

A TALE OF TWO CRASHES

*Compiled By Louie Celerier
Revised September 27, 2015*



24th Pursuit Squadron



29th Pursuit Squadron

FOREWORD

The revision to this narrative was necessary because further research into the fate of 2nd Lt. Worley Sherill Lyon revealed a different outcome. The newspapers listed the pilot as surviving with minor injuries and my friend Charlie Hinz, BHS '49, was also adamant that the pilot had survived. However, a third source with access to USAAF Accident Reports, AAIR Archaeological Investigations & Research, listed 2nd Lt. Lyon as KBOF, "Killed while Bailing Out due to Fire". I had to make a choice and picked the AAIR Report as being the correct one because they had access to the Accident Reports of the U.S. Army Air Corps. After all, they had listed the pilot in the 1939 crash mentioned here as KMAC, "Killed in Mid-Air Collision" and there had been no doubt about that.

Still, I remained skeptical because of the other reports and Charlie's account. I contacted my "chief researcher" Barbara Baldwin to help locate a Death Certificate for Worley S. Lyon and I contacted ACCIREPORT, another research outfit with access to USAAF Accident Reports. They provided the same information as AAIR had, except they did not list the fate of the pilot. Next I contacted Mr. Craig Fuller of AAIR who graciously looked into the 62-page accident report and informed me that 2nd Lt. Lyon had indeed survived the crash. He stated that he would review his listings and make appropriated corrections to the codes describing the accidents listed. With that confirmation, I ordered a copy of the report to gather more information on the incident. Then, Barbara found a Death Certificate for Worley Sherill Lyon indicating that he died at Community Hospital in Roanoke, Virginia, on June 30, 1981, at age 64. His date of birth was listed as March 25, 1917, matching the Army records of 2nd Lt. Lyon, so there is no question of this being the same man. Cause of death was listed as "Acute Myocardial Infarction". This certificate gave additional proof that the man had survived the 1942 crash.

The USAAF Technical Report Of The Aircraft Accident Classification Committee provided me with the actual statement by 2nd Lt. Lyon pertaining to the accident as well as eye witness accounts, investigation results and photos of the crash scene. All that has been added to this revised narrative.

INTRODUCTION

The 1939 events in Europe generated significant changes to the plans pertaining to the air defense of the Panama Canal. For one, Albrook Field, established around 1928, finally got a paved runway making it possible to operate from it 24 hours a day in most weather conditions. This runway ran South-North and was approachable from the South going over the main Tank Farm on the Pacific entrance to the Canal, some commercial sites, including the YMCA and the Jewish Welfare Board building, some homes, and Balboa High School. On final approach, the airplanes had to pass through a "notch" created by Ancon Hill on the right and Sosa Hill on the left.

Construction of new barracks at the airfield, for the additional personnel scheduled to arrive to bolster the defenses, also began to go up at a rapid pace. Additionally, equipment also got the attention of the hierarchy and the obsolete aircraft that had made up the bulk of the first line of defense, Boeing P-26 Pursuits, Northrop A-17 Attack Bombers and Martin B-10 Bombers, began to be replaced by more modern aircraft such as Curtiss P-36A Pursuits (later called Fighters), and Douglas B-18 and B-18A Bombers. A year later, Curtiss P40C and P-40E fighters arrived on the Isthmus along with variants of the Bell P-39 as well as some early Boeing B-17 models. Several P-36A and P-40E fighters were based at Albrook Field in the 24th and 29th Pursuit Squadrons of the 16th Pursuit Group.

Along with these changes in the facilities and the transition to new equipment came a group of new pilots fresh out of training. Additionally, new defensive tactics and strategies were being adapted. Using the new long range B-18 bombers, practical exercises were many and intense. Patrols were sent out daily to intercept ships coming to the Canal as far out as possible. Then, using fighter aircraft, they would shadow ships departing Canal waters.

As the situation in Europe continued to deteriorate, more equipment and more new inexperienced pilots continued to arrive while long range flights and fighter patrols increased substantially. And so did accidents, two of which are the subject of our short story. They are significant because they happened over Balboa a short distance from each other and were witnessed by people I know.

