

MILITARY CRASH STOLE CHRISTMAS IN 1952

By Amy Davis

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN

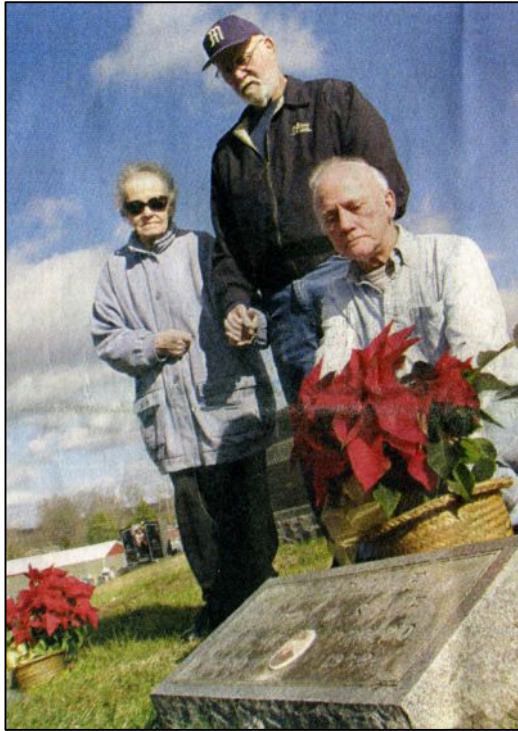
Sunday, 23 December 2012, front page & pg. 2

<http://www.ajlambert.com>

PUTNAM COUNTY – She never told her dreams before breakfast.

It was a precaution...to keep them from coming true.

But on the morning of December 21, 1952, Martha Nickens had awoken from a dream so horrific she couldn't help but share it with her children right away – even if she hadn't yet eaten.



Both 17-year-old Peggy and 8-year-old Harry, as well as the rest of their siblings, remember well the harrowing details of their mother's dream, which involved a fiery plane crash with men dressed in blue uniforms at the hardwood flooring mill near their Monterey home.

It has been cold that morning on the small mountain top town, with snow and ice covering the ground, delaying the arrival of the Sunday paper. (Pictured: Visiting the graves of Monterey Air Force Airmen Van Nickens Jr. and Paul Eugene Vaden at Welch Cemetery are, from left, Peggy Walker, sister of Nickens, and George and Mert Vaden, brothers of Vaden. The young servicemen were killed in a plane crash 60 years ago on Dec. 20, 1952,

while on their way home for Christmas through a program known as Operation Sleigh Ride).

While the family looked forward to reading *The Tennessean* for updates on the Korean War and comic strips, the day's news hadn't been a major concern of the Nickens family as Martha cooked for her children. After breakfast, they were to walk to the Monterey hospital to visit the ailing Mr. Nickens, a coal miner suffering from black lung and a serious heart condition.

Even so, the day had a bright spot.

Big brother Van "Bud" Nickens, who was in the Air Force, was due home for a visit from Larson Air Force Base in Moses Lake, WA. In fact, the 23-year-old was to arrive by bus later that day.

Just in time for Christmas.

His sister Peggy recalls the anticipation that morning.

“We had his dinner ready,” she said.

Van, along with his best friend since childhood, Paul “Boob” Vaden, also of Monterey, son of Walter Lee “Athie” and Lena Vaden, had joined the Air Force together through the “buddy system” and were among a large group of comrades from Korea and the northwestern U. S. Air Force bases who were headed home for the holidays through a program known as Operation Sleigh Ride, in which passengers’ names had been drawn by lot number for the special privilege.

Elsewhere in Putnam County, three other servicemen families awaited the arrival of their boys as well.



In Baxter, Alvin Jared, 22-year-old son of Lee P. and Mary Maxwell Jared, and Robert Neal Dalton, 21-year-old son of Minnie Austin Dalton and the late Charlie Dalton, were on their way back, as was Cookeville’s Donald Howard Grogan, son of Mr. and Mrs. Haskel Grogan.

