

## US NAVY PLANE CRASHES IN ANTARCTICA IN 1961; FIVE AMERICANS KILLED

[The author has drawn heavily on the article by Hal Vogel in *Ice Cap News* dated October 2009.]



9 November 1961 Wilkes Crash: [www.antarctica.gov.au](http://www.antarctica.gov.au)

A University of Minnesota scientist, Dr Edward C Thiel, was one of five Americans killed when a US Navy P2-V Neptune patrol plane crashed on take-off at 0410 on 9 November 1961 from Wilkes, the Australian Antarctic Station. Dr Thiel, a member of the US Antarctic Research Programme of the National Science Foundation, had been measuring magnetic variations in the plane's record flight.

The US Navy stated the aircraft crashed as it was heading back to McMurdo Sound, having landed at Wilkes to refuel, on the return leg of a triangular 3,500-mile scientific flight. This was the longest scientific traverse ever flown in Antarctica by the US Navy Support Force. It previously had stopped at the Russian base at Mirny to off-load American scientist Dr M Pryor and to gather data for a magnetic field map of the Antarctic. Medical personnel were flown from McMurdo to Wilkes in a Lockheed C-130 Hercules to bring back the five dead and four survivors who were the pilot, LT E J Stetz, co-pilot LTJG E L Hand, AE1 J C Shaffer and AT1 C C Allen.

The four dead crewmen were LCDR William D Counts, of Rhode Island, Mechanic AMH1 William W Chastain, Rhode Island, LTJG Romauld P Compton, of Denver, and Machinist Mate ADR2 James L Grey of Creeksill, New Jersey.

An investigation of the crash reported the cause as a collision with the ground following an intense, uncontrollable fire in the landing gear - bomb bay fuel tank area. The aircraft, a P2V-7LP Neptune BuNo 140439 (all US Military aircraft are assigned a Bureau Number), was one of four built re-designated Lockheed LP-2J with wheel/ski landing gear and JATO gear (jet assistance for taking off) for Antarctic operations (BuNo 140437-40). The aircraft was written off and no equipment was salvaged.

## Dr Edward C Thiel

Dr Thiel began his polar career as Chief Seismologist of the Arctic Institute of North America. In 1956 he was Chief Seismologist at Ellsworth Station, Antarctica and was co-leader of the 1957 Filchner Ice Shelf traverse which covered 1,200 miles which had never been visited before.

Thiel was later the leader of a series of United States Geophysical Programmes which extended into the 1961-62 Antarctic summer. He became an authority on airborne geophysical study. On 30 October 1961 he left Byrd Station with a British glaciologist, Dr Charles Swithinbank, in a US Navy R4D-8 aircraft to investigate glaciers entering the west edge of the Ross Ice Shelf. Thiel was then flown to McMurdo Station to be on a University of Wisconsin airborne magnetometer flight to the Russian Mirny Station. The return flight to McMurdo was to be via Wilkes Station.

On board the P2V-7LP 140439 *Bluebird*, Thiel left McMurdo at 1550 on 5 November, landing at Mirny at 0140 on the 6<sup>th</sup>. At Mirny a USA exchange scientist, Dr Madison E Pryor left the aircraft which took off at 0100 on 8 November for the 450-mile flight to Wilkes, landing at 0340.

The landing at Wilkes on the improvised airstrip was described as rough with one crewmember commenting that the strip was *as bad as Mirny*.

Dr Thiel was later remembered in that Building No 138 at McMurdo was named the Thiel Earth Sciences Lab. This was demolished in 2007 to make room for a new gasoline storage facility. A more permanent memorial was the renaming of a submarine trough in the Weddell Sea. Thiel led a significant geological traverse that covered this trough, which had been named the Crary Trough. On the insistence of Dr Crary it is now known as the Thiel Trough.

## The Mail

There are four recorded surviving covers from this crash. **The only example addressed to Australia** is illustrated below. It was enclosed in an outer cover postmarked Christchurch NZ on 17 November 1961, and accompanied by a letter from the Station Scientific Leader at McMurdo dated 15 November.



