

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

B-25 versus The Empire State Building

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 Beechcraft C-45F B-25 Mitchell LTC William F. Smith Empire State Building
 Betty Lou Oliver Elevator

*The twentieth anniversary of the dreaded 9/11 terrorist attack is just over a month away. Two hijacked planes were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on that awful day. But did you know that there have been **three other times** when tall NYC buildings were struck by aircraft? None of those tragic events were deliberate, but all were fatal, and one was particularly noteworthy. It happened 86 years ago this week, on July 29.*

THE MOST RECENT: OCTOBER 11, 2006

New York Yankees pitcher, Cory Lidle, was proud of his airplane, a Cirrus SR20. He had recently learned to fly, and was taken with the joy of flying and the convenience having his own airplane would give him in traveling. He had just over 100 hours of solo flying experience.

On October 11, 2006, Lidle took off from Teterboro Airport with his certificated flight instructor aboard, bound for Nashville, with a continuation the next day to California by way of Dallas. They didn't make it, striking a condominium building on the Upper East Side. Lidle and the flight instructor were killed; two residents of the condo most impacted by the plane were badly hurt, but survived. An additional 19 on the ground were hurt, including 11 firefighters.

After take-off, Lidle circled the Statue of Liberty, then flew up the East River at just over 600' altitude. At the time, fixed-wing aircraft had a VFR corridor available up the East River, but were required to U-turn at the northern tip of Roosevelt Island unless they have ATC permission to proceed. Lidle's plane attempted such a U-turn, but it was started in the middle of the river, not the edge which would have given them more turning room. Further, the wind turbulence from nearby tall buildings that always made the U-turn difficult was worsened by a strong cross-wind that day. They hit the Belaire building, a 42-story condo tower at 524 East 72nd Street, at about the 30-story level.

New York was still a bit jittery from the 9/11 attacks five years earlier, but the small size of the crash and quick action by first responders quickly quelled terrorism concerns. The fact that Lidle was a pitcher for the Yankees attracted a lot of attention.

The NTSB concluded that the primary cause of the accident was pilot error, but could not determine which person was actually flying the airplane at the time. The FAA instituted a rule

requiring all fixed-wing aircraft to be under ATC control at all times in the East River corridor, two days after Lidle's accident.

U.S. ARMY AIR FORCES C-45F CRASH

On May 20, 1946, an AAF Beechcraft C-45F Expediter with five aboard on a flight to Newark from Lake Charles Army Air Field in Louisiana crashed into the 58th floor of the Bank of Manhattan building at 40 Wall Street. The weather was foggy, visibility was poor, and the pilot was lost. All five were killed, one a WAC officer, but nobody on the ground or in the building struck were hurt, because the crash occurred at 8:10 PM, and there were only two people in the building). The plane was larger than Lidle's, but still relatively small, and it was flying slowly as the pilot groped through the fog, so the damage to the building structure was minor.

The causes of the crash were well understood, and the only casualties were the five on board, which has helped the fog of time obscure this event. The Manhattan Bank building, however, does have an interesting history.

The Manhattan Company was founded in 1799 by Aaron Burr, with its HQ at a row house at 40 Wall Street. Claimed to be a water company, it was really a banking ploy by Burr to compete with his hated foe, Alexander Hamilton, and his successful Bank of New York. By 1900, the company began expanding rapidly, as was the rest of Wall Street, and horizontal space was at a real premium. The only way to grow was up. And the folks involved had rather large egos, so there was a competition for building the tallest structure.

The Manhattan Company led a syndicate that produced the tallest building in NYC (briefly), completing it in May, 1930, in spite of serious construction difficulties, and changing plans in mid-construction in order to add height to make it taller than the then-building Woolworth building. It took 2300 construction workers working 24/7 to do the job. The 40 Wall building contained about 2 million square-feet of usable office space.

Meanwhile, the Chrysler Building was under construction, but it wasn't going to be quite as tall at 40 Wall. The architect secretly built a 125' spire to cap the Chrysler, making it slightly taller. The Manhattan syndicate snorted that their building had the highest usable floor, their corporate club room. They were right, but their focus on height ended with the completion of the Empire State Building one year later. There were a number of other skyscraper proposals floated in the early 1930s, but the Depression wiped them out.