THE 1939 P-36A COLLISION OVER PIER 18

In the rain and fog of the morning of November 17, 1939, a patrol of several Curtiss P-36A fighters returning from Rio Hato Field, in western Panama, were approaching Albrook Field. The poor visibility led two of the planes to collide in mid-air. The plane being flown by 2nd Lt. James A. Barnett ran into the tail section of the plane flown by 2nd Lt. Phillip O. Potter effectively severing it from the rest of the plane. With his plane out of control, and at low altitude, Potter rammed into the ground next to Section I Shops on Diablo Road in the proximity of Pier 18. The tail section of his plane landed near-by on Galliard Road. Pilot Barnett was able to land his damaged aircraft safely at Albrook.

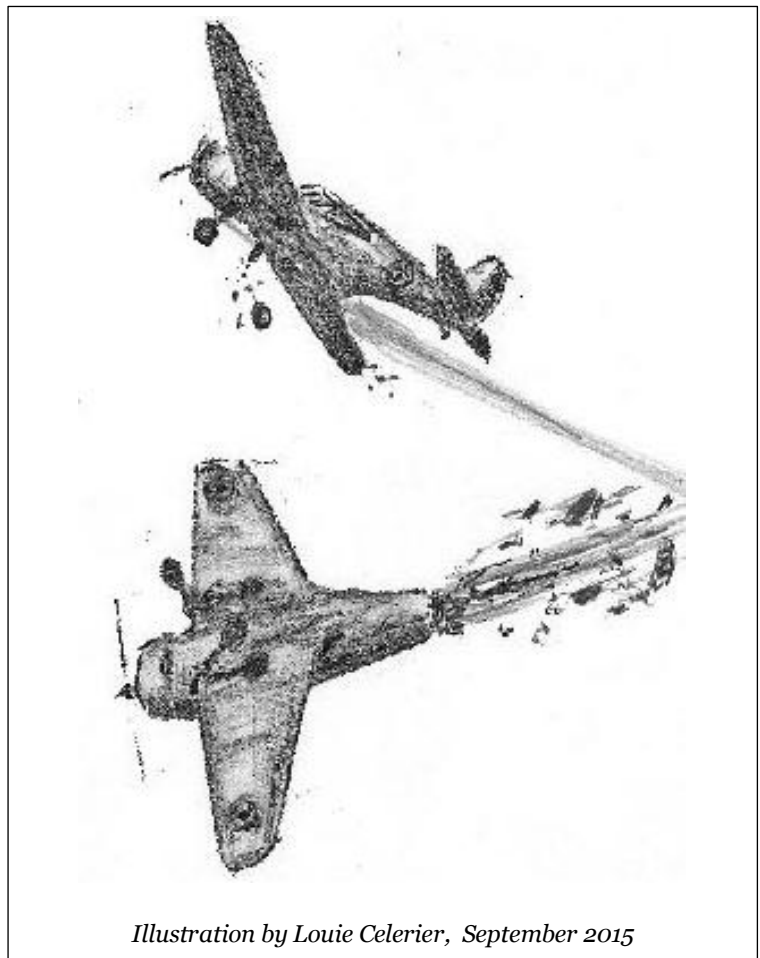


Curtiss P-36A Pursuit Aircraft. Photos from Internet.

Due to the low altitude at which the collision occurred, Potter was unable to bail out and his mangled body was found in the cockpit of his aircraft. Both planes belonged to the 24th Pursuit Squadron of the 16th Pursuit Group based at Albrook Field, Balboa, Panama Canal Zone.

The records of the AAIR Aviation Archaeological Investigation & Research list the accident as follows:

Date of Accident: 17 November 1939
Location: Balboa, Panama Canal Zone
Cause Of Accident: Weather Related
Aircraft: Curtiss P-36A, Serial Number 38-150
Damage To Aircraft: 5 = Completely Destroyed
Organization: 24th Pursuit Squadron, 16th Pursuit Group
Home Base: Albrook Field, Panama Canal Zone
Pilot: 2nd Lt. Phillip O. Potter
Serial No.: O373861
Action: KMAC = Killed Mid-Air Collision



Second Lt. James A. Barnett in the other P-36A was unhurt but his plane was listed in Condition 3 = Major Damage.

