FLIGHT SAFETY FOUNDATION
Accident Prevention
Vol. 46 No. 11 *For Everyone Concerned with the Safety of Flight* November 1989

Who Killed MacMillan?

Years after a final report found no definitive cause for the Artic crash of a military cargo aircraft, the author puts together a chain of events that could have led to the accident.

by

Maj. David M. H. Sibbald
U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

Charlie MacMillan's dead. That's a fact, final and irrevocable. Such parts of him as were recovered were minutely examined by a skilled pathologist who declared those meager scraps of flesh were indeed the last mortal remains of Charlie MacMillan, Captain, USAF.

How MacMillan died is also known; the spectacular manner in which Charlie plastered his lumbering C-124 Globemaster up the side of the Sondrestrom Fjord has been rather cleverly reconstructed by a skilled team of Air Force safety personnel. But one rather odd and interesting fact remains. Although they know where, how, and when MacMillan died, the United States Air Force, in all its wisdom, does not know why MacMillan died. In an accident report several inches thick, the investigating team explained at some length and in great detail that they could find no positive reason for Charlie's untimely and violent end.

Almost 10 years have passed since that disastrous November night and still I see no one putting pen to paper about Charlie MacMillan and the circumstances surrounding his death. It is time someone did; certainly there is plenty to tell. So many of us knew so much more than we ever told the investigators. As one of the active ... passive? ... both? ... participants in events which led up to the crash, I think it is time to get it all down, in order and logically. Maybe it will make more sense now than it did then. And maybe I will sleep better at night.

***

Just before his takeoff from the United States back in 1965, Charlie MacMillan stood hard upon his brakes at the end of the runway. He called for the checklist and his flight engineer started the ritual examination of the four rumbling powerplants. It was no night to be going anywhere, but it was a particularly rotten night to be taking off for Greenland. The airfield outside Charlie's cockpit was drifted deep in snow, and a steady northeast wind of some 20 knots swirled the still-falling flakes against the heated glass windshield. Two large yellow snowplows, marked by flashing blue and yellow beacons, snorted up and down the runway. Obligingly, they would pull off to the side when Charlie announced his readiness for takeoff. Charlie did not care if he never got ready.

His schedule called for a refueling stop at Goose Bay, then a fairly short leg into Sondrestrom. The cavernous cabin of his Globemaster was crammed with fresh vegetables, eggs and Christmas mail. Charlie was in an extremely ill humor. After all, a midnight departure for

Greenland on a miserable winter's night is no fun for anyone. For a scheduling officer who had a reputation to maintain as a Grabber-of-Only-the -Good-Trips, it is downright embarrassing. However, when the scheduled aircraft commander had suddenly called in sick, Charlie was the only rested AC available. So there he was, about to roar into the black November sky, when he would much rather have been at his own fireside sipping a drink and studying the *Wall Street Journal*.

"No Sweat" Flight

The flight to Goose Bay was uneventful. There was some moderate icing at the cruising altitude of 9,000 feet but, passing Boston the Globermaster broke into the clear and droned on to Goose Bay where it landed on a snow-covered runway under clear, cold skies. While his machine was being refueled, Charlie MacMillan and his crew had a hot meal in the terminal snack bar. Their departure from Goose Bay and their flight to the coast of Greenland were also uneventful. Droning north over the frozen Davis Straits, MacMillan exchanged a few words with TWA 609, inbound on a great circle route from London. The TWA captain later testified that Charlie had inquired about the beauty of the hostesses aboard the jetliner. TWA 609 being a freighter, there were no stewardesses aboard, and the captain asked Charlie about the weather between their present position and Boston. Charlie obliged with their information and the two craft went their separate ways.

Sometime later, MacMillan chatted briefly with Joe Penner at a radar site remotely and precariously perched on the frozen Labrador coast. MacMillan requested a radar fix to confirm his position and Joe obligingly supplied one. Both of these calls were entirely in character for Charlie and neither of them suggested that his flight was anything other than routine.

Five minutes ahead of flight plan, MacMillan reported over Hosteinborg NDB, located close to the mouth of the Sondrestrom Fjord. In summer the fjord murmurs with sparkling blue water which, 90 miles inland, laps gently against the end of the Sondrestrom runway. That night, however, the deep blue water was covered by thick black ice and a light snow was falling on Sondrestrom.

MacMillan made contact with the Sondrestrom radar controller and received clearance for his approach. He left his cruising altitude and began responding to vectors which should have brought him safely to the end of Sondrestrom's steeply sloping runway. The fjord was obscured by clouds which reached to within 1,500 feet of the surface and visibility was three miles through a gently falling snow. The captain of a Scandinavian DC-8, which landed a few minutes before Charlie's crash, reported that there was no turbulence or ice, and that he had experienced smooth, routine approach.

