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Fire in the sky

The January 7, 1971, crash of B-52 model
54-2666 training bomber into Lake Michigan

by **Richard A. Wiles**

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Fire in the sky

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Fireball over Little Traverse Bay

The January 7, 1971, crash of B-52 model 54-2666 training bomber into Lake Michigan

On the southern shoreline of the mouth of Little Traverse Bay, just up the hill from the small village of Bay Shore, sat a series of mobile trailer buildings. These portable structures were filled with complex electronic equipment belonging to the United States Air Force. The hilltop unsecured area was home to the United States Air Force Strategic Air Command Detachment 6, 1st Combat Evaluation Group, better known as the Bay Shore RBS (radar bomb scoring) Group. The unit had come to lower northern Michigan from the Ironwood area of the Upper Peninsula back in July of 1963 to set up their 100-man site. This had been done on the orders of the SAC headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska, where Air Force commanders felt a low-level flight training route over Lake Michigan would be well-suited to their Cold War defense and enemy attack plans.

The Bay Shore site was ten miles east of the well-known summer resort town of Charlevoix. It was there that most of the Air Force men and their families took up residence. The radar bomb scoring site had been put into place in July of 1963 to help train Cold War pilots and crews who were required



B-52 long-range bombers capable of carrying 4 nuclear bombs. Pictured is Westover Air Force Base in Springfield, Massachusetts, 1970.

to fly their large bombers at low-level altitudes of 500 feet or less.

By the early 1970s, the United States was relying on a “Triad System” of defense, which consisted of nuclear submarines armed with missiles, land-based underground bunkered missiles, and the large B-52 Strato-fortress long-range bomber capable of carrying nuclear weapons. Though the B-52 planes had been designed in the early 1950s as having high altitude, long-range flight capability, the May



Just four seconds into its initiation, the tone stopped and the tracking radar screen at Bay Shore lit up in a brilliant burst of light. All radio contact from the crew stopped.

1960 missile-to-air downing of the United States U-2 spy plane over Russia changed the Air Force’s game plan. With the Soviet Union’s ability to detect and down planes at 60,000 feet, the military assignment of the B-52 bomber had to change.

Instead of the designed entry of the enemy’s territory at 40,000 to 50,000 feet altitude, the Strategic Air Command’s leaders now knew they had to use their gigantic B-52 bombers at entry flight altitudes of 500 feet or less. This meant that the original design structure of the large bombers would be compromised — that there would be greater metal fatigue and possibly even structural failures while in such low-level flights. It was the price that would have to be paid until a newer Air Force bomber such as the B-1 or, later, the B-2 could be brought into use.

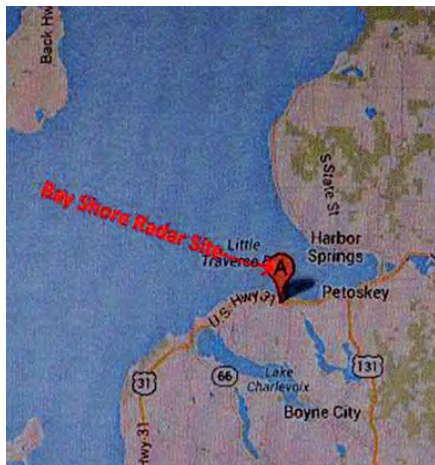
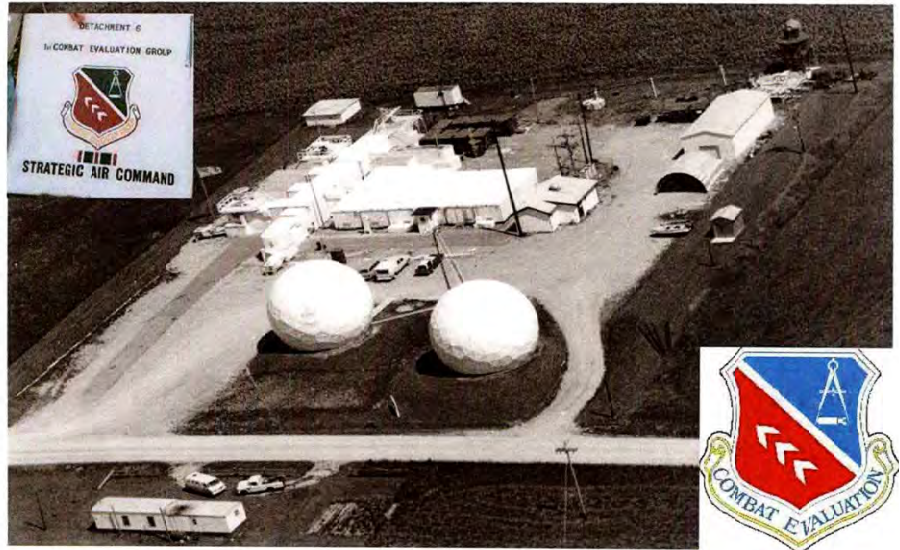
The first B-52 Boeing Aircraft Company designed and built bomber was ready for Air Force assignment in 1955. By then, two prototypes and two models, A and B, had been built and test-flown and accepted by the Air

