

September 29, 2010 - Bob Steelman of StarNews posted the following account of the crash of the C-123:

An Air Force C-123 transport plane crashed 'during an air show on Sept. 24, 1961, at what was then the New Hanover County Airport.

The two-engine propeller plane was carrying members of the U.S. Army's Golden Knights parachute team from Fort Bragg for a skydiving exhibition before an audience estimated at nearly 100,000. The air show, sponsored by Wilmington TV station WECT in cooperation with the Civil Air Patrol, had been an annual event since 1958.

The crash occurred about 3 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon, as the C-123 apparently stalled on takeoff. "It dipped, tried to climb, then pancaked on the grass," recalled airport ground crew member Charlie Nixon, in an interview years later with the StarNews. "It hit and bounced 60 feet as the wings collapsed and caught fire."

Three crew members were killed, apparently almost instantly: Capt. John E. Markel, the co-pilot; Technical Sgt. John M. Lesso, the flight engineer; and Army Spc. 5 Robert T. Turner, the unit photographer for the Golden Knights. Twelve people were injured, including a number of StarNews and WECT photographers and some WECT executives.

The death toll might have been higher except for adroit maneuvering by the crew of an Air Force H43-B Huskie helicopter, which used the backwash of its rotor to retard and push back the flames so rescuers could reach the crew and passengers.

Nixon would earn a citation for breaking the C-123's windshield and pulling out the pilot and the body of Capt. Markel. Army 2nd Lt. Douglas C. Runnels later received the Soldiers Medal for repeatedly entering the aircraft's burning cabin to rescue those inside. PFC Robert J. McDonnell was awarded the Soldiers Medal for refusing aid, although injured, until passengers who had been more seriously hurt were removed from the plane.

One of the civilians aboard, James S. Craig Jr. of Wilmington, was severely burned and was airlifted to Brook Army Medical Center in Texas for treatment. He died of his injuries on Oct. 14, 1961.

An account executive at WECT, "Jimmy" Craig had long been active in American Legion Post 10. He is credited with coming up with the idea of bringing the decommissioned battleship USS North Carolina to Wilmington as a floating war memorial, and he convinced state officials and local civic groups to support the plan. At the time of his death, he was serving on the USS North Carolina Battleship Commission.

Craig, 50, had apparently boarded the flight in order to photograph the North Carolina's future berth on the west bank of the Cape Fear River near Wilmington. Sadly, he missed the battleship's arrival in the Port City on Oct. 2, 1961. Battleship Commission Chairman Hugh Morton later arranged for a "Jimmy Craig Day" to be declared at the memorial.

The crash remains fixed in the memory of many area residents since a WECT camera crew happened to be covering the air show live at the time and recorded the carnage as it happened. According to witnesses, the wreckage continued to burn for more than an hour. It was the first fatal incident at Wilmington's airport. No further air shows were held there for many years thereafter.

On Oct. 6, 2010, Murrie Lee of Wilmington added: "Mr. John T. McNeill, a staff photographer with WECT on board the plane, also died in a Texas burn center as a result of injuries that he received." '