(Pictured: L. P. Jared of Baxter looks at a photo of his brother, Alvin Jared, who was killed 60 years ago in Operation Sleigh Ride, a plane crash that also claimed three other

Putnam County Air Force servicemen and wounded another as they were coming home for Christmas.

The five young men were amidst 115 passengers and crew who had taken to the morning sky the previous day, Dec. 20, aboard a C-124 Globemaster aircraft enroute to Kelly Air Force Base near San Antonio, and later to the Seward base in Smyrna, from the Moses Lake base in WA.

Back at the Nickens home the following morning, the Sunday paper finally arrived – with news that forever changed their lives.

“On the front page I believe it said ‘87 killed in plane crash,’” said Peggy Walker, now 77 and still living in Monterey. “My mother read it to us and said, ‘Those poor mother.’”

Her son Harry, now 68 and living in Danville, KY, recalls his mother's initial reaction to reading the newspaper story.

"She came in crying and really disturbed because she said, 'This was my dream,'" he said.

But still they had no news of Van – of whether or not he was actually on the doomed plane.

"My brother was supposed to have been on a train, not the plane," Peggy said. "but his friend Boob, the Vaden boy, lost his train ticket so he took the plane. Then, at the last minute, Van Jr. got a cancellation and got on the plane with him. They always stayed together."

As the day wore on – with frantic calls to the Air Force base and Red Cross – the Nickens family came to fear the worst.

"The bus came to Monterey, and he wasn't on it," Peggy said.

However, it would be a couple more days before the official telegram came – the one that said her brother was among the dead.

"The man from the depot came and brought it, and my mother was reading it and said something like, 'They had found him,' and thought he was among the survivors," Peggy said. "Then the man who brought it said, 'I believe you read that wrong.'"

As it turned out, Nickens and Vaden along with Jared, Dalton and Grogan – were on board the large Globemaster transport plane, which crashed just after takeoff from the Moses Lake base at 6:27 a.m. on Saturday.

According to information about the crash on historylink.org, the plane "lurched to the side" with the left wing tip hitting the ground and the plane exploding in fire. Killed were 87 passengers and crew, making it the worst air disaster in history at that time. Whether the crash was due to pilot error or a mechanical malfunction is still in dispute.

Harold "George" Vaden of Monterey, brother of Paul Vaden, was 12 years old that Christmas, which, if not for the tragic loss, would have been the best ever, he said. "My younger brother and I were getting new bicycles," he said.

Mert Vaden of Monterey, who was 10, remembers their older siblings making the gifts possible.

"We'd never had anything like that," he said. "Mom and Dad couldn't afford it." But the joy of new bikes and having their big brother come home for Christmas was stripped on that Sunday evening when news of the plane crash began to spread.

“I was sitting in the living room with my sister when they brought the telegram,” Mert said. “My mom knew something bad was wrong because we’d been listening to the radio about the plane crash.”

George found out Sunday night after church, when his uncle told him.

“It hurt,” he said. “It still does. It ruined Christmas from then on. It just wasn’t the same and never has been.”

Mert, who described his brother as “a big cut-up character,” still tears up when talking about the that time 60 years ago.

“It’s been a long time, but I still remember it,” he said.

As for the Alvin Jared family in Baxter, older brother L. P. remembers the difficult days. He head the news while living in Detroit, working in the automotive industry.

“It was a bad experience, of course,” said L. P. now 85 and living in Baxter. “Feeling were hurt – badly hurt.”

It was almost too much to bear for a family that was already grieving.

“The year before at around Christmas I lost a sister to cancer, and six months later I lost a brother in a car wreck,” he said. “So I had some piled up troubles there for a while...three deaths within a year and a half.”

He said Alvin had lived with him in Detroit for a while before serving his country.

