

Da Nang

B-57 Canberra

May Day ...May Day ...

12 January, 1966

(c) 1996, by Don Poss



12 January 1966
 B-57 Canberra, Crash on Take-off
 Da Nang Air Base
 K-9 Handlers wait to cross runway
 (c) 2014, by Don Poss

USAF K-9 Sentry Dog Handlers

L/R: Lee Miller, Shep A902; Tom Baker, Rex; ----; Patrick Compton, Vaughn 826F; Gary Eberbach, Bucky A748; Don Poss, Blackie X129.
Additional Handlers not shown

FORWARD: By June of 1965, the U.S. Air Force 3rd Bomb Group had moved to Da Nang AB to carry out night interdiction operations over North Vietnam and Laos. Principal targets were trucks, storage and bivouac areas, bridges, buildings and AAA sites. When deployed at Da Nang AB, the 8th and 13th Squadrons came under operational control of the 6252nd Tactical Fighter Wing which became the 35th TFW about a year later.

Combat attrition in the B-57 force, plus the increasing availability of higher performance fighters to carry out the air war against the North, caused the 3rd BG to be withdrawn from operations against the North in October of 1966 and relocated to Phan Rang AB, just south of Nha Trang AB and Phu Cat AB.

Out of the 94 B-57s that were assigned to the Southeast Asia theatre, 51 were lost in combat (including 15 destroyed on the ground). This is the story of the deaths of USAF Captain Leon Boyd Smith II (pilot) and Major Elijah Goar Tollett Jr (crew), who crewed one of the 51 B-57s lost.

[History and current status of the [Martin B-57 Canberra](#)]

Da Nang Flightline, January 12, 1966:

6252nd Air Police Squadron, 366th SPS K-9 - As the sun began to set in the west, a dozen K-9 sentry dog handlers waited at the north end of Da Nang's only active runway for a B57 Canberra to complete its taxi and wait for take-off clearance to join an orbiting flight for a mission north.



As soon as the tower gave us the green-light we could cross to the runway's west side perimeter and take up our posts every thousand feet. My sentry dog, Blackie (X129), was at heel, sitting patiently on my right side, and soon we would arrive on post between the 2,000 and 3,000 feet runway markers.

I watched for the pilots of the Martin B-57 Canberra, a tactical fighter bomber, to glance up from their preflight, as they almost always did, so that I could wave a thumbs-up. But this time, both were intently focused upon their instruments, glancing neither left or right. The bomber was fully armed for a bombing mission, and would join-up with other bombers orbiting nearby. Several minutes passed and *something seemed wrong*.

The bomber was heavily armed with wing bombs, and its nose seemed to dip slightly lower than the normal nose-down *rake* attitude of a B-57.

When it began to roll forward, the nose sagged a little further. The B57 Canberra fighter-bomber lumbered down the runway, picking up speed, with dual engines roaring. All of us sentry dog handlers followed its acceleration--we sensed that it was not a typical take-off, and we were right.



The Canberra passed what should have been a point of no return and committed to take off and vertical rotation that would lift the nose to a high attitude. Suddenly the nose gear collapsed onto the asphalt runway--trailing sparks and fireworks, like a thousand giant sparklers burning at once.

We knew the B57 pilots could not eject at ground level because it had the old cannon shell ejection seats that would literally blow the pilots out of the cockpit and throw them onto the runway in front of the still accelerating aircraft. The pilot was obviously fighting to control the aircraft and managed to lift off the runway. For several seconds the nose lifted high, then settled back and pancaked on the runway with a screeching shower of sparks like a comet's tail skipping across a lake of fire. Racing ever closer to the south end of the runway, it was *lift off* or die-time for the pilots.

Please God ... I prayed, willing it into the air.

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B-57 Canberra, 0-33876

We watched helplessly as the B-57 labored to raise its flaming nose again--and suddenly it popped up--and the bomber was airborne but shuddering dangerously close to stall speed. The pilot instantly raised its landing gear in an attempt to reduce air drag. The plane did gain precious air speed and an altitude of at least fifty feet, its wing overflying a sentry waiting to be relieved. Without warning, the Canberra wig-wagged its tail and began to settle back to the earth--less than three-thousand feet to the end of the runway, perimeter road, concertina wire, and the largest a field of landmines in South Vietnam.