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Force command. In 1956, 35 Model C B-52 bombers were built, including the B-52 Model C 54-2666. The last Model H bombers rolled off the assembly line in October of 1962. In all, there were 745 B-52 planes built, Models A through H. By 1970, though they were originally designed to just carry four nuclear weapons, some of the B-52 models were being redesigned to carry conventional “iron bombs” for use in Southeast Asia-Vietnam. Model Fs were first put into this “Hot War” use in 1965 and they were then followed by Model Ds and Model Gs. That left the newest model H planes for only “Cold War” readiness on the tarmacs of selected worldwide SAC bases. They were loaded with their nuclear weapons and set for takeoff toward the enemy within 15 minutes of notice.

The “Hot War” in Southeast Asia left only the older, 1956-built Model C B-52s in use for Cold War low-level bomb training flights by stateside SAC crews. These planes were now the oldest of the eight different models that had been built from 1952-1962. They also had the most flight time due to their constant use as a trainer. All Model C planes were stationed at Westover Air Force Base, near Springfield, Massachusetts. It was from here on Thursday, January 7, 1971, at 1:40 p.m., that the nine-member bomb training crew in their B-52 C 54-2666 took off for a routine low level bomb training mission over northern Lake Michigan.

By 6:05 p.m., that late Thursday afternoon-early evening, the giant Stratofortress bomber had completed all of its practice mission’s maneuvers,



Bay Shore Radar site

and had successfully laid down two practice electronic bombs on Little Traverse Bay’s simulated target sites of ECHO and FOXTROT. No B-52 bomber on a practice mission had been allowed to carry a nuclear weapon since the 1968 crash of one at the Thule Air Force base in Greenland. All practice bomb runs were carried out using electronic signals activated by the training bomber’s bombardier at pre-designated coordinates and which were then evaluated by the Air Force personnel on the ground stationed at the various twelve or so bomb scoring evaluation sites, such as the one at Bay Shore, Michigan.

Bay Shore, Michigan - Air Force mobile bomb evaluation scoring site — July 1963-November 1984.

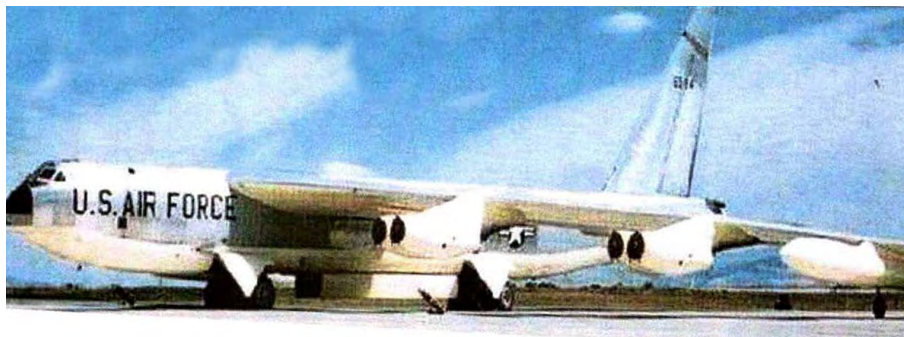
By 6:32 p.m. on Thursday, January 7, 1971, the Westover Air Force base crew designated as “Hiram 16” was ready to lay down their third electronic nuclear bomb drop at target DELTA located along the mouth of Little Traverse Bay, Lake Michigan. The crew was in constant contact with the Bay Shore evaluation site and the electronic bomb release on target DELTA was preceded by the normal 20-second electronic tone followed by the usual verbal “bombs away” called out by the crew’s radar-navigator (bombardier). The “bombs away” voice signal that early evening was heard by the tracking and evaluation crew at Bay Shore. The bombing altitude of the plane was judged to be at 700 feet above the icy 32-degree waters of Little Traverse Bay. Those on duty at the Bay Shore radar site scored the delivery as on target. The ground crew then awaited the final practice drop on the fourth and final target CHARLIE.