Charles "Charlie" Hinz, BHS '49, was 8 years old at the time of the collision and says he recalls the event very clearly. He believes the accident occurred around, or past, noon. Here is his recollection: *"Later that evening my Dad took me out to the crash site but, except for the crater and the twisted railroad rails, the area had been pretty well cleaned up. I climbed down into the crater and did find a short piece of braided cable about one foot long, and that was my only souvenir of the crash. Some of the BHS students rushed over right after the crash, and some did pick up some odds and ends. The next day I clearly remember a neighborhood boy displaying the throttle quadrant, which he had brought home. I wanted it badly, but he was asking 30 cents for it, which I could not afford as it was a princely sum for an 8-year old in those days."*

THE 1942 P-40E CRASH INTO THE USO-JWB BUILDING

By 1942 the sound of airplane engines roaring was not an unusual occurrence. During the day patrol formations of bombers and fighters were a normal sight. And at night we went to sleep listening to the drone of airplane engines from Albrook Field.

It was, therefore, of no concern to the people of Balboa, Panama Canal Zone, when, on the morning of April 28, 1942, at about 9:20 AM, a formation of Curtiss P-40E from 29th Pursuit Squadron, 16th Pursuit Group, based at Albrook Field appeared overhead in the flying pattern to land at the airfield.

Then, things began to happen, and happen fast. According to the few persons who happened to look up at the planes overhead, one of the planes, while still over the canal channel on what is known as the "final" leg of the landing pattern (the yellow path on the included map), at an altitude of about 1000 feet, suddenly caught fire and smoke was seen to come out of the engine cowling. Observers claimed that they

thought the pilot tried to head the plane back over the water but was unsuccessful and was forced to bail out over the La Boca Tank Farm, some 1500 feet from where the plane struck the ground.

The following account is from the **Panama American** edition of that evening: *"The falling aircraft struck the southwest corner of the USO building, plunged through the roof, out the east wall and fell to the ground between the building and the Elks Club next door. Bits of broken*



Illustration by Louie Celerier, September 2015

concrete and metal from the plane were thrown as far as the side steps of the Elks Club". According to the paper the crash killed instantly Mrs. Esther Witkins, wife of Rabbi Nathan Witkin of the Jewish Welfare Center on La Boca Road. The paper went on to say "Mrs. Witkin was . . . at the upstairs rear of the building when the plane crashed. She was pushed through the wall by the concussion. . . and her body was found thirty feet from the side of the wall. Rabbi Witkin, at work in his study on the ground floor, was not injured. He felt the force of the crash and rushed outside to find the body of his wife on the ground."

Another woman, a Jewish refugee named Mrs. Carolina Verener, who was also upstairs close to the impact spot, was not touched by the burning plane but suffered cuts and bruises. A Canal Zone police officer from the near-by police station rushed her to Gorgas Hospital, where it was reported that her condition was not serious.

The **Panama American** also reported that *"Prompt action on the part of civilians and police who rushed to the scene of the accident averted possible further serious damage. Pat Coakley, power dispatcher in the Electrical Division, pulled the main switch in the building and later helped remove the ammunition from the burning plane. Louie Haseman, Balboa post office employee, also assisted in getting the ammunition as did several Silver employees and a squad of soldiers who arrived on the scene shortly after the crash.*

"Police and military authorities promptly threw a cordon of guards around the wreckage to prevent the quickly gathering crowd from hampering the efforts of the fire department which went to work immediately extinguishing smoldering clothing and bedding in the demolished portion of the building."

The paper went on to state that the pilot, *"whose name was not released by Army authorities, managed to bailout of the plane when it was over the Tank Farm area. He was taken to Gorgas Hospital but was reported at noon today not to be in serious condition."*

The AAIR Aviation Archaeological Investigation & Research, based on USAAF Records, corroborates this information with the following data:

Date of Accident: 28 April 1942
Location: Balboa, Panama Canal Zone
Aircraft: Curtiss P-40E, Serial Number 40-577
Damage To Aircraft: 5 = Completely Destroyed
Organization: 29th Pursuit Squadron, 16th Pursuit Group
Home Base: Albrook Field, Panama Canal Zone
Pilot: 2nd Lt. Worley S. Lyon
Action: BOF = Bailed Out due to Fire