During the investigation, the radar operator testified that MacMillan's heading and glidepath control had been "erratic" although "no worse than some others" he had seen. He then testified that when the aircraft reached a point about seven miles from touchdown, it drifted rapidly left of course, corrected back to the right, climbed high above the glideslope, dove through it, and disappeared from the scope. The only answer to his subsequent urgent calls was the soft hiss of static in his receiver. His shift supervisor, leaping for the door of the radar van, was just in time to see a huge flash of fire and a billowing explosion from the north shore road. The rescuers arrived at the crash site to find the torn remains of a Douglas Globemaster burning furiously. There were no survivors.

During the investigation, the experts decided the machine impacted nose low with the wings almost level. They also discovered that all four engines had been bellowing their maximum power at impact. As they progressed, they also found evidence that the flight instruments and their power source had been operating normally. So why then did MacMillan crash? Why did Charlie MacMillan and five others end their flight and their various hopes and aspirations against the frozen wall of the Sondrestrom Fjord?

The crew was current and qualified. They were current even to the point of everyone's having had a recent oxygen mask inspection, a fairly rare situation in those days before the Military Airlift Command (MAC) bought the sweep-on mask. Examination of body tissues showed no evidence of alcohol or other poisons. So what happened? Who or what killed MacMillan? Why did a qualified, experienced crew, in a well-maintained, smoothly running airplane stall, crash and burn during a routine instrument approach? The final verdict of the investigators was not enlightening. "For reasons unknown to this board, the pilot lost control of his aircraft, permitting it to stall on final approach where insufficient altitude remained to effect recovery." This is (or was) standard safety jargon for "We don't know who or what killed Charlie MacMillan."

The Pointing Finger Doesn't

But I know who killed Charlie MacMillan, and so do several others, though none of us admitted it at the time. We remained silent for what seemed excellent reasons then. Where's the man willing to stand up and accuse the squadron commander or the chief of standardization? Remember, this was 1965 — a different time and place from now. Who would let a board of strangers know about MacMillan's actual level of competence, and who would tell the truth about his copilot? No one would.

But now it's time. MacMillan's death illustrates so vividly and with painful clarity how a unit or a crew may look good on paper and yet be seriously deficient in their flying ability. Let me tell you how MacMillan's outfit was so many years ago.

The squadron commander was probably the weakest link in a rusty chain that finally parted the night MacMillan died. The man had never commanded a flying unit before and was badly out of his depth. It was rumored, and with some accuracy, that he was the only man in his class who had not made full colonel and that this assignment would do the trick. He was not a particularly good pilot and did not care to fly. He was therefore very poor at making the proper decisions for a flying unit. His lack of experience and lack of confidence caused him to place great reliance upon his squadron staff. And a couple of them used this situation to further their own ends. He seldom went against the recommendations of his staff, even when they may have been poorly thought out.

One of these recommendations, which eventually became policy, concerned the scheduling of staff pilots on flying missions. The squadron hierarchy, which included MacMillan, had first choice of all the trips the squadron was assigned. Since these people worked so hard in administrative jobs, it was thought they ought to have preference when it came to choosing trips. The problem was, of course, that the staff pilots abused this policy and the commander permitted them to do so. The exciting, exotic missions to Kenya, Australia, and South America were invariably grabbed by the staff pilots, while the remainder of the unit flew to places like Germany, the Azores and Greenland.

One of the outgrowths of this policy, was that MacMillan seldom flew where the bad weather was taking place. One thing Charlie MacMillan dearly loved to do was stay out of bad weather. And rightly so, because he was not very good at flying in it. One evening in the bar, a young copilot who had flown several trips with Charlie sounded off on the subject.

"Better watch you don't fly into a cloud some day, MacMillan. You'll probably spin, crash and burn, heh, heh!" But it was "Happy Hour," so we all chuckled with him and thought no more about it.

False Picture of Proficiency

Although MacMillan seldom flew solely by reference to his flight instruments, his logbook showed otherwise. On his frequent trips to Honolulu and points west, he logged lots of weather time and numerous instrument approaches. Looking back, I wonder why none of us ever called him on this. You do not consistently see 60 hours of weather time on a 90-hour mission to Saigon or Clark AFB. Looking back again, it is not hard to see that in spite of the impressive columns in his logbook, Charlie MacMillan's instrument technique was probably chronically rusty.

