

Kellogg AAB First Fatal Crash - January 8, 1944

By: Claude C Griffin, as told to Diana Nemetz

Ed. Note: This is a difficult story, but it demonstrates the bravery shown by ordinary citizens answering their country's call to become Marauder Men.

It was a perfect winter morning for flight—clear and crisp with just a breath of a wind. Our full crew of seven loaded on and completed the pre-flight procedures. After rolling to the runway we had a smooth take off, climbed to our set altitude and leveled off.

Roughly 20 minutes into our mission, the left prop feathered causing the left engine to fail. Ground crew confirmed witnessing the engine failure shortly after take off.

The pilot and co-pilot, 1st Lt Earl Bradley, and 2nd Lt Montague Waterhouse contacted the Tower and informed them of our intended return for emergency landing. Our normal approach brought us over the Parade Area. The upturned faces were sharp with worry and clearly visible. I estimated that we were at an altitude of 850 feet, looking great at that time.

“...we were just mushing through the air. I looked out again and saw timber.”

Then the Tower called and told the pilot he was coming in downwind and to circle around to come in into the wind. The pilot attempted to comply, but was unable to regain altitude to circle and in fact was losing altitude fast. It felt like we were just mushing through the air. I looked out again and saw timber.

Radioman, Sgt Troy Lisenby cried out, “Hold on back there!” We clipped the tops of a line of trees before slamming into the ground to catapult 250 yards more, break into pieces and burst into flame.

The section aft of the rear bomb bay rolled about 50 feet to the right of the crash path before coming to a rest. The aircraft from the aft bomb bay forward to the wings had simply *disintegrated*. It had separated around the pilot, co-pilot and radio compartment. When the plane finally stopped moving, Sgt Ernesto Ornelas and I were in the waist gun area. I attempted to exit via the door to the aft bomb bay only to be greeted by a thundering wall of fire.

After slamming the door closed I said to Ornelas “Let’s get out of here!” Choosing the only exit visible, I exited through the compartment window onto an auxiliary gas tank. I noticed that Ornelas was having trouble getting out of the opening and went to assist. His harness ring was snagged on a gun mount. I yanked it free and began pulling Ornelas out onto the auxiliary tank. The extra weight caused the tank to

collapse, throwing me forward into the waist gun opening and cracking my nose bridge vertically; the only injury I sustained.

Ornelas was out but having trouble standing and complaining of pain and weakness in his back. After getting him a safe distance away, I turned to search for more survivors. I saw a man coming out of the Glenn Tappen farmhouse nearby. I called out to him to have him call the base for medical assistance. The man turned and hurried away to comply.

The pilot and co-pilot were laying side by side in the crash path. I, sadly, covered their bodies with a parachute. The bodies of radioman, Lisenby and the bombardier, 2nd Lt James Lee were a short distance farther along the crash path.

Flight engineer, Sgt Howard Molyneaux, Jr, was the only one who appeared to have been thrown from the aircraft, his body located by tracking scuff marks in the snow until reaching him 70 feet from the plane and about 40 feet left of the crash path.

While I had been seeking survivors, Gene Tappen from the nearby farm had loaded Ornelas into the back of his car for safety. The ambulance arrived on scene and took over Ornelas. After I was questioned by a Martin Factory representative and an Army captain, I was loaded into the ambulance with Ornelas and we were whisked away to the base hospital. Upon arrival, Ornelas was sent to x-ray and that was the last I saw of him. I got a bandage on my nose bridge and was placed in a room with two gold bricks to wait.