“He went home, and he and his buddy Bob Dalton decided to join the Air Force,” he said. “Of course, they were killed together.”

Those surviving the plane crash are said to been seated in the tail section of the plane.

Among them was Cookeville’s Donald Grogan – Putnam County’s lone survivor of Operation Sleigh Ride.

His youngest brother Layton Grogan, who now lives in Gainesboro, remembers learning of the plane crash.

“We heard about it that Saturday morning,” he said. “My mother just walked the floor all day because we didn’t hear anything from him.”

That night, he said his family got official word of his brother’s survival while the family was gathered at his father’s store, Grogan’s Grocery on Cedar Street in Cookeville.

“It burned him and broke him up pretty bad, but he called us the next morning and told my momma he was all right,” Layton said. “That relieved her a lot, but he wasn’t all right. He was sent to the Air Force base hospital in Montgomery, AL, to get all patched up, and we went down there to see him.”

While the Grogan family was thankful for Donald’s survival, they grieved for those who weren’t so fortunate – especially those from Putnam County.

“It had us all tore up,” Layton recalled. “We were really sorry for those people, but we were grateful for Donald to come through. We couldn’t understand why he would be the



only one.”

Donald went on to build houses and later run an antiques shop. He died in 2001 at age 69.

(Pictured: This Thursday, Dec. 25, 1952, issue of the Putnam County Herald records details of the Operation Sleigh Ride plane crash that killed four Putnam County Air Force servicemen and wounded another. At the time, it was the worst disaster in aviation history).

As for the experience of surviving a plane crash that killed so many others, he wasn’t one for sharing details, Layton said.

“He never did say much about it,” he said.

As for the Nickens siblings following the Christmas of 1952, their sorrows continued as two months later, they also lost their father.

Harry recalls the difficult days that followed – but also pointed out how the tragedies made the family stronger.

Made them survivors.

“I remember the cloud of sadness,” said Harry, thinking back to the double funeral service held for Nickens and Vaden in the old Monterey High School auditorium and the side-by-side burial to follow at Welch Cemetery.

“But my family was and is a family of faith, so we see the bigger picture. We don’t understand why it was permitted to happen, but it did happen. So, in God’s bigger plan, maybe it helped shape all of us.

“So, while it was very, very difficult for us – for my mother in particular – I think all of us have incorporated it into our life experience’s I don’t want to say we’re better off for it, but we are appreciative of what he have and who we are as a family. I can see it reflect in how we can assist other people in their life journey.”

And the families – none of them – will ever forget.

“One of the most vivid memories I have is from the cemetery,” Harry said. “To this day, I still reflect back when I hear Taps and seen the 21-gun salute.”

Even 60 years later.

Alvin Cullom Jared

b. 13 March 1930. Putnam Co., TN
d. 20 December 1952, Larson Air Force Base, Moses Lake, WA
Father: **Leonidas Polk Jared Sr.** (1879-1963)
Mother: **Mary Frances Maxwell** (1886-1981)
Buried: Maxwell Cemetery N. I-40, Baxter, TN
Inscription: In Memory Of Our Son.
Note: Airman 1/C Alvin Cullen Jared (62nd Instl. Sq)



Robert Neal Dalton

b. 23 August 1931
d. 20 December 1952, Larson Air Force Base, Moses Lake, WA
Father: **Charles Herman Dalton** (1895-1946)
Mother: **Minnie Austin** (1900-1992)
Buried: Boiling Springs Cemetery, Putnam Co., TN
Inscription: A/1C 62 Food Sv Sq AF
Note: Airman 1/C Robert N. Dalton (Fd Sv Sq)



Donald Howard Grogan

b. 6 September 1931, Putnam Co., TN

d. 2 March 2001, Putnam Co., TN

Father: **William Haskell Grogan** (1898-1967)

Mother: **Mary Jane Dunn** (1908-1995)

Buried: Cookeville City Cemetery, Putnam Co., TN

Inscription: US Air Force

Notes: One of the survivors of the plane crash (Operation Sleigh Ride).
Grogan, Airman 3/C Donald H.

