

**Boca Raton Army Airfield (BRAAF)
Fire Department
Most Notable Incidents
May & June 1944**

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Fire Chief**

Please see the Boca Raton Fire Rescue September-October 2011 Newsletter, Pages 2 and 3, for a feature article about the BRAAF Fire Department. All recent Newsletters can be accessed on our web site at <http://myboca.us/fire/newsletters.shtm>

Seventy years ago, between May and June 1944, BRAAF FD experienced their busiest and deadliest two months. The least damaging of the incidents were 1 automobile fire and 23 brush fires in May and the 14 brush fires in June. They were described as "brush fires of little consequence". The "Band Dayroom" structure fire occurred on May 19, 1944 and it was a complete loss. The entire crew of nine men were killed on May 12, 1944, when a B-34 plane crashed on the runway during takeoff for a routine radar training mission. This incident was recorded as follows: "The month revealed the greatest loss of life and property in the annals of the fire department on the base since its inauguration." A second deadly crash occurred on May 31, 1944. The Director of Training and Director of the Ground School were both killed when their UC-78 aircraft crashed near Jupiter, Florida. There were several other aircraft incidents, including a B-17 with an engine catching fire shortly after takeoff on May 27, 1944, and a tire blowing off an AB-34 aircraft on takeoff. All these incidents led to discussions of better fire department staffing and construction of two new crash fire stations. Six additional firefighters were added, bringing the total to 61, with hopes of reaching 101 firefighters. These events also led to better communication between Fire Station #1 and all sub-fire stations. Enhanced aircraft firefighter training also was a result of these unfortunate events.

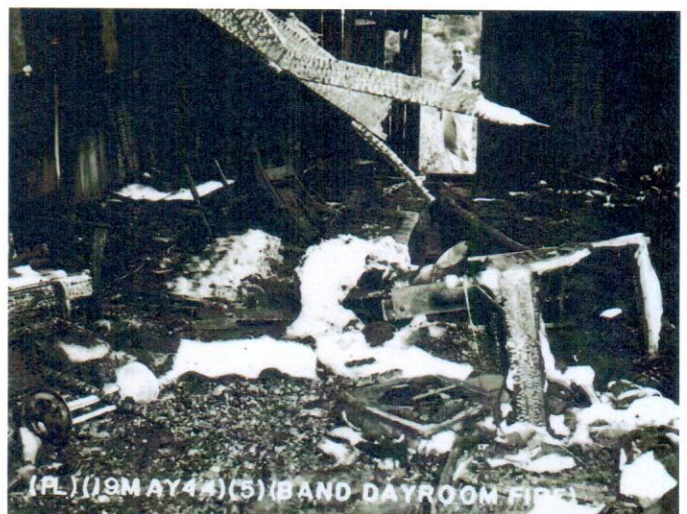
Original Research Sources: Unclassified U.S. military documents obtained from the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, Accident-Report.com MACR #44-5-12-11 & the Boca Raton Historical Society.



Firefighting at the Band Dayroom fire



Aftermath of the Band Dayroom fire



Aftermath of the Band Dayroom fire

B-34 Crash – May 12, 1944

May 12, 2014 marks the 70th anniversary of the deadliest incident at the Boca Raton Army Airfield. The nine soldiers lost on that tragic day were:

First Lt. William H. Carson - Pilot
South Carolina, age 23

First Lt. Jacob M. Buie - Student Radar Operator
Florida, age 22

First Lt. Thomas A. Lamont - Student Radar Operator
New York, age 27

First Lt. John J. Lominac - Student Radar Operator
North Carolina, age 25

First Lt. Benjamin P. Sibley - Student Radar Operator
Massachusetts, age 27

Staff Sergeant Frank L. Bursaw - Radio Operator
Missouri, age 31

Sergeant John S. Safieko - Radar Instructor
Wisconsin, age 25

Private First Class Norman R. Steiner - Student Engineer
New York, age 20

Private Robert E. Locke - Aerial Engineer
Ohio, age 22

On May 12, 1944 at 8:17AM, the B-34 was taking off in an easterly direction from the west end of the East/West runway. It had traveled 3,400 feet east and lifted off at an altitude of about 35 feet when it veered left and hit the ground, cart-wheeling. It stopped upside down and in flames. The final resting place of the aircraft fuselage was 800 feet east of the east end of the East/West runway and 200 feet north of that point. By my calculations, the aircraft came to rest at what today is the intersection of North University Drive and FAU Blvd. on the Florida Atlantic University campus.