The Pilot's Accident Statement

"Just as we started to back from patrol, I noticed the fuel pressure registered zero. Fumes kept getting worse and I could feel gasoline hitting my legs. Just after letting the wheels down I looked down to change gas tanks and I noticed the whole floor was covered with gas, so I immediately broke formation, approximately over La Boca tank farm, and headed for Albrook. I

cut my engine and began my glide and then the ship caught fire. I believe the gas line to my fuel pressure gauge became disconnected or broke because my engine was operating normally at all times. I left my plane at approximately five hundred (500) feet via parachute."

Worley S. Lyon,
2nd Lieut., Air Corps

"Second Lieutenant Worley S. Lyon being unable to use his hand for signature, I certify that the above is a true statement given me by Second Lieutenant Worley S. Lyon."

Landis O. Carter
Captain, Air Corps

The Technical Report in which this statement appeared went on to state that "the pilot was sober, sound of mind, and physically fit for flying duty. The plane was in normal flying condition prior to take off. Weather conditions were good." Further, the committee investigating the crash "feels that the pilot is in no way responsible for the loss of the plane as it was material failure in the fuel system that was directly responsible for the accident." As a result of the cockpit fire, 2nd Lt. Lyon suffered first and second degree burns on his face, hands, neck, arms and legs.

Some Eye-Witness Reports

First Lt. John H. Buffum was flying formation with Lyon. He was in the tail position of the 5-plane formation approaching Albrook Field when he noticed Lyon's plane, which was above and slightly to the side, take a sudden dip. As he passed by, Lt. Buffum noticed small flames in his cockpit. Lyon's plane was still in a diving position when Buffum saw Lyon's chute whip out and seemingly pull Lyon out of his cockpit. The parachute opened immediately and he started to descend. At that moment the plane appeared to burst into flames just before crashing into a building in Balboa.

PFC Anthony Melazzi of the 16th Pursuit Group was driving his car on the way from Ft. Amador Hospital when he noticed the planes overhead and saw one on fire. He saw the pilot bail out and disappear behind some trees. He drove to the place where the plane had crashed and helped keep civilians away as a few shells in the weapons of the plane were going off due to the fire. When Captain Powell arrived, PFC Melazzi went looking for the pilot and found him surrounded by a detachment of soldiers who were rendering first aid. He noticed that Lt. Lyon's hands, arms, legs, feet, neck, face and hair were badly burned. His head was also cut above his left eye. The ambulance took a long time to arrive so a Colonel at the scene told him, with three soldiers, to drive Lt. Lyon to Gorgas Hospital in Melazzi's car.

George V. Richards was standing in the rear of the Balboa Police Station observing a flight of five planes approaching Albrook Field from the south when one made a left bank. At the same time he saw flames beneath the undercarriage. The plane then banked to the right and the pilot bailed out. The plane continued to descend rapidly banking to one side then the other until it

crashed into the rear of the Jewish Welfare building. Richards ran into the Police Station and told the officer at the desk what had happened and then went out to render aid.

Captain W.B. Pearson, C.Z.F.D., said they arrived at the Jewish Welfare building at about 9:15 AM and found a fire burning between the Jewish Welfare building and the Elks Club building. Thinking there had been an explosion within the building, part of the crew proceeded to the second floor of the JWB building to remove debris and look for the wife of Rabbi Witkin. The rest of the crew laid one 200-foot, 2-1/2-inch water line from a hydrant at La Boca Road to extinguish the fire. Capt. Pearson said they did not know that a plane had struck the building until some 10 minutes later.

Charlie Hinz, BHS '49, states that he clearly remembers the P-40 crash into the USO-JWB building and visited the site later that day. While not an eye-witness, he recalls the news about the plane catching fire when it was returning to Albrook. The pilot attempted to steer the plane away from Balboa, but was unable to do so. He recollects learning that the pilot bailed out landing at the La Boca Tank Farm and injured slightly. He says that the first person on the scene was H.T. Carpenter of the Panama Canal Building Division who assisted the pilot.

Sheila Fearon Weldon, BHS '52, was walking to school from her home at the Cable area when the crash occurred and remembers the smoke coming out from the top floor of the JWB building.