Unknown how he escaped from the plane. Transferred to Madigan AH.



Van Buren "Bud" Nickens Jr.

b. 12 December 1929, Detroit, Wayne Co., MI

d. 20 December 1952, Larson Air Force Base, Moses Lake, WA

Father: **Van Buren Nickens Sr.** (1906-1953)

Mother: **Martha Jane Wunningham** (1911-1982)

Buried: Welch Memorial Cemetery, Monterey, Putnam Co., TN

Inscription: A-1C HQ & HQ Sqd N 62nd ABGP 'Asleep in Jesus'

Note: Airman 1/C Van Buren Nickens (Hq Sq AB Gp)



Paul Eugene "Boob" Vaden

b. 12 August 1930

d. 20 December 1952, Larson Air Force Base, Moses Lake, WA

Father: **Walter Lee "Athie" Vaden** (1904-1982)

Mother: **Lena Mae Smith** (1907-1977)

Buried: Welch Memorial Cemetery, Monterey, Putnam Co., TN

Inscription: A-1C US Air Force

Note: Airman 1/C Paul E. Vaden (Hq Sq AF Gp)



**DOUBLE FUNERAL SERVICE SET FOR LAST OF COUNTY'S
AIR CRASH VICTIMS**

Putnam County Herald, Cookeville, TN., 1 January 1953, front page

Funeral services for the last two of the four Putnam County boys killed in the crash of a C124 Globemaster plane at Moses Lake, WA, Saturday, December 20, have been set for Friday afternoon at 2 o'clock in a double ceremony in the auditorium of Monterey High School. Bodies of the two servicemen, Paul Eugene Vaden, and Van Nickens, Jr., of Monterey, arrived Wednesday. Final arrangements were completed by the families of the boys, who were high school classmates and buddies in the service, Tuesday night. A

double military funeral will be held with a detachment of airmen from Stewart AFB taking part. W. R. Allen of Strawberry Plains, former pastor of the Monterey Baptist Church, which both boys attended will conduct the services. Interment will be in the Whitaker Cemetery.

The father of one of the boys Van Nickens, Sr., is in a serious condition at Monterey Hospital and final arrangements were also delayed pending word from Bobby Nickens, a brother who is on Navy duty in Japan.

Minnie (Austin) Dalton

b. 3 February 1900, Smithville, DeKalb Co., TN – d. 17 July 1992, Nashville, Davidson Co., TN, md **Charles Herman Dalton**, b. 23 May 1895, Baxter, Putnam Co., TN – d. 7 August 1946, Nashville, Davidson Co., TN, s/o **James Buchanan Dalton** (1857-1926) & **Sarah Myatt** (1874-1950). Minnie (Austin) Dalton, d/o **Ammon Wylie Austin** (1861-1946) & **Minnie Sherman Medlen** (1865-1951).

Minnie sewed beautifully, was a resourceful cook and had the greenest thumb in the county. Her lawn and flowers were always the prettiest in the neighborhood. Eventually she became interested in wildflowers and enjoyed many excursions to find and transplant wildflowers - which always thrived without ever wilting. Tragedy was no stranger to Minnie. She lost her husband and her father in the same month. Five years later, her son Robert was killed in a military plane crash. Another son, Bill, died suddenly. Minnie became seriously ill in 1980. She lived with her daughter in Tullahoma, TN until her death in 1992. Through-out all difficulties, her self- determination and positive attitude have been an inspiration to all who knew her.

Donald Howard Grogan Obt.

b. 6 September 1931, Putnam Co., TN – d. 2 March 2001, Putnam Co., TN, s/o **William Haskell Grogan** (1898-1967) & **Nancy Jane Dunn**. Donald Howard Grogan survived the plane crash of 1952 called Operation Sleigh Ride that killed Robert Neal Dalton; Van Buren “Bud” Nickens Jr.

