the Boeing School of Aeronautics. Sperry received an appointment to the West Point Military Academy, but lost his appointment after he was seriously injured in a motorcycle accident.

After recovering from his injuries, he joined the Army Air Corps and graduated from pilot training July 26, 1940. Lt. Sperry continued training in Texas, and in August 1941 was transferred to Moffet Field, CA, where he married his wife Carol on August 16 of that year.

Duty assignments included New Mexico and Walla Walla, Washington. From Washington, Major Sperry led groups of B-17s being ferried to England. His request for transfer to a combat unit was finally granted and he was assigned to command the 816TH Bomb Squadron in Italy. He flew eighty combat missions, was awarded the **Silver Star**, two **Distinguished Flying Crosses** and nine **Air Medals**.

When the war ended, Lt. Col. Sperry returned to duty in Arizona, Florida, Massachusetts and finally to East Base at Great Falls, Montana where he was Advisor for the organization of the Air National Guard Unit at Gore Hill and served as the first Commander of the unit.

Lt. Col. Willard Staples Sperry's body was returned to California for burial. His wife returned to California with their son, where she taught school. She never remarried and is now retired. Their son G. Brooks Sperry, a U. S. Air Force veteran who served in Viet Nam as a helicopter pilot also lives in California. Brooks Sperry returned to Great Falls in September of 1997 and Col. Rex Tanberg of the Montana Air National Guard flew

Brooks

over the site where his father was killed.

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Sgt. Charles L. Glover



Charles L. Glover was born Dec. 23, 1920 in Hoopeston, Illinois. He was the oldest of twelve children, born to Ralph Lester Glover and Buelah Glover Dobkins. Charles attended schools in Lincoln, IL, and later enlisted in the military service in Springfield, IL. He was stationed in Santa Monica, CA, where he met Jean Mills, the girl that was to be his wife.

Glover first came to Great Falls, MT in 1943, when he was assigned as an engineer to the 25TH Sc, 7TH Ferrying Group A.T.C. Other duty assignments followed, including service in Karachi, India. He returned to the U.S. aboard the U.S.S. General A. E. Anderson, which sailed from India on Oct. 21, 1945. Charles came back to Great Fall to make his home at 117 Twentieth Street South with his wife Jean, son Bradley and daughter Judith Ann.

Sgt. Charles L. Glover was survived by his wife and two children, as well as four brothers and six sisters. He is buried at the Floral Hills Cemetery at Hoopeston, Illinois. Glover's daughter, Judith Ann, and son, Bradley Owen, now live in California. Bradley served four and one-half years in the U.S. Air Force, with service in Viet Nam during that war.

Sgt. Glover was the first Montana Air Guardsman killed in the line of duty. Glover Street, located on the Montana Air Guard base at Great Falls, was named in his honor and was dedicated during a ceremony on January 8, 2000.

Glover Street



## THE GREATEST GENERATION

“The Greatest Generation” is the term that Tom Brokaw has used to describe the men and women of the World War II era. The Greatest Generation consisted of millions of Great individuals doing Great things.

Lt. Col. Sperry and Sgt. Glover were two of those individuals. Their lives began in different parts of the United States, separated by many miles and variable environments. When our country needed them, they volunteered to serve. They served where they were asked to serve— far from home and in harm’s way. When the war ended, the two veterans returned to the US, and both chose to continue serving our state and our

country by joining the Montana Air National Guard. On that September day in 1947, on a snow-covered mountain in Montana, they served their final moments.

Elements collided into a tragic ending as a crew with unquestioned ability to fly and maintain their aircraft, and a plane that had proved its capability to master many obstacles, set out on a worthy mission into a beautiful scenic mountain area that would soon unfold into an unseasonably, severe Montana snow storm. Lt. Col. Sperry and Sgt. Glover were not the first to fly into the wild blue yonder and not return— and they will not be the last. Now, more than fifty years later, as the veterans of that generation are passing at the rate of 1,000 per day, it is important that we remember them and all who served, and continue to serve, our state and our country.

Lt. Col. Willard S. Sperry and Sgt. Charles L. Glover, *may you rest in peace, and may we never forget the service you gave and the sacrifice you made.*

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#### FINAL NOTES

The Montana Air National Guard Squadron, activated in 1947 with approximately 350 members, today has an authorized strength of over 1,000. The new Squadron was federalized in 1951 and served outside the state of Montana for the first time during the Korean War.

Originally created as a military force to maintain order in the territory, the Montana

National Guard is now a highly respected international resource.

Members of Montana's Citizen Army and Air Force serve the state in many ways and are continuously being deployed on missions around the

world. Members of the Montana National Guard are currently on fire-fighting duty this summer of the year 2000, as Montana suffers the worst wildfire season in many decades. Some members of the Air Guard Squadron are serving in the Big Belt Mountains controlling fires that threaten the site where the first two members of the Squadron died so many years ago.

I am grateful for the assistance of many members of Montana National Guard, including:

Lt. Col. Joe Foster and Col. Ray Read of the Army Guard. Brig. General Frank Tobel, CMSgt. Larsen and SSgt. Laurinda S. Burns of the Air Guard. I appreciate the help willingly offered by James Glover, Bradley Glover, Lloyd Schendel, John Stoner, Denny Lynch and others. A special thanks to my daughter, Char Pentecost, for editing and correcting my notes and urging me on, and to Mike Castleberry of the Broadwater County Historical Society for putting it all together.

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Military Affairs Committee  
Townsend Area Chamber of Commerce



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Records and Photos courtesy of the **Montana Air National Guard Historian** at Great Falls and the **Montana Army National Guard Public Affairs Office** at Helena.

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