Gilmore A. Jones, BHS '52: "I remember when this happened. I was in the 3rd grade at Balboa Elementary School and my brother Norbert was in the 5th grade with Naomi as a class mate. We saw all the smoke and the class went to the windows and we were all told to sit down. I remember my brother telling me about when they came and get Naomi and took her away. At noon we all rush done to the JWB and when I got there most everything had been removed except the engine was still laying in the yard about half way to the Elks Club exterior wall. I remember looking up at the hole where the plane came through which was where the bathroom shower was and there was a piece of the jagged window ledge sticking out at the periphery of the opening and about 12" in there was an empty coke bottle just sitting there. That vision still sticks in my mind to this day and I'm just baffled at how that could have survived such traumatic force and just be sitting there."

Leo A. McIntire, BHS '50, "I was in school at Balboa Elementary School on the day of the JWB crash. Naomi Witkin was a classmate and I remember the day. We were at recess I believe and the news that something had happened went around the class. shortly thereafter Naomi was taken out of school to go home! It was not until later that day that we learned of the tragedy! I remember driving past the JWB with my dad, you could see the damage from the road. It was a terrible thing for Naomi. As young as we were it was a big shock to all of us to realize that things like that could happen."

NOTE: Naomi Witkin was 10 years old at the time of the crash and was in the Fifth Grade at Balboa Elementary School.

The following is an account by **Michael Witkin, the son of Rabbi and Esther Witkin**:
"On the day of the accident I clearly recall the event. I was 3 years and 7 months old and playing in the front of the building when the plane hit. My dad came running out of the front entrance to the Center to see what had happened. My mother was the only fatality. We lived

upstairs in an apartment over the Center. Behind us was a group of apartments and behind them the fuel tank farm. [The planes flew over so low] My father used to kid the Priest at St. Mary, across the street telling him that the cross on top of the church was made of rubber to allow the planes on approach to Albrook Field to pass over safely."

Michael graduated from Balboa High School in 1956 and still remembers, as we all do, how low the planes flew over the school which was directly under the path of the planes landing at Albrook on the other side of the highway.



Left: The engine of the airplane. Right: You can see the almost round hole on the wall where the plane struck before going through the building and landing near the Elks Club. Photos by Craig Fuller, AAIR.



Searching through the rubble and cleaning up. Photo by Craig Fuller, AAIR.



The wreckage and the crowd. Photo by Craig Fuller, AAIR

Crash Investigating Report

The investigating team of Headquarters XXVI (16th) Interceptor Command concluded that rubbing or chafing of fuel lines had caused the accident. It cited that "Recent inspections have shown a grave laxity on the part of maintenance crews in this case. Several lines were found to be almost completely punctured." It found that airplanes after leaving the factory needed blocking and taping to prevent chafing of various lines and ordered that all squadrons equipped with P-40E aircraft check thoroughly the fitting of the pressure line connecting the fuel pressure gage to the carburetor as it was suspected that wear had probably caused the line to break and the consequent fire that destroyed Lyon's plane.

Point of Interest

As a point of interest, the AAIR Report also notes that just 12 days earlier, Lt. Lyon had crash landed on the water by Flamenco Island. Talk about luck. This is the Accident Report:

Date of Accident: 16 April 1942

Location: Panama Canal Opposite Flamenco Island, Panama Canal Zone

Aircraft: Curtiss P-40 (No model letter given), Serial Number 40-448

Damage To Aircraft: 5 = Completely Destroyed

Organization: 29th Pursuit Squadron, 16th Pursuit Group

Home Base: Albrook Field, Panama Canal Zone

Pilot: 2nd Lt. Worley S. Lyon

Action: FLEF = Forced Landing due to Engine Failure

EPILOGUE

Mrs. Witkin was 36 years old and had been an outstanding member of the community since her arrival on the Isthmus in 1937. Working for the USO-JWB, she had devoted her life to the organization, especially during the war years, providing a welcome atmosphere to the thousands of young soldiers stationed in Panama. She and Rabbi Witkin had two children, Naomi, 10 years old and Michael, 4.