*See Harold Kenneth Grogan buried in Cookeville City Cemetery.

*See Nancy Jane (Dunn) Grogan Obt.

*See William Haskell Grogan buried in Cookeville City Cemetery.

COOKEVILLE -- Funeral services for Donald Wayne Grogan, 69, of Cookeville, were held on Sunday, March 4, from the chapel of Hooper & Huddleston Funeral Home. Burial was in Cookeville City Cemetery with full military honors conducted by Veterans Honor Guard, consisting of American Legion Post 135, VFW Post 6277 and VVA Chapter 741.



Mr. Grogan died on Friday, March 2, 2001, at Cookeville Manor Nursing Home.

He was born September 6, 1931, in Putnam County to the late Haskell and Nancy Dunn Grogan. He was an antiques dealer and veteran of the U.S. Air Force.

His family includes two sisters, Beatrice Elmore and Ara Farley, both of Cookeville; four brothers, Austin Grogan of Lewisburg, Payton Grogan of Cookeville, Layton Grogan of Gainesboro and Haskell Grogan Jr. of Tullahoma; and several nieces and nephews.

In addition to his parents, he was preceded in death by a brother, Harold Kenneth Grogan.

Pallbearers were John Collins, Jerry Dillon, Steve and Bruce Grogan, Freddie Jones and Larry Madison.

Bro. Joseph C. Britt Jr. officiated the services.

Published March 05, 2001 12:28 PM CST: Herald Citizen Newspaper, Cookeville, TN

Nancy Jane (Dunn) Grogan Obt.

b. 15 September 1908 Putnam Co., TN – d. August 1995, Cookeville, Putnam Co., TN, md on the 20th of November 1924, Putnam Co., TN to **William Haskell Grogan**, b. 10 March 1898, TN – d. 18 August 1967, s/o **William Wesley & Cordelia Grogan**. Nancy Jane (Dunn) Grogan, b. 10 March 1898, TN – d. 18 August 1967, Cookeville, Putnam Co., TN, d/o **Perry Dunn & Lucy Nash**.

*See William Haskell Grogan buried in Cookeville City Cemetery.

COOKEVILLE – Funeral services for Nancy Jane Grogan, 86, of Cookeville will be held Sunday, August 13, at 2 p.m. in the chapel of Hooper and Huddleston Funeral Home. Burial will be in Cookeville City Cemetery.

Mrs. Grogan died Friday, August 11, 1995, at Cookeville General Hospital.

A native of Putnam County, she was born September 15, 1908, to the late Perry and Lucy Nash Dunn.

Mrs. Grogan was a homemaker.

Her family includes two daughters, Beatrice Elmore and Ara Farley, both of Cookeville; five sons, Layton Grogan of Gainesboro, Peyton and Donald Graogan, both of Cookeville, Austin Grogan of Lewisburg, and Haskell Grogan Jr., of Tullahoma; one sister, Avannah LaCourse of Cookeville; one brother, Erby Dunn of Cookeville; and 11 grandchildren, 20 great-grandchildren, and ten great-great-grandchildren.

In addition to her parents, she was preceded in death by her husband, Haskell Grogan, Sr., and one son, Harold Grogan.

Her grandsons will service as pallbearers.

Bro. Guy Farris will officiate at the services.

OPERATION SLEIGH RIDE

http://www.koreanwar-educator.org/topics/airplane_crashes/globemaster_larson/p_globemaster.htm#Survivors

[KWE Note: The following tribute to Van B. Nickens Jr. and Paul Eugene Vaden was authored by Ken Hal, Cultural Administrator and Curator of the Monterey (Tennessee) Central Transportation Museum.]

Van B. Nickens, Jr. and **Paul Eugene Vaden** were best of friends. Both boys had grown up in Monterey playing together and had even attended church together at the Monterey Baptist Church. Soon after graduation from Monterey High School, the two enlisted in the United States Air Force under the “buddy system” and were assigned to the same unit.

