

'This Is It,' Radios Pilot:

Big M'Chord Plane Falls; 4 Men Die

Mid-Air Crash Hinted In Plunge Near Sumner

An Air Force C-118 transport plane, wrapped in flames and streaming a tail of fire, plunged to earth with four men aboard 15 miles east of McChord Air Force Base last night. There were no survivors.

The Air Force said two of those aboard the plane were 1st Lt. Thomas E. Lasater and T/Sgt. Guy J. Cunningham, both of Tacoma.

Col. Robert E. Booth, commander of the 1705th Air Transport Group, to which the plane was attached, said a radioed report from the pilot indicated there had been a mid-air collision.

He said the pilot radioed about an hour and 15 minutes after taking off from McChord on a routine training flight:

"We have hit something, or something has hit us."

COLONEL BOOTH SAID the pilot then called "Mayday," the international distress signal, and reported he was headed back to the base.

Then came the word:

"This is it!"

That was the last heard from the stricken plane.

"It would appear there was some kind of a mid-air collision prior to the crash," Colonel Booth said.

He said he had no way of determining immediately whether another plane was involved.

AIR FORCE SPOKESMEN would not comment on reports that three, and possibly four, parachutes had been seen in the air.

Bill Jones, Route 1, Orting, told Chief Emard he saw three parachutes in the air.

The plane was torn asunder in a tremendous explosion when it smashed into the ground in the mountainous, wooded Rhodes Lake area about five miles southeast of Sumner.

It was attached to the 33d Air Transport Squadron and took off from McChord at 6:29 p. m. Its crew consisted of two officers and two enlisted men. There were no passengers.

SEARCHERS could find no survivors. It was reported that two bodies were found buried deep in the ground by the impact.

Fred Emard, chief of police at Orting, said the plane caught fire and spewed flames for a full four minutes. He said he looked up and it was spewing fire for several hundred feet behind it, then went down over a hill. Then a tremendous explosion lit up the

whole sky, Emard said.

ANOTHER EYE-WITNESS, E. F. Seeley, Orting, saw the plane burst into flames; first one motor, then the whole ship. He said:

"I put on my shoes and ran down there. The whole place was on fire. I knew this was no place for me. I ran out and began directing

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traffic. My wife called for help."

AN EYEWITNESS, Sam Snyder of Graham, a U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service employe, reported:

"At about 7:45 p. m. I heard a plane fly over my house. A short time later, I saw what appeared to be a dim light, then a huge flash. It was the plane crash."

Snyder lives only a short distance from the crash scene.

Gerald O'Connor, a tug crewman, of Orting, said:

"I was driving toward Orting from Auburn when I saw what looked like a flare in the sky. I stopped my car and watched it. It looked like the flare was falling apart. Then I saw a terrific flash and a puff of smoke. It was the plane hitting the ground."

PIERCE COUNTY Sheriff's deputies who went to the crash scene radioed headquarters an hour after the crash that the flames were too intense to get near the plane.

Within a half-hour of the crash, the twisting country roads leading to the area were jammed with ambulances, State Patrol and sheriff's cars, firefighting vehicles and curious onlookers.