

Crash of the UC-64 Norseman

by Bruce Roberts

On a cold morning in January 2018, I decided to climb the mountain behind our house and hike along the High Ridge of the western side of the Southern Nantahala Wilderness Area. After a long climb, nearing the top of the mountain, I noticed a couple of pieces of sheet metal half covered in the leaves. Looking around, I spied a large metal frame above me on the slope. Climbing up for a closer look, I found a rusted structure made from welded tubing, in more or less a long tapered rectangular shape, just over 30 feet long.

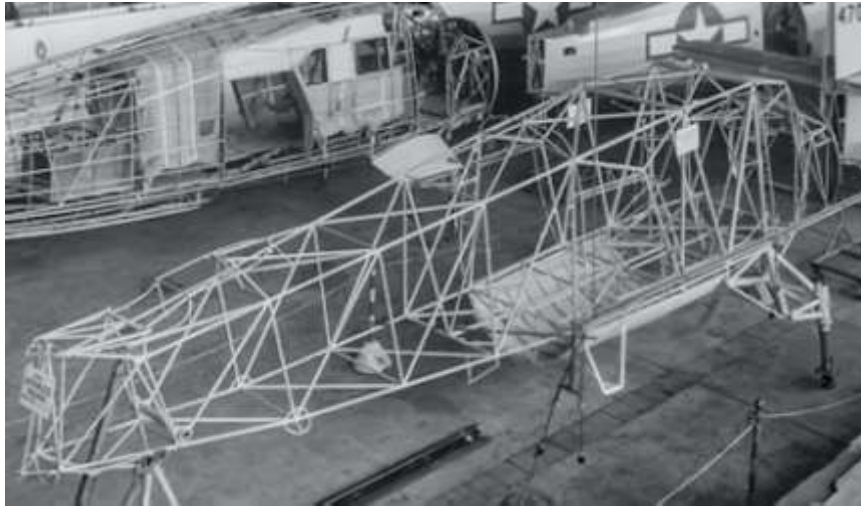


Structure of welded tubing

At first I could not imagine what it might be. All that came to mind was an old radio or communications tower, but this wasn't at the high point of a mountain. Perhaps it had been in the process of being moved by a helicopter and the cables had broken? I had no idea. After looking around some more and photographing the wreckage, I soon got on with my hike.

That evening, I posted a few photos online, and some friends made a few suggestions. Then one of my old co-workers said "Probably not, but it looks almost like the frame of a WWII glider that we saw in Europe." Well, I worked at Lockheed for 35 years, but it never crossed my mind that this might be an aircraft. Modern planes aren't built of welded tubes, and their structure looks nothing like what I had seen. But I got searching the internet, and this frame started looking more and more like a 1930s era aircraft. Reviewing my photos, a windshield frame and cockpit were recognizable, as well as the wing strut attach points and other structural components.

Posting the photos in some online aviation groups, the aircraft was soon identified as a Canadian-built Noorduyn UC-64 Norseman, the same aircraft that bandleader Glenn Miller disappeared in while flying over the English Channel in December 1944. A single-engine bush plane first introduced in 1935, the Norseman remained in production for almost 25 years, with over 900 made, 749 of them ordered by the US military for use during WWII.



UC-64 Fuselage frame at Noorduyn factory

The Norseman was a high-wing braced monoplane with an all-welded steel tubing fuselage. Attached wood stringers carried a fabric skin, although the aircraft was aluminum-clad from the cockpit forward and along the belly. Its wing was fabric covered wood, except for aluminum leading edges, with steel tubing flaps and ailerons. The landing gear were fitted to fuselage stubs; the tail strut could be fitted with a wheel or tail skid. By the time I found the plane, there were no remains of any skin fabric or wood, except for a tiny piece of wood remaining at the tail.



UC-64 Norseman

I started searching civil and military air records for some record of the crash, but couldn't find anything. The crash was pre-FAA, so the CAB (Civilian Aeronautics Board) had responsibility for aircraft accident investigations, but there was no record of this incident. I reviewed available issues of the weekly Towns County Herald, archived at the Towns Co. courthouse and Young Harris College, from the late 1940s to mid 1950s, but found no mentions of the crash. Noorduyn kept a history of every ship by serial number, but unfortunately those records weren't maintained for former USAF aircraft once they were surplused to civilian entities after the war.

In early 2018, I briefly spoke about the crash at one of our TCHS meetings. That brought a few recollections to light. But all of the information gathered was either from local folks who had heard about the crash, or from those that heard details from relatives or another third party. I have not come across anyone who personally witnessed or was old

enough to clearly remember the events well enough to provide important details. Several folks who may have been able to provide information have passed on in recent years.