The B-57's fuselage tail scrapped the surface first, then the body belly-flopped hard. Landing gears-up, the fully fueled and armed bomber slid and scrapped along the runway flaming sparks like a high-speed but upside down car sliding on its roof. Metal to runway, the scrapping-screeching noise of a thousand fingernails on blackboards assaulted our ears. The bomber slid on the pavement from runway's center toward the right edge. God knows how, it bounced airborne again then immediately pancaked on the runway shoulder and plowed a shallow furrow for several hundred feet raising a dust storm and skidding sideways.



Wind quickly swept the dust cloud away and we could see the bomber, still upright, as it rocked from left wing and settled onto the right bomb-laden wing. All was quiet as the cockpit opened and the pilot, Captain Leon Boyd Smith II, climbed out near the wing. Miraculously, the crewman Major Elijah Goar Tollett Jr., followed him, both standing near the dipped wing no doubt surprised to still be alive! A 500 pound bomb directly beneath the wing near where they were stood exploded. The first millisecond: a glass-dome a hundred yards at its base and filled with white-fire engulfed the bomber. The next instant: a massive concussion wave (literally visible like a fog) slapped sentry dogs and handlers on the ground. Debris rained down from the heavens and a large chunk of fuselage crashed on the rim of a gouged red-earth crater as a *Hiroshima-like* mushroom cloud roiled upward--black smoke with raging fireballs within.

The wreckage, strewn over hundreds of yards, began burning furiously. A hundred-pounder exploded in the bomb bay, hurtling 5,800 pounds of unexploded bombs like dagger-leaves in a hurricane. 20mm cannon shells began to cook-off, adding a surreal fourth of July effect, like fireworks and Roman Candles.

Crash and Rescue trucks began to arrive nearby, having left their hangers before the wounded bomber had settled to earth for the last time. Fire fighters leapt from their Pumpers, and seemed to pause as if resisting orders to climb back onto the rig. The Crash Crews, as one, jumped back in and on the Rescue Trucks and raced backwards away from the exploding holocaust before them.



A Pedro Rescue Helicopter orbited directly above the bomb-spewing cauldron as flaming tongues of fire taunted it closer. Another bomb exploded and 20mm cannon shells spewed wildly. The chopper, dangling its globe of fire retardant, suddenly flipped on its side and fell a hundred feet before righting itself and riding the heat-thermals away to safe orbit. Oily black smoke roiled from the flames. For more than an hour, exploding ordnance rocked Da Nang Air Base, as fellow pilots waited for the inevitable news of death.

Night was falling fast. Another half hour had passed since the last bomb detonated in a fireball which revealed the carnage had actually formed its own cloud layer above. The Pedro Rescue chopper returned and dumped its fire retardant chemicals on the billowing flames. Like a team of wolves on a fallen prey, Crash Crews attacked the fallen bird. Hundreds of gallons of fire retardant foam was sprayed, from roof mounted cannons, on the main wreckage and nearby glowing bomb casings. Oily smoke was everywhere and rotating emergency red lights strobed the ground-hugging

smoke adding a surreal effect to the crash.

Rescuers shouted, P.A. systems calmly barked orders, and teams of highly trained men went about their tasks in silver space suits. War, once more, had provided a real-live hands-on experience. MMS men began searching for unexploded nearby bombs, and gave orders to secure the area until dawn would permit further search for bombs laying in tall grass over a wide area.

Through the night, a monster bomb crater gaped like a black eye-socket in its promise to reveal something hideous.



At dawn's first light, the foamed wreckage was still too hot to touch. Wisps of gray-white "foam" were still rising from the wreckage.

The smoldering pit, thirty feet across and twenty feet deep, oozed a sludge of muddy-foam on one side, in stark contrast to the red-clay. A two foot deep pool of water and scum ringed the bottom. The stench of JP-4 jet fuel and plowed earth was heavy in the air.

Bomb disposal teams combed the field, carefully removing unexploded bombs and cannon shells. A Crash Truck was manned nearby with a fire fighter alert at the water-cannon. A cluster of other Crash Teams parked a hundred yards further away. Air Police guarded the crash site as investigators searched the broken earth. At a signal from a Crash Team leader, a crowd of rescuers gathered near a stump of something. The leader, dressed in a silver suit, was covered in dirty foam and smeared with charcoal-soot. Like others, he had entered the fires of hell at its zenith, hoping--but *knowing*--that nothing--*no*-thing could live.