In addition, MacMillan flew the same number of checkrides as everyone else and he usually passed. But he never made a good enough showing to have anyone recommend him for instructor pilot. His grades from training were always just barely passing. It was a curious thing since he flew the same aircraft, attended the same course, and answered the same questions year after year. The only time I ever saw MacMillan read the Dash One and other literature was immediately before a trip when he would zip into the crew reading room and initial everything in sight. He was also an accomplished square-filler and usually dodged flight safety meetings, 5BX (aerobics), flu shots and anything else he did not personally approve of. Control of those items 10 years ago was loose enough that MacMillan could usually get away with it. It is interesting and undoubtedly coincidental that MacMillan skipped the monthly flight safety meeting the day before he crashed. The subject that day was cold weather procedures.

The Start of a Chain

Of course, the fact that he was an undisciplined and unprofessional pilot who happened to be a bit rusty on instruments did not kill MacMillan. After all, he flew instruments well enough to pass his check rides, so he should have been able to handle a routine radar approach to Sondrestrom. It took just a few more additional factors to do him in.

MacMillan had with him on this last trip a copilot by the name of Minkiewicz. They had been aviation cadets together around the time of the Korea War, and they had a lot in common. They were both marginal pilots, and they both had poor attitudes. Minkiewicz had recently returned from a staff job, and his flying was so rusty he had the devil of a time just checking out as a second pilot. Both MacMillan and Minkiewicz had been passed over once for major, and they were sweating out the next list to be published within the month. Each seemed to find some measure of comfort in the other's presence, and frequently you would see the pair of them in the bar growling and complaining over the lousy hand the Air Force had dealt them.

They both had other personal problems. At any given hour of the day, should you pass MacMillan's house, you could almost count upon seeing Mrs. Mac under the influence of martinis or recovering from an overdose of the same. MacMillan never knew what she might do when he was off flying, and she was constantly on his mind. Mrs. Minkiewicz was a frail shadow of a creature who, we discovered, was quietly dying of leukemia. She

did, too, just a few months after the crash.

So, now we've got MacMillan and his C-124 over Holsteinborg facing a weather approach into the narrow confines of the Sondrestrom Fjord. And we know a little more about him that we knew before. Charlie is a little rusty on the needle-ball-airspeed. His copilot is worse; he may not even have the sense to understand the attitude indicator. Both of them have their worries about promotions, passovers and their respective wives. Some final little distraction was thrown in, and it was too much. Some final straw which no one will ever identify caused Charlie MacMillan and Minkiewicz to lose control of their aircraft on final approach. There was a shuddering stall which ended in a sickening dive, then a blazing holocaust a scant three miles from the safety of the airport at Sondrestrom.

***

Not long after MacMillan's death I was promoted to colonel and reassigned to a staff slot in the Pentagon. I was ready to leave. Commanding an operational flying squadron had not been my cup of tea. The day I made the CO's official visit to MacMillan's wife and the wives of the other crew members will be remembered as one of the worst days of my life.

It was some months after I had left before I began to see that if I had been a commander in the real sense of the word, MacMillan's accident would never have happened. I could have closely reviewed his checkrides instead of automatically endorsing them. I could have insisted that he complete training, or I could have had strong discus--sions with him about his attitude. I could have taken any number of steps, any one of which might have saved him. After all, that is what commanders are supposed to do. The commander is responsible for the safe and efficient operation of his unit, and that does not include letting marginal air crews kill themselves. How simple it is now; how obscure it seemed then.

It's been almost 10 years, and I am long retired. My life is golf, fishing and the beach. Yet still, sometimes in the dark of the night, I wake up shuddering and sweating because once again in my mind's eye I have watched a C-124 come thundering out of snow-filled clouds and explode against the ice and rocks that rim the Sondrestrom Fjord. Sleep is often hours returning and sometimes never comes because I was no leader, or commander and, in the final analysis, I killed MacMillan. ♦

[This article is reprinted from the May 1989 issue of The MAC Flyer *(U.S. Air Force Military Airlift Command) in the interest of sharing safety information with the worldwide aviation community. —Ed.]*

What's Your Input?

Flight Safety Foundation welcomes articles and papers for publication. If you have an article proposal, a completed manuscript or a technical paper that may be appropriate for Accident Prevention, please contact the Editor. Submitted materials are evaluated for suitability and a cash stipend is paid upon publication. Request a copy of "Editorial Guidelines for Flight Safety Foundation Writers."

ACCIDENT PREVENTION

 • Subscriptions : $50 U.S. (U.S. - Canada - Mexico), $55 Air Mail (all other countries), twelve issues yearly. • Staff: Stephanie F. Yoffee, production coordinator; Jacque Edwards, word processor; Arthur H. Sanfelici, consultant • Request address changes by mail and include old and new addresses. • Roger Rozelle, editor, Flight Safety Foundation, 2200 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 500, Arlington, Virginia 22201-3306 U.S. • tel: 703-522-8300 • telex: 901176 FSF INC AGTN • fax: 703-525-6047