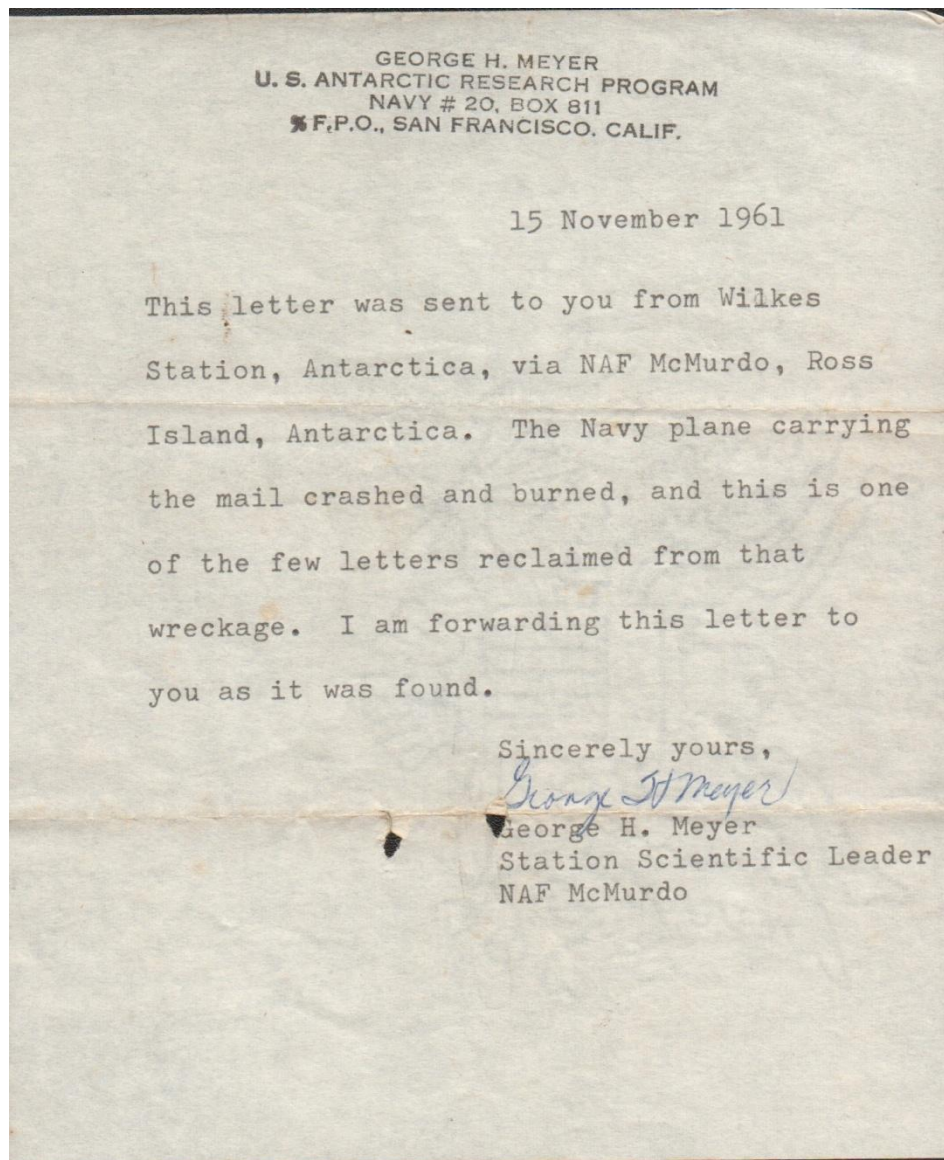
Bearing the Wilkes Post Office opening day pictorial cachet, originally used on 1 February 1959, the cover has lost its stamps and is oil-stained.





Ambulance Envelope Cancelled CHRISTCHURCH NZ 8 PM 17 NOV 1961

The writer of the following letter states that : *This is one of the few letters reclaimed...*



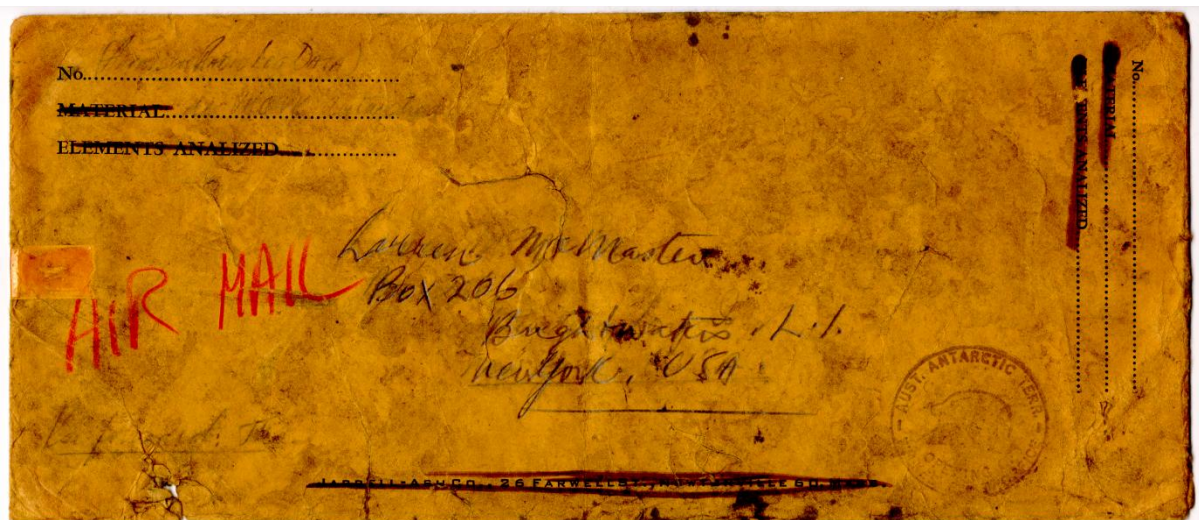
Letter from McMurdo Station

All the other letters are addressed to the USA; one to Lauren McMaster, Box 206, Brightwaters, New York , one to The Personnel Officer, Department of Personnel, Boulder, Colorado, and the other to Mr O Gilbert, 2004 G St NW, Washington, DC..