Several men stared down at the ... remains ... and one called loudly for stretcher bearers. Amongst the smoldering debris were human remains, including a charred torso stump; headless and limbless.



The group of K-9 handlers crossed the runway. Night was coming and the runway perimeter area had to be secured. K-9 posts were adjusted well away from the danger of encountering scattered bombs.

It was a long night.

At Da Nang Air Base, aerial combat and battle damage certainly took a toll on pilots and crews. Worn equipment, fatigued pilots and ground crews--and simple *Acts of God* took too many others, who gave so much in return for so little.

B-57 Canberra, 0-33876

B-57 at morning's first-light.





Da Nang AB flightline in background, across the runway.



B-57 blown apart and scattered in a thirty-yards debris field.



B-57 Nose remains.



B-57 debris loaded on a flatbed truck in route to a hanger for evaluation, then to its final resting place in an aircraft boneyard.

EMAIL Responses

From: Phillip J. Lane
Sent: Monday, April 22, 2002 6:34 PM
To: don@war-stories.com; larry@larryposs.com
Subject: 311th Air Commando Squadron, "Harry Haughton's Hog Haulers"

I was surfing for references to the 311th and came upon a story of a B-57 crash at Danang. The crash story was very interesting since I was there that night and saw it happen. I was a C-123 pilot on alert for flair missions and happened to be standing outside of our alert trailer and watched the crash unfold. I climbed up on the banister of the alert trailer to get a better view, and was awed by the fire and the 20mm cooking off. Then the 500 pounder went off and the resulting shock wave knocked me off of the banister.

The B-57 story awoke some memories...but... my question is how can I access the info about "Harry Haughton' Hog Haulers". I was one of Harry's pilots (Apr 1965-Apr1966) and certainly qualify a "Hog HAULER".

I appreciate your help, and will read more stories.

Phil...
Phillip J. Lane
Major USAF (Retired)

From: Stephen Smith (son)
Sent: Friday, February 28, 2003 12:30 PM
Subject: War-Stories: B57-Canberra; KIA: USAF-Capt.Smith, Leon-Boyd; Major-Tollett, Elijah-Jr.

Mr. Poss: Two years ago, while surfing the Internet, I decided to research the type of aircraft my father flew when he was in Vietnam, to try to find a picture of one. Being a father myself now, I had recently taken an interest in trying to learn something of the father that I had never really known. He had died when I was only five years old. Whether due to our youth, or an unconscious attempt to keep pain at bay, all that my two younger brothers and I knew was that he had died in Vietnam in an aviation "accident", that he was buried in Arlington Cemetery, and that his name was on The Wall. I had a few vague memories of him, just a few mental snap-shots. And our family has kept in touch with an old friend of his.

I was stunned when, a few clicks into my search, I found your web page recalling so vividly the death of my father, Capt. Leon Boyd Smith II. I had never known any of the details, but reading your story took me there, hit me hard with the reality of it and the impact it had on others. In the two years since, I have often thought of emailing you, but have never known quite what to write, quite what to feel. I still don't. I just felt a compelling need to reach out in some kind of acknowledgement, to share with you that the events of that day in 1966 still echo in many lives.

Stephen Smith

Response: Dear Stephen: The day your father died is as vivid to me, 33 years later, as the day it occurred. Years later, I felt it necessary to write out what had happened, and perhaps touch someone who knew the pilots. There have been many responses over the years. I know exactly how you felt about e-mailing. I felt the same way when a KIA friend's sister suddenly e-mailed out of the blue, but when I finally was able to contact her I was grateful that she had made that first effort. I do not think I can add much about that day. Your dad was, and is, a hero who served his country well. Perhaps you know the mission he was engaged in was completed successfully by his fellow pilots. I do have many photos, not posted, of BE-57s at Danang. Perhaps one could be of your father ... although that is a long shot. If you want, I will e-mail them to you. God bless. It seems that your parents did a very good job of raising a fine son. Don Poss

From : Robert F. Baity, Major, USAF Retired
Subject: B57 Canberra

Don: Reference is made to the B57 Canberra lost at Da Nang in January, 1966. I was a member of the 13th Tactical Bomb Squadron and was on the flightline getting ready for a flight scheduled to take off 1 hour and twenty minutes after the aircraft which crashed on takeoff. My Pilot was Major Charles Rose and I was the Navigator-Bomberdier. **We did complete the mission**, but I can attest that we made a very careful pre-flight of our aircraft. Another fact leading up to this doomed flight was that the Navigator crewed with Capt. Smith had just that day resigned his flying status. Major Tollett, who was the Squadron Navigator replaced Captain Smith's Navigator on that flight. I cannot remember Captain Smith's former Navigator's name but he was a First Lieutenant.