Rabbi Nathan Witkin spent 30 years in the Canal Zone (1937-1967) receiving recognition for his work from both The Canal Zone Government and the Government of the Republic of Panama receiving the Medal of Freedom from President Truman and the Order of Vasco Nuñez de Balboa from Panama. He died October 9, 1990, in Sarasota, Florida. He was 88. He had studied in Jerusalem and was ordained there in 1933. Before being assigned to Panama, he was a chaplain in the Civilian Conservation Corps for two years. Leaving Panama he moved to Houston, Texas, where he organized a Jewish chaplaincy at the Houston Medical Center. He was survived by his second wife Helen and his three children Naomi, Michael and Samuel (by his second wife).

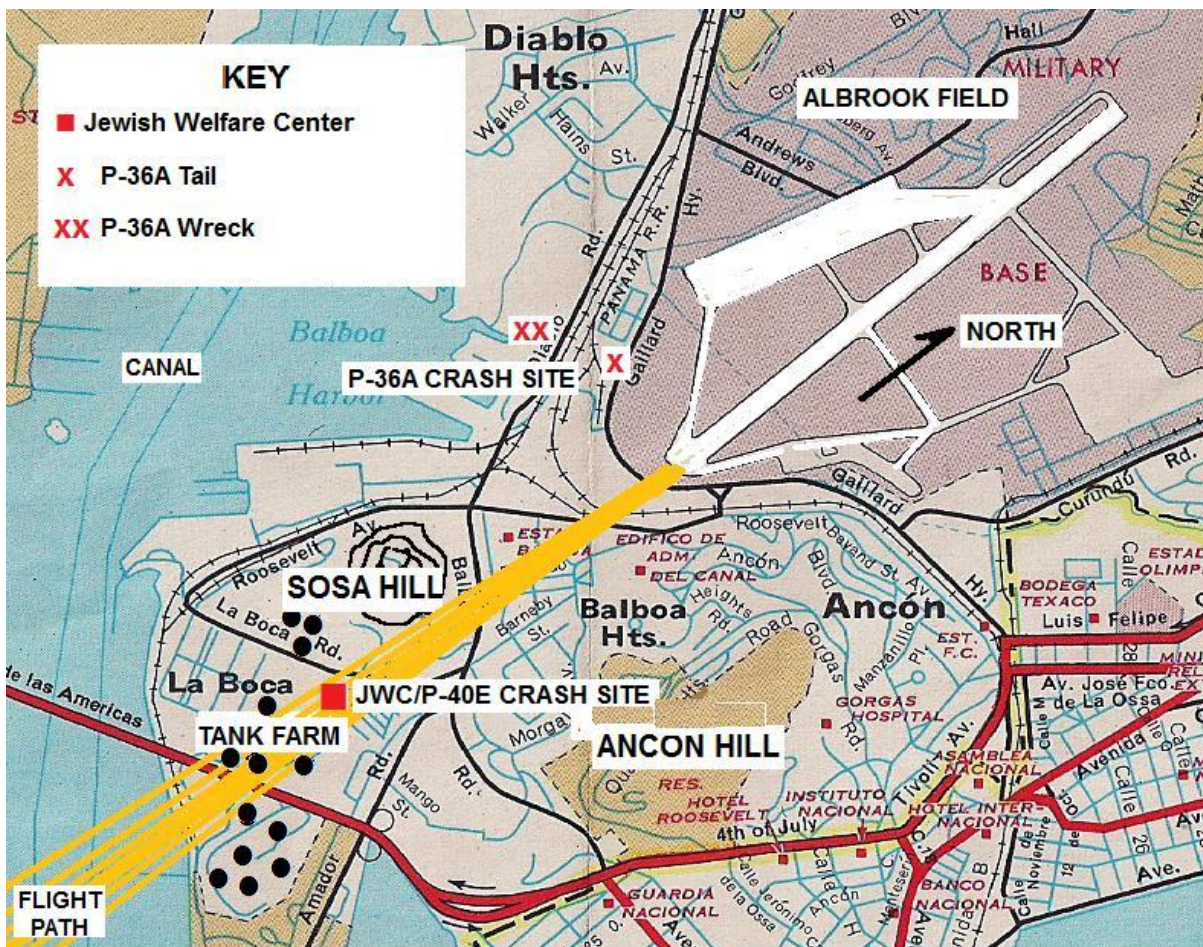
Michael Witkin went on to become a medical doctor practicing most of his life at the Ochsner Clinic in New Orleans retiring after 34 years. Upon retirement he moved from New Orleans to Davidson, North Carolina, seven weeks before Katrina hit the city