Opening a year after the Stock Market Crash was a difficult proposition, and many of the tenants the 40 Wall syndicate was counting on went belly up. In spite of the turmoil, the Manhattan Company survived the Depression and WWII, and merged with the Chase National Bank in 1955. The new Chase Manhattan was headquartered nearby, and, after a lot of financial wheeling and dealing (much of it illegal), the building was sold and remodeled several times, and is now on the National Register of Historic Places. It was acquired by the Trump Organization in 1995, and is known today as "The Trump Building." Estimates of the building's value and indebtedness vary wildly.

B-25 VERSUS THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

No fatal accident can be truly termed “inconsequential,” but the two accidents above had a relatively small effect on those not directly killed or injured. The third accident in this Item, however, had a significantly larger impact.

WWII was winding down in July, 1945. Germany had already been defeated, and Hitler was dead. Japan was running out of kamikazes and other resources; Hiroshima was less than two weeks away. A number of experienced pilots had already returned to the Zone of the Interior, having completed their combat tours.

One returned pilot was William F. Smith, an experienced B-17 driver from the ETO. He was serving as a VIP transport pilot, using a B-25 Mitchell bomber that had been demilitarized and tricked-out accordingly. He took off from Bedford, MA, on July 28, 1945, on his way to Newark to pick up his CO and transport him to Sioux Falls Army Air Base in South Dakota. He had two passengers aboard, an AAF mechanic and a USN aviation machinist's mate who hitched a ride to get to Brooklyn, where his parents were grieving the loss of their other son, in the South Pacific.

LTC Smith received a warning from the New York Municipal Airport in Queens (soon to be re-named for Mayor LaGuardia) that foggy weather was present over Newark, and suggested Smith land in Queens. Smith refused, almost certainly because his passenger, and boss, were waiting for him in Newark.

The weather report was accurate, and Smith likely became lost and disoriented. Flight rules at the time forbade any flying below 2000' over NYC, but Smith dropped lower (much lower) to try to find landmarks. He blew down 42nd Street well below building tops, and then fatally turned south at 5th Avenue, directly north of the Empire State Building. Smith knew he was in deep trouble, firewalled his engines, and tried to climb out of danger. Then the silhouette of the world's tallest building loomed out of the fog, dead ahead.

At 9:49 AM, the Mitchell bomber hit between the 78th and 79th floors at ~200 MPH. The crash tore a hole the size of its fuselage in the tough exterior, through which much of the plane entered and tore its way through the building. One engine detached and skidded into an elevator shaft, ending up in the basement, where it started a serious fire. The other slid all the way through the building and out the other side, and crashing into another building far below. Wings, landing gear, and other debris cascaded below the impact point. The plane's gas tanks ruptured and splashed burning avgas into the two floors struck and creating a flaming firefall down the building's north façade.

The impact site was near the top of the building; if Smith had had a little more time, he might have been able to avoid the crash.

The final human toll of the accident was 14 dead (including the three on the B-25), and 26 injured. The other 11 dead were office workers or building employees. Some were incinerated immediately, others were trapped until overcome by flames, and at least one, Paul Dearing, jumped to his death rather than be consumed by fire. The building's stout construction, the

fact that the accident took place on a Saturday when fewer workers than usual were present, and quick action by civilians and first responders, kept casualties to a minimum.

The accident created a number of stories of exceptional bravery, and exceptional luck. One worker on the 62nd floor helped firemen rescue trapped people nearer the impact site, and Herbert Fabian, a 17-year-old student commandeered an abandoned elevator and took it to up to rescue 20 people trapped between the 30th and 40th floor.

The most amazing story of all was that of a young elevator operator named Betty Lou Oliver. She had just opened the doors of her car on the 79th floor when the B-25 hit. The impact threw her from her post and across the hall, badly burned. Two office workers provided first aid, and placed Ms. Oliver in the care of another elevator operator, who started to take her to the ground level for medical care.

Just as the doors closed, the cables holding the elevator snapped, and Betty Lou and the other operator began a long fall, screaming all the way. A Coast Guard pharmacist, Donald Maloney, was on the ground floor as the car fell past. Hearing screams, he and a group of firemen headed for the basement. They had to break through a wall to get to the battered car, and found both women badly hurt, but still alive. A combination of air compression in the elevator shaft ahead of the falling car, some braking from its emergency system, and a pile of lift cable falling in the shaft ahead of her car and acting like a cushion kept the blow from being fatal. Maloney then climbed the stairwell, floor by floor, checking for survivors.

For some reason, there is a lot more information on Oliver than the other women who survived the elevator drop with her. The crash caused ~\$1 million in physical damages, which were repaired in three months.

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Guinness Book of World Records entry [here](#)

More on Betty Lou Oliver [here](#)

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