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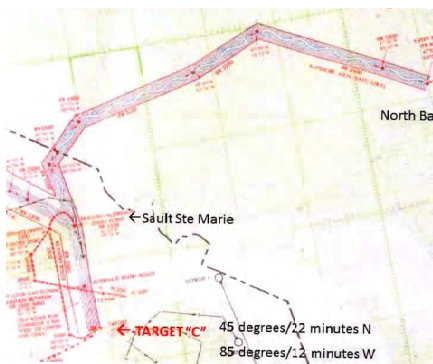
The gigantic plane made a six degree turn left at a speed of 360 miles per hour and at 6:33 p.m., plus thirty seconds, the electronic tone was initiated by the plane's radar-navigator. Just four seconds into its initiation, the tone stopped and the tracking radar screen at Bay Shore lit up in a brilliant burst of light. All radio contact from the crew stopped. All subsequent attempts by the Bay Shore evaluation site members to reach the plane's crew members were unsuccessful. No cry of warning or despair from the B-52 54-2666 crew had been heard.

At exactly the same time that the radar screen in Bay Shore lit up, the sky over Little Traverse Bay, according to witnesses, looked as though the sun was rising from the west. A terrific fireball had erupted on the surface of the bay. The plane's giant jet fuel tanks containing its remaining supply of over 25,000 gallons of JP-4 fuel had exploded on contact with the cold and deep waters of Lake Michigan. Along with the fireball of light came a deafening sound that many described as a sonic boom.

According to the Air Force Accident Board's revised report of July, 1971, the 15-year-old B-52 Model C had suffered catastrophic structural failure of its left wing between the two giant engine pods. This failure, due to metal fatigue, then caused the plane to nose dive into the waters of Lake Michigan. There was not even time for any of the nine crew members on board to issue a cry of alarm. No human remains were ever recovered.



B-52 Stratofortress Bomber — built in 1956.



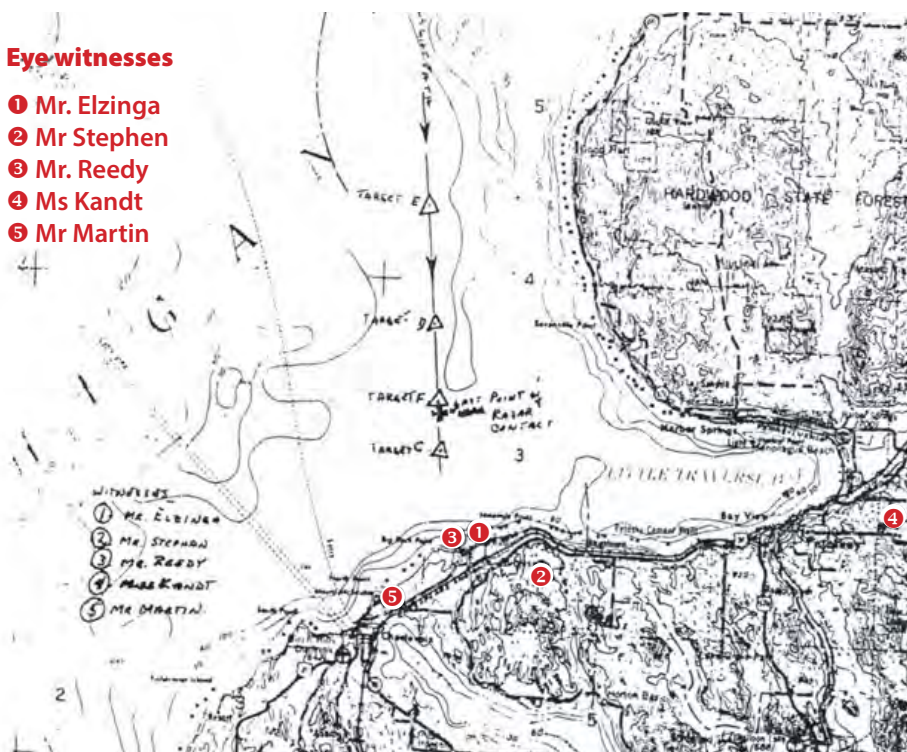
Thursday, January 7, 1971 6-6:30 p.m. first flight at electronic targets completed and second run in progress.



