

13 PARATROOPERS, 3 FLIERS KILLED IN PERU

Berkshire Evening Eagle, Aug. 17, 1942

Saturday night, August 15th, was "a miserable night," hot, damp and foggy. A war was on. When the sun set people went to bed. There wasn't anything else to do in Peru, no television. Much of the town didn't even have electricity.

At Tanglewood a special program for Russian Relief that same evening featuring Shostakovitch's Seventh netted \$10,000. In Pittsfield the Electrics of the Can-Am League were playing under the lights. Earlier that same day at the Airport 84 members of the Royal Netherlands Air Force had been presented with the Order of Willem, their nation's highest award, by their queen. Thousands had witnessed the event.

War monopolized the front page of the newspaper. The US Marines were fighting in the Solomon Islands, the Germans were attacking south of Stalingrad and battles were underway in North Africa. Our nation had been at war for seven months already.

As dusk settled that evening the quiet of Peru was suddenly broken by the troubled sound of an airplane, low and lost in fog. And then, with a blast that shook the hills, it crashed. Alerted by the shocking sound residents nearby set out in search of the plane using whatever means they could to locate it. For a time there were additional explosions. It was as if a gun fight was in progress.

Search parties, hastily assembled, finally located the plane off to the left of the road the CCC had built from Curtin Road to the top of Garnet Mountain and near its summit. The scene was chaos, the plane, an Army Air Force two engine transport, was in ruins, burning, with equipment and personal effects scattered everywhere. On crashing it had cut a swath through the forest 60 feet by 60 yards.

Among the first to arrive on the scene were Ken and Bob Torrey. Others soon joined them and shortly Peru's Civil Defense, abetted by the state police, took over. One soldier, Sgt. Robert Lee

of Columbus, Ohio, badly burned but still on his feet was doing what he could to bring his fellows out of the burning plane. He had managed to save two of his comrades both of whom were badly hurt.

Once on the site the rescue party set about carrying the survivors to where they could receive medical attention, in itself a considerable challenge. For his heroism that night Bill Avery was awarded a medal by the Army and for its work Peru's Civil Defense force in 1943 received citations from the US Office of Civil Defense and the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety.

The plane had been en route to Providence, RI transporting paratroopers from Fort Bragg, NC. It was far off its course as was a sister plane which had had to make a forced landing at Pittsfield that same night. That plane had found the city with the help of light from the baseball game underway at Waconah Park. To provide light for its landing Airport officials had arranged for automobiles to line the runway and shine their headlights on it.

The airplane crash on Garnet Mountain was one of the worst disasters ever to strike Berkshire County. In its final review of the event the Army announced that 16 persons, in all, had died in the crash, 12 paratroopers and four crewmen. Three had survived, thanks, in a large part, to the prompt, effective and compassionate response of Peru's people.

- Carl Nordstrom

(The story above contains the answer to last month's question about the 1942 plane crash. Gremlins contaminated the question - the date was given incorrectly as August 2. A monument commemorating the event and identifying the location was built there by Peru people. It was dedicated on August 18, 1946. In attendance at the dedication were members of the families of the soldiers and airmen killed in the crash.)

((The Eagle cost 30 in 1942.))