

Bombs over Goldsboro ^[1]

On the night of January 24th, 1961, the quiet farmland surrounding Goldsboro was disturbed by an airborne alert mission gone awry. "I heard the whine of an airplane about to land, then there was a big explosion. It almost knocked me out of bed. I got up and ran to the window and saw my whole field on fire," stated a local farmer. Witnesses said the plane spun through the sky "like a roman candle," finally hitting somewhere near Musgrave's Crossroads, between Patetown and Eureka. The B-52 jet carried two thermonuclear bombs and had been in the air for about twelve hours before it experienced a drop in fuel pressure. While attempting an emergency landing, the crew lost control of the aircraft, and they were ordered to bail. Five men ejected and landed safely. One ejected but did not survive the landing, and two died in the crash.

Lieutenant William R. Wilson, one of the survivors, told of his experience parachuting into the surrounding swampland: "I don't know how it happened. I know when I landed in the field I felt awfully good. I felt like running. I went to a house and a fellow got his wife up and they fixed some coffee. They thought at first I was a prowler when I told them I had jumped out of an airplane. I must have been bad looking." The co-pilot, Major Richard Rardin, also gave his account of the crash: "I could see three or four other chutes against the glow of the wreckage. The plane hit ten or twelve seconds after bail out. I hit some trees. I had a fix on some lights and started walking. My biggest difficulty getting back was the various and sundry dogs I encountered on the road."

The next day, local newspapers reported that as the plane went down, one of the nuclear bombs on board was ejected and parachuted to the ground, while the other was found among the wreckage. Air Force officials stressed that there was no danger of radiation affecting the area because the two bombs were unarmed, meaning that there were safety devices in place to prevent explosion. Later sources indicate, however, that an explosion may have indeed been a real concern. In a 1983 statement, Robert McNamara, then Secretary of Defense, admitted that when the parachute-less bomb was found, its arming mechanism had accidentally gone through all but one of the seven steps toward detonation.

More alarming information about the crash was revealed later. In 1992, Congress released a summary of the Goldsboro accident indicating that, according to investigators, upon impact the parachute-less bomb had broken into several pieces, one of which was never found. The missing piece contained uranium, and it was believed that it may have struck the ground so hard that it sank deep into the soft, swampy earth. Crews excavated the surrounding farmland to a depth of fifty feet, but were unable to recover the missing piece. Two days after the accident, officials at nearby Seymour Johnson Air Force Base asked that all visitors to the crash site return any aircraft parts they may have removed. The officials claimed that these parts were needed to assess the cause of the accident, though they made no mention of the missing portion of the bomb. The Air Force eventually purchased an easement to the area surrounding the crash site, in order to prevent any land use or digging.

Radiation tests have been conducted on the crash site and surrounding area over the years, though no harmful substances have been detected.

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Photo of one of two Mk.39 thermonuclear bombs that fell from the failed B-52 in Faro, NC. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



^[17]

Highway marker in Wayne County, NC, marking the site of the B-52 crash. Located on NC 111/222 (Main Street) at SR 1058 (Faro Road) in Eureka, NC. Image courtesy of the North Carolina Historical Highway Marker Program.

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