At 6:33 p.m., 360 mph and 600 feet above water, according to the Air Force Accident Board's revised report of July 1971, the B-52 suffered catastrophic structural failure of its left wing between two engine pods.

Eye witnesses

- ① Mr. Elzinga
- ② Mr Stephen
- ③ Mr. Reedy
- ④ Ms Kandt
- ⑤ Mr Martin



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A salvage operation was begun at the crash site, some 5 miles directly north of Big Rock Point in Lake Michigan, on Tuesday, January 12, 1971. Ocean Systems deep sea divers in their hard hat diving suits were able to locate the first of many pieces of wreckage that were then brought to the surface. However, an arrival of a fierce winter storm on Monday, January 25, 1971, ended phase one of salvage operations.

Phase two began in late May-early June when Ocean Systems returned to the crash site with its 130-foot salvage ship *Sea Systems*. The salvageable parts were trucked from the United States Coast Guard property on Lake Charlevoix north to the United States Air Force's SAC base at Kinross, Michigan - Kincheloe Air Force base.

The Accident Investigative Board's revised report found that the Model C B-52 plane had, in a sense, "committed suicide." It had outlived its service life and metal fatigue had caused the wing failure. The report was presented to the commanders at the Strategic Air Command headquarters in Omaha in late August and by October 1, 1971, all 29 remaining B-52 Model C planes were mothballed to the Arizona desert. Out of the 35 planes built in 1956, five had crashed due to various causes by January 8, 1971.

All nine crewmen killed that early evening in January were veterans of the Vietnam War. They had survived combat missions in Southeast Asia during their "Hot War" service, but they did not survive their "Cold War" low-level practice mission upon their return to the United States.



They were:

- Aircraft Commander Pilot
Lt. Col. William Lemmon - age 39
- Co-pilot Lt. Douglas
Bachman - age 35
- Electronic Warfare Officer
Cap. Joel Hirsch - age 26
- Radar Navigator (bombardier)
Major Gerald Black - age 32
- Navigator Cap. John Weaver
- age 27
- Tail Gunner Tech Sgt.
Jerry (Gerry) Achey - age 33
- Electronic Warfare Officer Major
Donald Rousseau - age 37
- Navigator 1st Lt. Dennis
Ferguson - age 25
- Instructor-Navigator Lt. Col.
John Simonfy - age 39

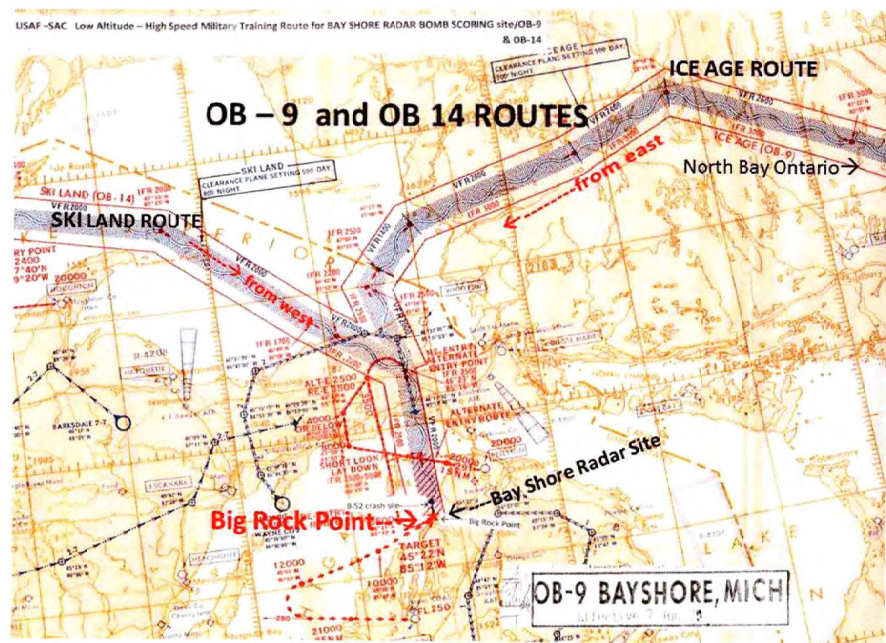
On Saturday, July 24, 1971, a memorial service was held in Charlevoix,