There are conflicting details in the various stories that I've been told, including date of the incident, aircraft ownership, fate of the pilot(s), etc. Following are examples of what I've been told:

"Sometime in the early 1950s, T.J. Crane, who lived off Bell Creek, heard an airplane crash up on the nearby mountain. He told folks, but no one else had heard anything, and no action was taken. Sometime later, word arrived about a missing aircraft. Two men were in town investigating; they were put in touch with Mr. Crane, who led them up the mountain, where they eventually located the crash. The pilot was found dead in the aircraft. Sometime later, R.L. Anderson, a logger from nearby Shooting Creek (later of Scataway Rd), traveled up the mountain with horses and a logging sled to salvage the engine (and possibly other major components which are no longer at the crash site)."

Two folks I spoke with maintain that the crash occurred in the late '40s. Another, also living off Bell Creek, was born in 1949, and stated that it happened when he was a young boy of about 7, placing the date in the mid '50s.

I have heard three different versions of the pilot's fate - 1) as stated above, the pilot (or 2 pilots in another recollection) was killed in the crash; 2) Jimmy Davenport stated that a rumor at the time was that the pilot had ejected from the aircraft and survived; 3) per Dion Eller, Ed Berrong was told by the Andersons that two men had survived the crash and made their way down Bell Creek to safety. This version of the story was essentially corroborated by Morris Phillips, who also recalled the date as being in the late 1940s. I can't remember if Morris mentioned two men or just the one pilot.

I talked with one fellow who had visited the site sometime in the late '50s/early '60s; at that time you could still drive part way up to the site from the NC side. At the time of his visit, the aircraft was half burned, but much of the wood & fabric remained, although in deteriorating condition. The salvage operation previously mentioned had already occurred. It was unknown if the fire was from the crash or a later forest fire in the area. He said that at one time, a couple of smaller components from the plane had been salvaged and were at a former auto garage on Old 64 in Shooting Creek. I also spoke with R.L. Anderson's son, but he couldn't recall anything beyond what I had already learned.

Morris Phillips told us that the previously mentioned salvaged engine was stored for years at the old Hiwassee High School. I sure would like to know what happened to it! That engine could help identify the aircraft. Serial number tags were placed in only a few locations on these planes, including the engine and cockpit firewall.

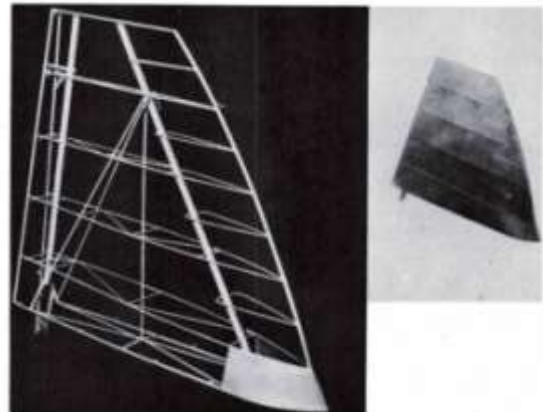


Figure 31 -- Vertical Stabilizer

Vertical Stabilizer frame, with page from the Parts Catalog

I made four more visits to the crash site that winter, hoping to find any parts that might ID this particular aircraft. Finding a copy of the aircraft Parts Catalog online was a tremendous help in identifying the various pieces buried around the site. Besides the fuselage frame, few major components of the aircraft remain. One wing must have been salvaged, because I only found the metal wing trusses from one side. The frame of the vertical stabilizer (tail) is still there, but no landing gear, wing struts, firewall, cockpit panels or other large pieces.

I thought I might be onto something when I found the aircraft's main fire extinguisher bottle. These are serialized, and have service dates stamped onto the cylinder. But a serial number doesn't help without having the ship's records, and it's unknown if the dates on the bottle are of "last service" or "next service due".



Pilot's seat

I have found and photographically documented a great number of components from this aircraft, but am still no closer to identifying such details as who owned the plane, exactly when the incident occurred, exactly what happened, etc. I'm still amazed that there seems to be no written record of the incident, in either aviation records or the local newspaper. After all, it's not like an airplane crash is an everyday occurrence in our community! The incident has been discussed several times at TCHS meetings, but no new information has turned up. I'm hoping that maybe this article might stir up something new, before the last folks with a first-hand memory of the crash are gone.

The newsletter format prevents showing more than a few photos. For anyone interested in additional photos (lots of them!) and information from the crash site, you can visit my website pages at:

<https://www.be-roberts.com/se/snant/nors-index.htm>

(Due to formatting, the website is best viewed on a large screen instead of a phone.)