Sincerely,
Robert F. Baity,
Major, USAF Retired

From : Howard D. Tollett (Flush), Cousin of Major Tollet
Subject: B57 Canberra

Don: I never knew how my cousin died, until I read your B-57 Canberra fighter-bomber story of what happened. Before, I only saw his name on The Wall, but didn't know. I was in the Air Force in the early 70's, was in the 4MMS, and being a distant cousin to Maj. Tollett. This was something of interest to me. I saw his name on the Traveling model of The Wall; last year, but all they had was his age, and no information on the crash.

Did you see it Don? It would be bad to live through the crash thinking, *We made it*, then having the bomb go off. I thought the bomb had to fall a distance, before it would arm itself? I'd have to find out more about my old job. If you run across some old MMS guys, have them hash this out with me. Thank you. Howard D Tollett

Response: Howard, yes, I witnessed your cousin's death. I have tried to faithfully recreate that event in the writing, research, and dedication of the story, B-57 Canberra fighter-bomber, to USAF Capt. Smith, Leon Boyd II and your cousin, Major Tollett, Elijah Goar Jr. Out of the 94 B-57s that were assigned to the Southeast Asia theatre, 51 were lost in combat (including 15 destroyed on the ground). There was indeed a moment of hope when the B-57 seemed to lift-off in spite of the collapsed nose-gear. And when it fell to earth and slide across the field near the end of the runway, another moment of hope as the cockpit opened and the pilot, Captain Leon Boyd Smith II, climbed out near the wing and Major Tollett followed him. A 500 pound bomb, directly beneath the wing near where they stood, exploded and both men died instantly.

I can put you in touch with another K-9 handler that was with me waiting to cross the runway until the B-57 took off, if you are interested in another witness' viewpoint. Don Poss

After researching the history of the Martin B-57B, I believe the bomber lost on January 11, 1966 was the Martin B-57B-MA 53-3859- 3876 which exploded on takeoff at Da Nang. The aircraft was piloted by Captain Leon Boyd Smith II, and Crewed by Major Elijah Goar Tollett Jr.

Official Information

Smith, Leon Boyd II
CAPT - Air Force - Regular
30 year old Married, Caucasian, Male
Born on 01/02/36
From Miami, Florida
Length of service 6 years.
His tour of duty began on
Casualty was on 01/12/1966
in Quang Nam Province (Da Nang), South Vietnam
Non-Hostile, Fixed Wing - Pilot
Air Loss, Crash On Land
Body was recovered
Panel 04E - Line 66

Official Information

Tollett, Elijah Goar Jr

MAJ - Air Force - Reserve
35 year old Married, Caucasian, Male
Born on 08/30/30
From Chattanooga, Tennessee
Length of service 14 years.
His tour of duty began on
Casualty was on 01/12/1966
in Quang Nam Province (Da Nang), South Vietnam
Non-Hostile, Fixed Wing - Crew
Air Loss, Crash On Land
Body was recovered
Panel 04E - Line 68

Specification of Martin B-57B Canberra 52-1493/1544:

Powerplant:

Two Wright J65-W-5 turbojets, 7220 lb.s.t. each.

Performance: Maximum speed 598 mph at 2500 feet, 575 mph at sea level. Cruising speed 476 mph. Stalling speed 124 mph. Combat ceiling 45,100 feet. Initial climb rate 6180 feet per minute. Combat radius 948 miles with 5240 pounds of bombs. 2722 miles ferry range.

Weights: 27,091 pounds empty, 53,721 pounds gross, 36,689 pounds combat weight.

Dimensions: Wingspan 64 feet 0 inches, length 65 feet 6 inches, height 14 feet 10 inches, wing area 960 square feet.

Armament: Four 20-mm M-39 cannon in the wings, 290 rounds per gun. 5800 pounds of bombs in internal bomb bay, 2800 pounds underwing.

Check out [The B-57 Canberra Night Intruder](#), at War - 1964-1972!
Missions, History, Vietnam, Photos and more! By Marquis (Mark) Witt, Lt. Col. USAF (Retired)!

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