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Michigan, to honor the memory of the lost crewmen. At 1:15 p.m. a B-52 aircraft flew over the town's East Park pavilion followed by a formation of F-106 jet aircraft with one missing jet to symbolize "the missing man formation in honor of the lost crew." A lone bugler then played a solemn "Taps." Fifty years later a re-dedication ceremony took place along the shores of Lake Michigan directly south of the lost aircraft's crash site. There a Memorial Rock had been placed in the late summer of 1971 with the names of those who died. Again, after a short ceremony, a lone bugler played a mournful "Taps" in honor of the Cold War heroes.

What was never fully publicized to the nation was the fact that the Air Force decision to establish a low-level military training flight route across the mouth of Little Traverse Bay in July of 1963 came right after the construction of the nation's fifth commercial nuclear power plant along the shoreline mouth of the same bay (1962). From the beginning, in August of 1963, jet aircraft were buzzing the large, green, domed power plant facility, many times at heights of just over a few hundred feet. Various letters of concern from the then-in-place Atomic Energy Commission and from the nuclear power plant owners to the Air Force were acknowledged, but the two low-level military flight paths known as OB 9 and OB 14 were continued until after the January 7, 1971, accident.

The first letter from the Atomic Energy Commission's Director of Regulation, Harold L. Price, to the Air Force was dated November 29, 1963. It began



with the statement, "It has come to our attention that the Strategic Air Command has been using the Big Rock Point Nuclear Power Plant at Charlevoix, Michigan, as a target for practice bombing runs ..." That was followed by letters in 1964 and again in December of 1970 when then Michigan Congressman Gerald R.

Ford was asked by Consumers Power Company, owner of the Big Rock Point Nuclear facility, to intercede in the still unresolved matter.

On December 21, 1970, Congressman Ford wrote the Air Force stating, "Dear Colonel Evans, - On December 14 you were in conversation with my office concerning the low altitude high speed training route used by the Air Force which passed directly over the Big Rock Point Nuclear Plant ... the power company is particularly

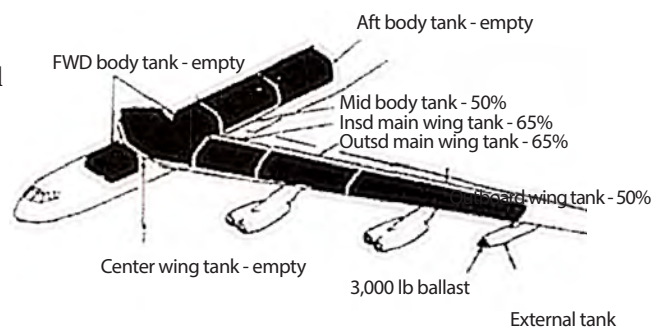


Figure 1. B-52 airplane, 43,000 gallon at full capacity

concerned at this time because its insurance company has just increased the annual premium on the nuclear power plant ... The insurance company took this action primarily because the nuclear plant is in the training route and is being used as a target."

How ironic that just 17 days later, on Thursday, January 7, 1971, an Air Force B-52 training bomber would crash directly north of the power plant.

