

We watched helplessly as the B57 labored to raise its flaming nose--and suddenly it popped up--and the bomber was airborne but shuddering, dangerously close to stall speed. The pilot instantly raised the 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 over flying a sentry waiting to be relieved. Without warning, the Canberra wigwagged its tail and began to settle back to earth--less than a thousand feet to the end of the runway, perimeter road, concertina wire, and a field of landmines.



The B57 fuselage's tail scrapped the surface first, then the body belly landed-- belly *slapped* really. Landing gears-up, the fully fueled and armed bomber 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.

The bomber, still upright, 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 where they 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 to the ground. Seconds later the sound of *worlds-colliding* assaulted and shook the airbase. Debris rained down from the heavens and a large chunk of fuselage crashed on the rim of a gouged red-earth crater.

The wreckage, strewn over a thousand yards, began burning furiously. A hundred-pounder exploded in the bomb bay, hurtling several unexploded bombs like dagger-leaves in a hurricane. 20mm cannon shells began to cook-off, adding an eerie 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 Rescue Helicopter orbited directly above the bomb-spewing caldron 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.

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 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 too real live hands-

on experience.



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 smoke signaled a warning of potential danger. 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. Combat 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.

At Da Nang Air base, aerial combat 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.

Conclusion and personal opinion: Important points that I have wondered about for years, regarding the--location of the crash landing at Da Nang, and why the pilots did not eject.

As a private pilot for years, flying my own aircraft, I was aware of keeping an eye out for potential emergency landings. Along that line of thought, I have discussed with B-57 pilots the ejection capabilities of that aircraft in 1966, and if they too would keep an eye out for potential emergency landing locations.

Regarding ejection from the cockpit of a B-57, pilots have told me that at that date in 1966, the B-57 bomber's ejection seat capabilities was "explosive" and not "rocket" in nature. Literally, the pilot seats upon ejection would be "blown" out of the fuselage by a howitzer type cannon shell. At altitude, that would be okay, but at ground level an ejection could "throw" the pilots forward and possibly in front of the aircraft risking being ran over by the aircraft.

One point never mentioned, and perhaps unthought of by fellow pilots and crew members responding, is that both pilots were certainly aware of their location along the runway and on base at the time they were briefly airborne. I believe they chose not to eject from the doomed B-57 at that point in order to not endanger others on base.

The below photo of Da Nang Airbase (1971) is touched up slightly to reflect that only one runway was active in 1965, and a second was under construction. If you note that just to the east of the crash location was a heavily populated area of USAF housing (tents), and civilian Vietnamese ARVN (Army) housing. To the west was an even heavier occupied area where Marines were based, and a very large USAF bomb dump. To the Southeast/west, were Vietnamese villages.

The area along the runway their aircraft settled onto was the only direction relatively clear of people. In my humble opinion, the crew of the B-57 most likely elected, heroically, not to eject in order to save lives. I would find it remarkable for their heavily armed aircraft to have merely and coincidentally landed in the only isolated area on the base and in a heading away from populated areas. To me, Capt. Smith and Major Tollett will always remain heroes who gave their lives to save others.



E-mail Received from Witnesses and Relatives:

Subject: War-Stories:B57-Canberra; KIA: USAF Capt. Smith, Leon Boyd; Major Tollett, Elijah Jr.
From: [Jane Tollett Odom](#) (Sister of Major Tollett)

Don, this is from Jane Tollett Odom, sister of Major Elijah Goar Tollett, IV ... (yes, he was the 4th)

Thank you so much for the story of his death ... We were told differently by official sources at his funeral in Arlington, Washington, D.C. "Bud", as he was known by all who knew him, was from Crossville, TN and only went to Chattanooga to "sign up" with his Buddies

Elijah Goar Tollett, IV was the son of E.G. Tollett, III who was an attorney/judge/legislator in the city of Crossville, Cumberland County, Tennessee ... His grandfather, E.G. Tollett, Jr was Lt. Governor of the State of Tennessee and Judge of The Oklahoma Territory ... His great-grandfather, Elijah Gore (sic) Tollett was raised in The Sequatchie Valley, Tennessee and moved to Crossville, TN.