During the Christmas holiday, 1952, the Air Force was trying to bring as many airmen as possible home from the Korean War and the Far East Command through a program nicknamed “Operation Sleigh Ride”. The lucky service personnel were chosen by lot number and were flown to the States by military aircraft. Nickens and Vaden were going to travel home on a special flight which was leaving Larson Air Force Base (AFB), Moses Lake, Washington, on December 22, 1952.

The two young men were excited to be returning home after a long stint away and eagerly boarded the C-124A Globemaster #50-100 (tail #100). There were two flights leaving Larson AFB that morning and both were traveling across the United States landing at various air force bases. Their flight was scheduled to head non-stop to Kelly AFB near San Antonio, Texas and then would eventually land at Seward AFB in Smyrna, Tennessee, where the boys would catch a Trailways bus home.

The 1.8 million dollar Globemaster (nicknamed “Old Shaky”) was a very large transport plane capable of carrying 200 fully armed troops. It was built by the Douglas Aircraft Corporation and was a double-decked plane with four 3,500 horsepower propeller engines. You entered the large cargo-hold through the nose of the plane. This particular flight carried a crew of 10 and was loaded with 105 souls and their baggage. It also carried 32,000 pounds of highly flammable aviation fuel.

At the controls was 27 year old Air Force First Lieutenant William N. O’Connell, a seasoned pilot with 2775 hours air time. Lt. O’Connell did the pre-flight run-up check list and briefed the passengers over the plane’s public address system on what to do in case of an emergency. A pamphlet with emergency procedures was also handed out to each serviceman. Nickens and Vaden were in their parachutes and seated in canvas sling seats eagerly looking forward to seeing their family and friends for Christmas.

The plane sat on the tarmac for 45 minutes, then just before dawn at 6:27 am, it traveled at full throttle down the long 13,500 foot runway. The large aircraft lifted from the runway, climbed to 100 feet and banked left sharply. Within two minutes of takeoff, the plane began to lose altitude and came down with its left wing striking the ground sending

the aircraft into a cartwheel across the snow-laden field at the end of the airstrip. The tanks ruptured and the wreckage became a fiery inferno.

There were 82 airmen and 5 crewmen killed in the crash, 29 airmen survived along with 2 crewmen. Many of the survivors were seated in the tail section of the plane. The victims were rushed to the base hospital which was about four miles from the crash. Some of the injured needed as much as 12 pints of blood. By 9:00 am, 81 donors had given blood and 48 pints of whole blood and 100 units of plasma were sent to the base hospital. By noon, more doctors and nurses as well as volunteers had gone to the hospital to care for the injured.

Airman First Class **Van Nickens, Jr.** and Airman First Class **Paul Vaden** did not survive. The two Monterey boys who had spent their lives together had perished together.

Later that evening, Ezra Wilson sat at the Trailways bus station located at Walker's Service Station on Commercial Avenue in Monterey. Ezra was waiting on his good friend, **Paul "Boob" Vaden** to arrive. Ezra and "Boob" had kept in touch and had plans to visit and catch up during this furlough. The bus pulled into the service station but no servicemen got off. Ezra was at a loss as to where his friend could be but it was just about that time that **Jerry Hall** (who would later die in an Air Force transport plane crash) had gotten the message at the Monterey Depot by telegraph of the disaster in Washington state and had gone to find Paul's parents. Paul's brother, Kenneth, went to the bus station and told Ezra of the tragedy. Ezra still tears up when he talks about that day 60 years ago.

Nickens and **Vaden** were returned to Monterey in January, 1953. Their funerals were held jointly in the auditorium of their alma mater, Monterey High School. The auditorium was packed to overflow and a cloud of sadness hung heavily over the town. The two life-long friends were buried side-by-side in Monterey's Welch Cemetery.