After the crash, on March 1, 1971, Ralph Nader became involved and

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personally wrote the Atomic Energy Commission's director Glen T. Seaborg stating in his letter, "On January 7, 1971, A B-52 bomber crashed into Lake Michigan while on a practice bombing mission. It has come to my attention that this plane was part of a training program that has been in operation since 1963 ... passing within 500-1,000 feet of the Big Rock Point nuclear power plant ... What is difficult to understand is why the flights had

not been suspended at an earlier date. Ever since 1963, these flights have been passing over the plant ... at a frequency rate of around ten flights per day. They were continued despite the repeated requests from the citizens, the power plant company ... to have the flights moved elsewhere. It is symptomatic of the federal bureaucracy that no action was taken on these requests until a plane actually crashed."



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Charlevoix, Michigan 49720 Wednesday, December 6, 1967

15c a copy

'Buzzing' of Jet bombers irks Big Rock employees

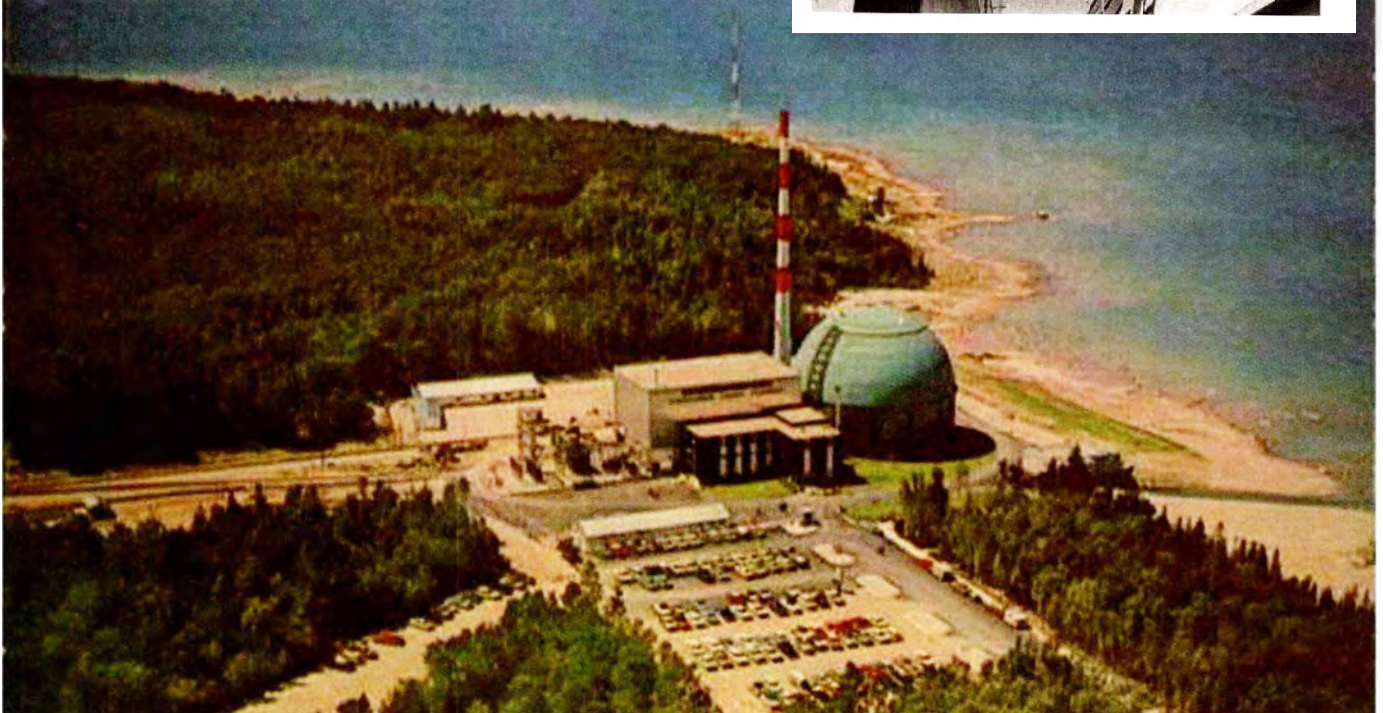
CHARLEVOIX -- The November issue of Consumers Power Co.'s employee magazine reveals the firm is having trouble with the Air Force over low-flying bombers.

sonimus six timowjer dayal sonolimus or' shattering closeness. I think it is wrong to use a nuclear plant for such practice because of the horrible consequences of radio activity release if one of these planes crashed into the plant.

pears to be a low altitude is not new nor has it gone unnoticed," the magazine continued. "As long ago as 1964 the Company lodged a complaint with about the practice with the Department of Defense and Atomic Energy Commission."