This cover to Boulder is oil stained as are the others. It bears a manuscript AIR MAIL in red on the left, as does the cover to Washington. Listed as Lot 1822 at an estimate of \$750-1,000 in the Spink Shreves New York sale on 29-31 January 2009, it sold for \$400.

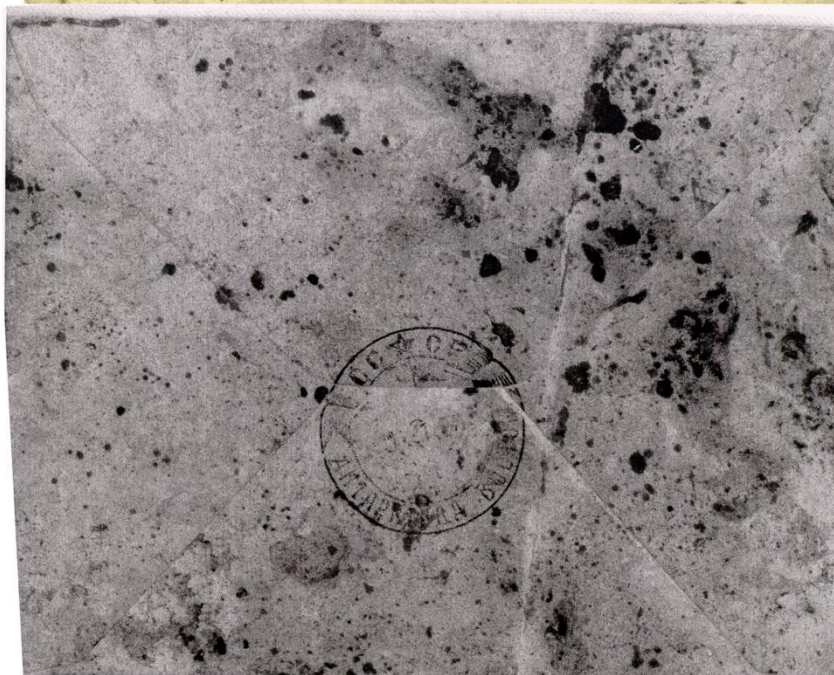
It has no stamps or markings remaining, and, as with the Melbourne cover, is accompanied by a note from the Station Scientific Officer at NAF McMurdo stating that the cover was salvaged and is being forwarded to the intended recipient.



This cover was placed on board the aircraft at Wilkes. The stamps were washed off with any cancellation. Both this and the Melbourne covers have the Wilkes Station post office opening pictorial cachet. First employed on 1 February 1959, after the station transferred from American to Australian administration, it was still in use two years later. Wilkes Station had no post office during USA administration.

The addressee of this letter, Lauren L McMaster, wrote to the late Dr Gale J Raymond on 2 February 1962 stating that the letter had contained QSL (amateur radio contact confirmation) logs from the amateur radio station (VK0VK) at Wilkes. The Wilkes operator radioed to McMaster that the envelope with the logs had been recovered from the crashed aircraft, but the stamps had been soaked off and the reverse was *splattered with oil*. All four surviving covers have these oil marks.





Unlike the other three covers, the above item addressed to Washington DC was carried on the inward flight to Mirny, and was in the process of being brought back to McMurdo via Wilkes. Cancelled on 6 November at Mirny Station, it bears an unusual cachet which had not previously been recorded. The reverse bears a Vostok Station date-stamp with a date too faint to make out. There is no record of P2-V 140439 having flown to Vostok during its time at Mirny, however the canceller may have been at Mirny in early November.

The inward mail remained with the aircraft to complete the round-trip back to McMurdo; there was no point in leaving it at Mirny as it was addressed to the USA.



Crash at Wilkes Station

Photo: Bill Burch



**Deep Freeze '61 crew of P2V '439. From Left: William W. Chastain, AM1; Arnold E. Tilley, PH2; George D. Conner, AD1; Clarence C. Allen, AT2; Larry E. McKee, SSgt, USMC; Robert C. Daley, Ad1; Jack C. Shaffer, AE1; Lt E. J. Stetz and Lt David J. Finn.**



LP-2J, 140439 fitted with the Fulton Skyhook Retriever System

## References:

Antarctic Development Squadron Six <http://www.vaq34.com/vxe6/p2v.htm>

Baker, Billy-Ace Penguin USN (Retired): *The Crash of BuNo 140439*, Pensacola, Florida, 1996

Vogel, Hal: Correspondence and scans of covers

Vogel, Hal: *Ice Cap News* (American Society of Polar Philatelists) Vol 54 No 4, Oct 2009, pp91-97

Abacus Auctions, VIC: 25 Jun 2025 Lot 2192

Spink/Shreves Galleries (New York): 29-31 Jan 2009, Lot 1822

Canberra Times: 11 Nov 1961 p5



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