This crash was the worst air disaster in the world. Unfortunately, just six months later, that distinction was lost as another C-124 crashed just after take-off in Tokyo killing 129 servicemen. In fact, in the six weeks prior to the fatal flight that took the lives of **Nickens** and **Vaden**, the Air Force had lost ten transport planes along the North Pacific rim between Korea and Montana. Just four weeks earlier, an identical C-124 had disappeared on a flight in Alaska taking 52 lives (this plane was finally located sixty years later on June 10, 2012, as a glacier melted and revealed the wreckage). Another 91 souls had been lost in the crashes of four C-119 "Flying Boxcars" (**Jerry Hall**, who had delivered the sad news of the tragic Washington crash, would die a few years later in an Air Force C-119 crash in Alabama).

Vaden and Nickens were two of the 36,516 American service personnel killed during the Korean War. The sadness and sense of loss felt by this tiny mountain community was felt all across the United States on other days and under other circumstances. The names of the dead are inscribed on tombs and memorials in every state, territory and province.

“My anguish, my anguish! I am pained at my very heart; my heart is disquieted in me; I cannot hold my peace; because thou hast heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war.”

A-2C Jerry N. Wall

From: January 11, 1953 Winn Parish, PA Enterprise
Funeral Dec. 31 For Victim of Plane Tragedy

Funeral services for A-2c Jerry N. Wall are scheduled Wednesday, December 31 at 3 p.m. in the Tioga Baptist Church. Wall, brother of A. D. Wall of Dodson, was killed in the tragic crash of the C124 Globemaster in Washington last Saturday.

A telegram sent to his parents said his body was shipped at 4 a.m. Monday and was due in Tioga at 8 a.m. In addition to his parents he is survived by three brothers, A. D. of Dodson, Joseph M. of Tioga, and Charles L. of Port Arthur, Texas. A2c Wall, 21, was a veteran of almost two years with the Air Force. He was aboard the huge transport from the base in Washington Kelley AFB in San Antonio, Texas, for the Christmas holidays. A total of 86 were killed.

Harry C. Nickens (brother to Airman 1/C Van Buren Nickens)

I was an eight-year old living with my family in Monterey, Tennessee (population 2,000) when my brother, Airman 1/C Van Buren Nickens (Hq Sq AB GP), or “Bud”, as we called him, boarded the “Operation Santa Claus” ill-fated C-124 A at Larson Air Force Base, Washington. He and his best friend, Airman 1/C Paul E. Vaden (Hq Sq AB GP), or “Boob”, as we referred to him, had entered the Air Force earlier that year under what I recall was ‘the buddy plan’. They were best of friends throughout their boyhood and schooling years and entered the Air Force under a plan that would keep them together throughout their basic training and beyond, so they hoped. Their planning for being home at Christmas, 1952 found them seated side-by-side on the C-124 A.

After a joint memorial service in the high school auditorium, their remains were interred in Welch Cemetery, Monterey, Tennessee in side-by-side graves. They were afforded the highest honor of a military funeral. I can still recall the impression made on me by the playing of Taps, the 21-gun salute and the presentation of the folded American flag to my mother. Even today, when I see remains of an American service person being returned home through Dover, Delaware or hear Taps being played, my mind reflects immediately to that December day in 1952.

Bud was the first of four sons born to Martha Jane and Van Buren Nickens. He also had four sisters. All other than Bud survive at this time.

Our mother was a saintly soul that cared for a household of ten. All eight children were raised with an appropriate portion of love and caring, were well-founded in our religious faith and felt a commitment toward success. For a coal mining and timber community,

Monterey offered little opportunity beyond high school. For many, the military was an opportunity to see the world and secure job skills for future employment. Once Bud entered the Air Force, his younger brother volunteered for the Navy. This left a 12-year old sister, a 6-year old brother, a toddler sister and me at home with my mother and gravely ill father, Van Buren Nickens.

