

WHY?

HOW FURTHER WARBIIRD TRAGEDIES CAN BE AVOIDED

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

Way back in Journalism 101, we had the "Five Ws" beaten into our heads: Who, What, When, Where, and Why. These were the fundamental questions that every article prepared by a journalism student had to answer.

When it comes to the tragedy that took the lives of six Warbird enthusiasts and involved the destruction of two rare aircraft, let's put our Five Ws to use:

WHO: Six individuals comprising pilots and members of the Commemorative Air Force.

WHAT: Boeing B-17G N7722C and Bell P-63F N6763.

WHEN: 12 November 2022, at approximately 1:20 pm.

WHERE: Dallas Executive Airport (formerly Redbird Airport).

WHY: The basis for this short article.

The "Why" is the elephant in the room. From the numerous videos and hundreds of still photographs it is clearly evident that the pilot of the Bell P-63F flew belly-up into the left side of the B-17G's fuselage — impacting approximately at the wing root. Both aircraft instantly came apart and the wreckage crashed into the ground in just over a second.

There were no mechanical issues with either aircraft and the weather was relatively decent with a strong wind pushing against the right side of the participating aircraft as they made their passes in front of the crowd. The various Warbirds appeared to be accommodating the specified show lines until the time of the collision.

It appears that the P-63F had deviated from its show line (it seems that the show line for the bombers was closer to the spectators while the show line for the fighters was outside that of the bombers and thus a bit more distant from spectators) while the pilot was watching two P-51 Mustangs that were ahead of the B-17. The P-63 pilot appears to be in an extended bank turn in an attempt to join the fighters. By doing this, the P-63F's belly is directly aimed


at the Flying Fortress. There is a very good chance that the fighter pilot never saw the bomber and the two B-17 pilots would also not have seen the fighter since the P-63F was approaching from a blind spot.

The "Why" extends to the pilot briefing and to instruction from the air boss — who controls the airshow once it has started. How was the pilot briefing conducted and what were the rules specified for the "Warbird Parade" of aircraft? Was enough space allocated between the flight levels of the different types of Warbirds? Was the figure eight fly-by pattern safe for the different types involved — Warbirds with a 100-mph speed difference? How was the Air Boss communicating with the aircraft and was he issuing specific instructions to the pilots with each pass?

These are questions that will be investigated by the NTSB but they will also take months, if not years, before a final report is issued. In the meantime, was there an unsafe procedure in play during the fly-bys and, if so, should not this knowledge be passed on as soon as available rather than waiting the allotted time for the investigation?

The "Why" regarding this disaster has lots of sub-questions that need prompt answers.

Will there be a long-term impact on Warbird aviation because of this crash? That is a difficult question. Some pilots state that it was a one-time mistake on the part of the P-63 pilot and to let it go at that. Others are more introspective and see the widely-viewed mid-air collision as a door being opened to allow for more restrictions and regulations. Sadly, there is little doubt that the P-63 caused the collision but we will need to explore all the factors of "Why" this happened so that our historic aircraft can continue flying in the safest manner possible. As usual, reader comments are welcome and I can be contacted at moleary2challenge@gmail.com. **AC**



One of the photographs widely circulated on the internet was this one taken by Larry Petterborg showing the complete devastation caused by the mid-air. The Fort has been blown in two while a large portion of the P-63F is at the upper left. The nose of the fighter has completely separated from the fuselage and the nose gear has extended. A wing from the P-63F can be seen immediately under the horizontal stabilizer of the B-17G.