How can we get in touch with Capt. Smith's brother and also Howard Tollett (cousin), whom we do not know, but would like to share information with?

Major Tollett's wife Pauline (Polly) Richards Tollett now lives in Kokomo, Indiana. She has not remarried and we have kept in touch through the years ... Bud's brother Ralph (now deceased) was an attorney in Crossville, TN as was his Uncle Carlisle Springer Tollett (Private practice and Tennessee State Senator).

My husband was tracing our family tree when your site came on the screen ... At first he would not let me read the story ... Then he felt it might help for closure since Polly and I didn't know much about the event.

Your sources helped both Polly and Me to put a lot of sadness (and some bitterness) behind us ... Thank you for your effort

in presenting the facts ... Please feel free to contact me.

Jane Evans Tollett Odom

Dear Jane Evans Tollett Odom:

Thank you for your e-mail. I certainly understand you husband's initial reluctance to have you read my accounting of your brother's death at Da Nang Air Base, Vietnam. I did not write it for many years, because I was afraid family members would be hurt or offended by graphic comments, which I felt were essential to convey the tragic and horrible sense of loss of that day.

I have posted the web page, War Stories, for eight years now. I have heard from hundreds of relatives of men killed in action and line of duty. Their comments are similar in that the government never told the real story of their loved one's death. I do not think that was a sinister act, but only that the information was not actually known by those relaying the message to family members. I also think the intent was to spare families details that could cause further grief.

One of my friends, and tent mate, James B. Jones, was killed by mortars at Da Nang, nine days following your brother's crash, within a few hundreds yards of that same location. His sister and daughters contacted me by e-mail. It took more than a month before I could reply. I don't know why, other than the sudden and unexpected contact. We have since communicated and have found it rewarding ... not as a "closure" (for me anyway), but more as an acceptance of what happened.

One thing I would like to add to the posted story, is a photo of Major Tollett. A photo, I feel, helps those who read the story understand that the men were once alive, and had all the dreams and hopes of young men with bright futures and loving families. If it is possible for you to e-mail a photo(s) I would include it with the story. A civilian photo would be all right, but if you should have one of him in uniform that would be ideal.

It is strange to note the real tragedy of war is never-ending, because loved ones will always remember those who fell, and those who served with them cannot forget.

Don Poss

Subject: [B57 Canberra](#)

From : [Howard D. Tollett \(Flush\)](#), Cousin of Major Tollett

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 theater, 51 were lost in combat (including 15 destroyed on the ground). There was indeed a moment of hope when the B-57 seemed to liftoff 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 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

Subject: War-Stories:B57-Canberra; KIA: USAF Capt. Smith, Leon Boyd; Major Tollett, Elijah Jr.
From: Stephen Smith (Cousin of Capt. Smith)

Mr. Poss,

Two years ago, while surfing the Internet, I decided to research the type of aircraft my father flew when he was in Viet Nam, 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 Viet Nam 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 snapshots. 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 and, B57, 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 e-mailing 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 acknowledgment, to share with you that the events of that day in 1966 still echo in many lives.

[Stephen Smith](#)

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 B-57s at Da Nang. 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

Subject: [B57 Canberra](#)

From : [Robert F. Baity](#), Major, USAF Retired

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 flight line getting ready for a flight scheduled to take off one hour and twenty minutes after the aircraft which crashed on takeoff. My Pilot was Major Charles Rose and I was the Navigator-Bombardier. We did complete the mission, but I can attest that we made a very careful preflight 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