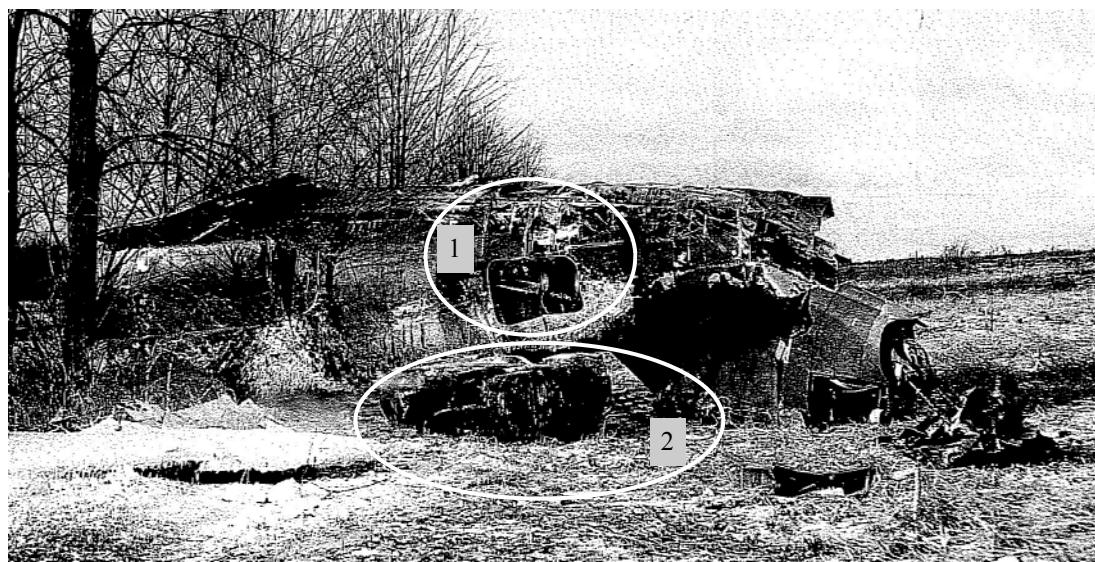
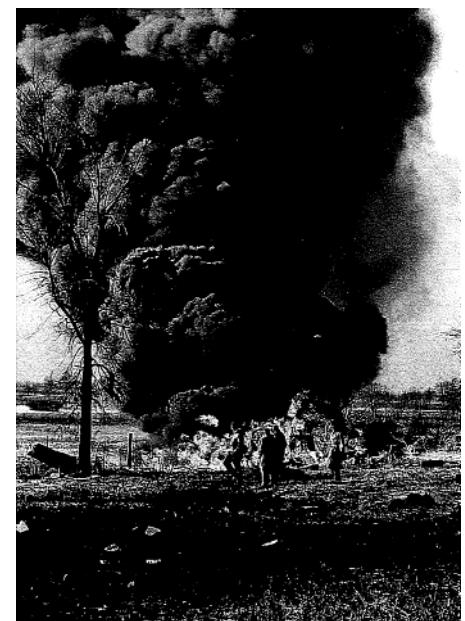
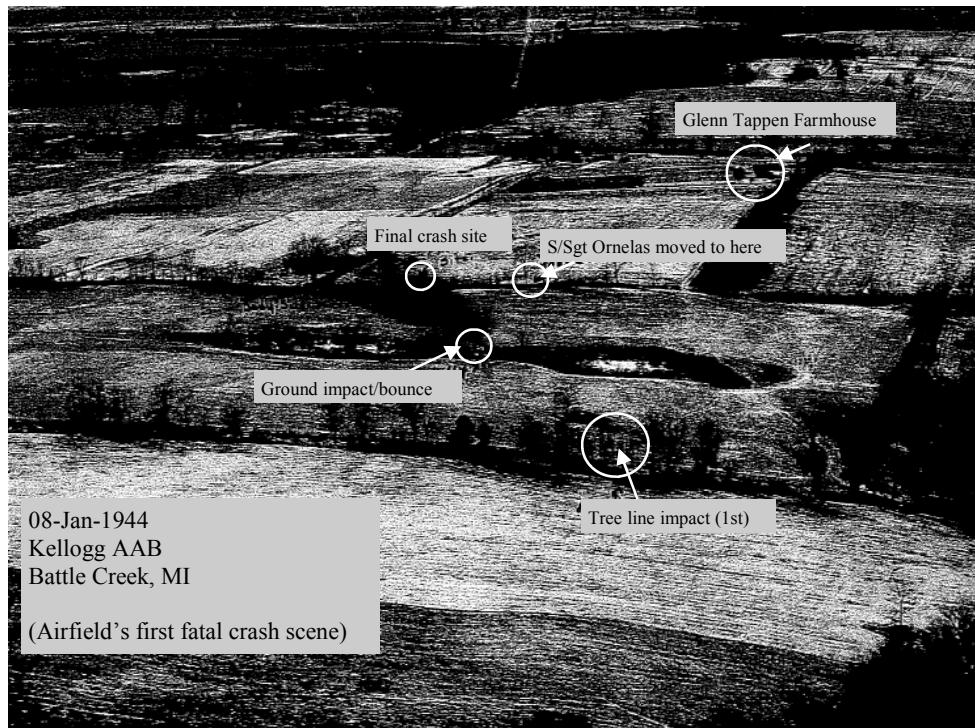
The Medic advised me that I would be kept overnight for observation. I was permitted to see my wife, Edythe, whom base personnel had notified and transported to the hospital. I had time to squeeze in a warm embrace and a kiss good-night before Edythe was taken home. I often wondered how she felt all alone in that Michigan apartment that night. I was released the following morning to my squadron and given 7 day emergency leave papers.

I have always believed that the Tower Op order to circle to come in into the wind coupled with our pilot obeying the order opened the door for this crash and horrible string of deaths that occurred.

Ed. Note: T/Sgt Claude Griffin was the youngest crew member at age 20, with the oldest being the co-pilot, 2nd Lt Montague Waterhouse at age 28. This crash was the first fatal crash at Kellogg airfield in the more than two years since the Army had taken it over.

Pilot: 1st Lt Earl Bradley, 25
 Co-Pilot: 2nd Lt Montague Waterhouse
 Radioman: Sgt Troy Lisenby, 27
 Navigator/Bombardier: 2nd Lt James E Lee, 25

Flight Engineer: Sgt Howard Molyneaux, Jr., 21
 Gunner: Sgt Claude C Griffin, 20
 Gunner: T/Sgt Ernesto Ornelas, 21



Inset 1: Waist window Griffin and Ornelas escaped from.

Inset 2: auxiliary bomb bay gas tank that collapsed causing Griffin to crack his nose bone on the inside edge of the waist window.

Below left: Saving all they can from the wreckage.

Below right: Debris across a 20 yard area. Inset: Pilot or co-pilot shrouded in a parachute. Civilian reporters and photographers were barred from the site.