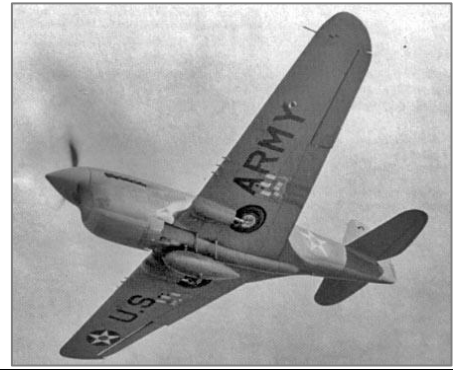
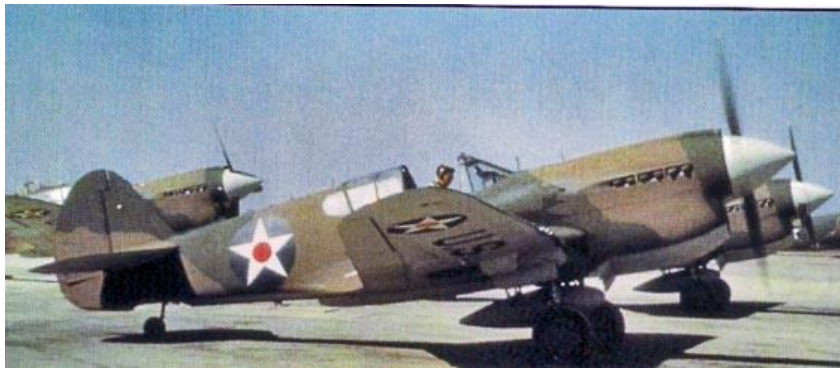
The USO-Jewish Welfare Board building, aka Jewish Welfare Center, at La Boca Road before the crash. Across the street was St. Mary Catholic Church. On the east side of the building was the Elks Club and then the Balboa Police Station on the corner of Amador Road. Photo submitted by Michael Witkin.



Albrook Field looking north, February 11, 1942. Note revetments built to protect the individual planes from enemy attack. Photo from "Wings Over The Canal".



Map of the area of the P-40E crash. The Flight Path (known to pilots as "Final Leg") shown in yellow, gives you an idea of the location of the aircraft when it was seen to catch on fire and plunge into the USO-JWB killing Mrs. Esther Witkin. In this map you can also see where the remains of the P-36A landed after the 1939 collision.



*Curtiss P-40E Pursuit (later designated Fighter) aircraft, the version involved in the crash.
Photos from AIR CLASSICS, 11-30-03*



*Left: P-40E leads two P-40C of 24th Squadron. Right: P-36A of 29th Squadron.
(photos from "Wings Over The Canal")*

SOURCES & CONTRIBUTORS

I am indeed grateful to all who contributed information for this short narrative on two of many military aerial mishaps that took place while the air service was in charge of the defense of the Canal. To those I give my thanks are the following:

Barbara Baldwin, whose research abilities are invaluable, Alan Bentz, Harold Beyerly, Julius Grigore, Dan Hagedorn, Stanley Heckadon, Charlie Hinz, Fred Sill, and Joe Wood who led me to Michael Witkin. My special thanks to Michael who provided the Panama American newspaper account, photo of the JWB building and other information. And I also must add Craig Fuller of AAIR to this group for helping me get a copy of the USAAF Accident Report with so much additional information and photos of the crash site.

OTHER SOURCES INCLUDE:

"Wings Over The Canal" by Dan Hagedorn. Some photos also come from this book which was given to me by Jack Morton, BHS '51; Geni.com; Wikipedia; AAIR Aviation Archaeological Investigations & Research; Ancientfaces.com; ACCIREPORT.com; WW II Enlistments.com; War Department, Air Corps Technical Report Of Aircraft Accident Classification Committee.