Richard L Smith, SMS, USAF (Ret)
Subject: Here's to old Da Nang

The story of the B-57, Jan 66, and death of J.B Jones sure stirred some memories. I was a TSGT, 6252d TFW, NCOIC, aircraft operations. I got to Da Nang on 10 Jan after spending 10 days at Tan Son Nhut. I was living in the tent city at south end of runway. I watched the Canberra's take off roll, heard that horrible screeching, and saw the gear collapse and fire. I watched horrified, knowing it would be impossible to survive, then saw the huge fireball and deafening explosion. I was able to duck quickly into an overturned garbage can just as the debris started falling from the sky. I thought it would never end. I watched the HH-43 Husky fly over the area, and knew immediately that he would have no chance of suppressing the fire or getting closer to the aircraft due to the exploding ordnance. WELCOME TO DA NANG.

Ref: J.B Jones: I did not know him, but was living in the hooch two rows up from the tank farm when the attack began. I was already asleep, but awakened immediately after the first round hit. I was on a top bunk, and blown off onto the floor. Fortunately, the man below in the bottom bunk was already on the floor, covered with his mattress which absorbed a little of the shock as I hit the floor. I did not find out for several hours that J.B had been killed. If you remember, the idiot in the command post sounded a "yellow" alert ... report to duty section, instead of a "red" alert ... take cover. So, a sizable bunch of us were out running through the streets headed for duty while the junk was dropping in. I, too, am a nondrinker, but believe me, I got drunk that night, for the last time in my life. My bunk mate worked at the NCO club and had a key to the back door. We stopped there about 0230 and drank till sunup.

You may also recall that a short time later, a memorial was erected out by the south runway tent city, commemorating the "Jensen-Jones" quarters area for J.B and a TSgt Jensen who also lost his life at good ole' Da Nang I remember the EM club very well. We called it "Shorty's Place" because of the base commander at the time, a 5'4" Jewish Colonel whose name I definitely remember but would not put out in public. The real name was the "Blue Hawaii Inn". I was affiliated with a country-western band "Billy and the Bourbons" which played the clubs regularly during much of 1966. You may remember the theme song "Here's to old Da Nang, a hell of a place. The organization's a disgrace. Also wrote a couple more songs, one honoring the 311th Air Commando Squadron, "Harry Haughton's Hog Haulers."

I do see the Vietnam Wall when it makes its pilgrimage to New Orleans, and have pencil-scratched Jones and Jensen. An A3C who gave the ultimate for this country. I have lots of other stories about good old Da Nang, but that's enough for now.

Richard L Smith,
SMSgt, USAF (Ret) 1954-1974. Da Nang 1 Jan 66-23 Dec 66.

[e-mail:viejito 65@aol.com](mailto:viejito65@aol.com)

From: Larry Bergstrom

Subject: War-Stories:B57-Canberra;KIA:USAF-Capt.Smith,Leon-Boyd;Major-Tollett,Elijah-Jr.

Don -

Your detailed chronicle of this [B-57] tragedy is identical to my recollections of the event. When this took place, I was in the Marine Corps ordnance compound just inside the A/F wire off the perimeter road. I recall standing on top of our bunker's sandbags gaining a better vantage point of the runway to watch the upcoming takeoff of the B-57 flight. To me, the Canberra when loaded out, normally appeared to struggle for rotation when compared to the Phantoms that practically leapt into the air, but on this particular day we watched an unusually long roll out, and when the ship passed our position we knew that it should have been airborne. As it passed, we saw the trail of sparks and red hot metal originating from what appeared to be the nose wheel area. At first, we thought that the tire had failed and the wheel was on fire as a result of it running directly on the surface of the runway.

This conjecture along with the usual "scuttlebutt" afterward circulated as to what had been the causative factor. It is interesting to finally have the details after all these years. Thank you for your observations Don, and God bless the memories of those two young men who like so many others ... gave their all.

Larry Bergstrom
USMC -
RVN '65-'66

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.

Smith, Leon Boyd II

Tollett, Elijah Goar Jr



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

Power plant:

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. 4500 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)!**



**Comments to Don Poss, via the [Bulletin Board](#)
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