A Big Rock employee wrote the magazine that he had been told by a

Courtesy of Charlevoix Historical Society



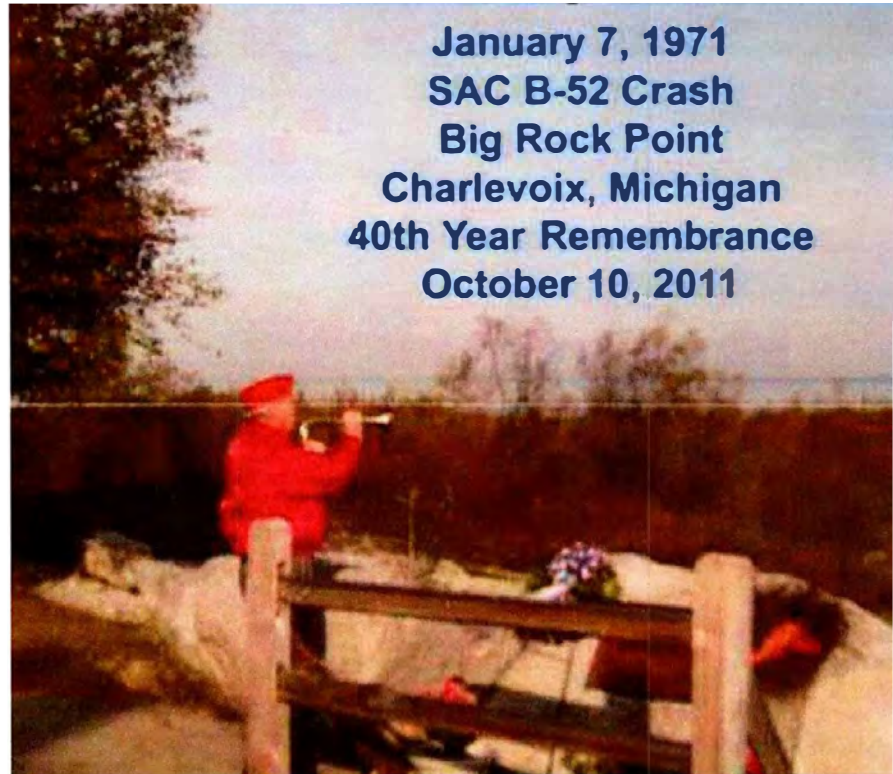
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Flights were suspended over Little Traverse Bay until a "Crash Probability Report" was prepared and delivered by Air Force officials in April of 1971 to the Consumers Power Company. The "risk analysis" report stated that there was only a 1.5 out of 10 billion chance of a B-52 bomb trainer hitting the nuclear plant and only a 1.2 out of one million chance of a B-52 overflying the plant.

Thus, military training flights continued over the large bay, but an adjustment in course was made by the Air Force as a compromise. These flights continued until October of 1984 when the Bay Shore Air Force Evaluation Site was closed. Prior to that closure, on November 3, 1983, almost twelve years after the horrific crash of the Westover, Massachusetts, based training bomber, the *Petoskey News-Review's* headline read, "Chances of Big Rock Air Crash Diminishing." The article began with, "The chances of a B-52 bomber crashing at Big Rock nuclear power plant are significantly less today than in 1971 — when a bomber went down into Lake Michigan just north of the plant — an Air Force official testified Wednesday." ■

Richard A. Wiles is a retired history and reading instructor at Petoskey High School and a former Spring Arbor University class instructor in research. He has written five White Paper research projects for the Petoskey Public Library involving historical events in the area, including the crash of the B-52 Air Force bombing trainer into Little Traverse Bay in 1971.

Wiles holds a Bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toledo, a



Master's degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.

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