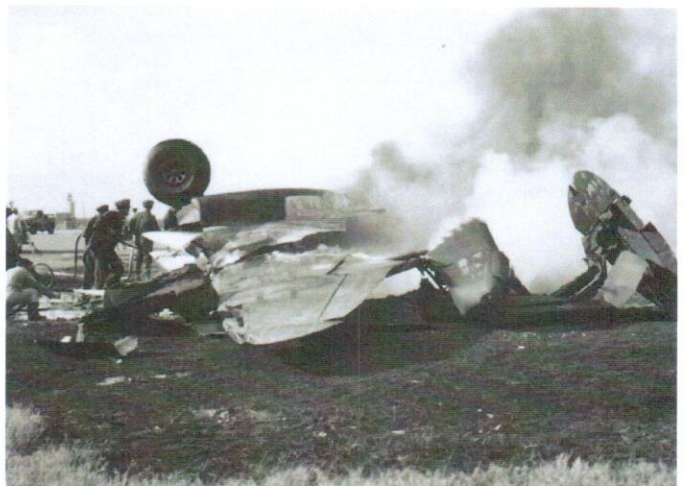
There was an ambulance and crash unit shed at the airfield, but no permanent fire stations on the flight line in May 1944. As a result, most of the airfield firefighting coverage at the shed was done by rotating crews from the structural fire stations in 6 hour blocks. Crash Fire Station #1 was completed on April 21, 1945. Crash Fire Station #2 was completed in September 1945. Once the two crash fire stations were completed, they separated the crash units into a separate Fire Department. Lonnie W. Cook, Sr. continued to serve as the fire chief of the structural crews and L.L. Latour became the fire chief of the crash crews.



B-34 Firefighting



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B-34 Crash Investigation

An Air Corps Accident Review Board, made up of one Colonel and three Majors took 19 written witness statements on May 13, 1944. The witnesses varied widely on the altitude of the B-34 just before it crashed. The average of the 10 estimates placed it at 35 feet above the ground. Five witnesses thought the aircraft didn't have enough speed before lifting off and four stated it lifted off too soon. Physical evidence of the condition of the left engine post-crash indicated that it had lost power, as testified by the Major in charge of Shop Maintenance and the General Superintendent of Shop Maintenance. One witness spoke with the only soldier to initially survive the crash, First Lt. Jacob Buie. He gave no indication as to the cause of the crash, as he was only concerned for his comrades still inside the wrecked burning aircraft. Buie died at 2:20PM at the base hospital. The Board issued its findings on May 22, 1944 and wrote: "It is the opinion of the Board that RB-34A-1 type airplane, serial number 41-38045, crashed due to the loss of power of the left engine shortly after take-off at the critical time when a successful single engine operation would be extremely difficult." The Board also alluded to a possible failure of the fuel pump serving the engine and that the 750 plus hours of operation could have been a factor. All B-34's at BRAAF were taken out of service and removed from the facility between September and October 1944, due to obsolescence.

A 1/72 Minicraft scale model of a B-34 is on display in Chief Wood's office. It was professionally built, painted, and custom markings applied to best represent 41-38045, by Paul Boyer of Cedarburg, Wisconsin. An accompanying plaque reads: "On May 12, 1944 a US Army Air Corps Lockheed B-34 Lexington bomber, as depicted by the model, crashed on take-off at the Boca Raton Army Airfield (BRAAF). The flaming wreckage came to rest at what in 2014 is the intersection of North University Drive & FAU Blvd. at Florida Atlantic University. All nine soldiers onboard died."

As we approach Memorial Day 2014 please keep these nine soldiers and all the U.S. military personnel that have died, in your thoughts and prayers.



B-34 Aftermath



B-34 Aftermath



B-34 Aftermath