We knew Bud and Boob would be traveling home together for Christmas. Their original plans were to travel by train, taking a northern route coming home and a southern route returning. That train ride would afford them the opportunity to 'see the whole country'; however, because they had so few leave days, they opted to board the Operation Santa Claus plane.

My mother was one that admonished all of the children: "Don't tell your dream before breakfast or it will come true." Early on Sunday morning, December 21, 1951, my mother revealed that she had had a terrible dream the night before but would not share it when prompted to do so. You see, we had not yet had breakfast.

There was snow in our home town that morning. This resulted in the Sunday morning paper not being delivered timely. There was no CNN, Fox News or even television in our home. We all looked forward to the Sunday paper for an update on the Korean War, world news and the comic strips. After breakfast and when the paper finally arrived, my mother went out to retrieve it. She returned to the house distraught and in tears, for you see, the headlines in the paper reflected what she had dreamed that Saturday night, December 20, 1951. She saw in her dream a plane had crashed into the Monterey lumber yard. She recounted seeing flames and 'molten lava' everywhere, and men in blue uniforms that kept her from getting close the site. She knew then the molten lava was the metal from the plane, the men in blue were Air Force personnel and that her son was on that plane. We were not officially informed of that fact until the following Tuesday. To add to the tragic experiences that be-felled my mother, if losing her 20-year old son in a plane crash was not enough, two months later my dad passed.

Bud, by all accounts, was a genteel, loveable young adult that had much potential. He was a gifted carver of wood, had a church solo quality voice and a great work ethic. The experience of my family was no different than that of 86 others—a tragic loss.

It is with gratitude that I and others within my family commend your efforts and that of the Forgotten Heroes Memorial group. We are not certain if anyone from our family will attend the dedication of the memorial on June 2. That is still being debated. In any case, you are commended.

Blessings,
Harry C. Nickens, Ed.D.
Dean of Health and Human Sciences
St. Catharine College
St. Catharine, KY 40061

Air Force transport plane crashes on takeoff at Larson Air Force Base in Moses Lake, killing 87, on December 20, 1952.

HistoryLink.org Essay 8352 :

On December 20, 1952, a U.S. Air Force C-124 cargo and troop transport plane lurches to the side shortly after takeoff from Larson Air Force Base in Moses Lake. The left wing tip hits the ground and the plane explodes in fire. A total of 87 passengers and crew die. It is, at the time, the highest death toll in aviation history.

Going Home

Most of the passengers were Air Force personnel from Korea or Northwest bases, catching a ride home for Christmas in a program called Operation Sleighride. The plane, a C-124 Globemaster, was enroute to Kelly Air Force Base near San Antonio.

According to eyewitness reports, the plane made a sharp left turn immediately after takeoff, causing the left wing tip to hit the ground. The plane then broke up and caught fire, just north of the runway. Some of the 121 passengers escaped by running out of the rear of the plane. But most of the people in the cavernous main passenger compartment and cockpit were caught in the wreckage and fire. Rescue teams worked for hours to look for survivors and recover bodies. At first the death toll was thought to be 92; that number was later reduced to 87.

A subsequent investigation showed that the crash was caused by “locked” controls at takeoff, but whether this was pilot error or mechanical malfunction is still in dispute. It was, at the time, the worst disaster in aviation history. It was, however, surpassed only six months later when another Air Force transport crashed near Tokyo, killing 129. That, too, involved a C-124.

Sources:

“92 Die In Plane Smash Near Moses Lake Base,” *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, December 20, 1952, p. A-1; “Home Front -- Globemaster Crash, Larson Air Field,” Korean War Educator website accessed October 31, 2007 (http://koreanwar-educator.org/topics/airplane_crashes/globemaster_larson/p_globemaster.htm).

By Jim Kershner, November 02, 2007

*Read more about the History of Putnam Co., TN and it's people at:
<http://www.ajlambert.com>