



F-47 Fighter Planes Collide Over Muhlenberg: Two Pilots Killed in 1948 Mid-Air Crash

A routine military training flight turned deadly over Muhlenberg Township on December 11, 1948, when two F-47 Thunderbolt fighter planes collided in mid-air and crashed within a few hundred yards of each other—one landing in Gethsemane Cemetery, the other in a nearby cornfield. The violent collision killed both pilots instantly and sent fire crews, police, and military personnel rushing to the scene.

The crash remains one of the most dramatic aviation accidents in Berks County history.

The Maneuver That Turned Fatal

Twelve F-47s from the Pennsylvania Air National Guard's 148th Fighter Squadron had taken off from Reading Municipal Airport shortly before 2:45 p.m. for a routine formation flight. As the aircraft began to form up at around 1,000 feet above the ground, two of the final planes in the sequence attempted to reposition—one crossing beneath the other—and collided mid-turn.

Witnesses reported the aircraft clipping each other overhead, sending one plane into a fiery spin and the other into a steep dive. One aircraft tore

into the southern edge of Gethsemane Cemetery and exploded on impact. The other crashed into a field just south of the cemetery along Kutztown Road. The impact sites were separated by approximately 150 yards. Both aircraft were destroyed.

Pilots Identified

The victims were:

1st Lt. Raymond W. LeFever, 24, of Lancaster, who perished in the wreckage of the aircraft that crashed inside the cemetery.

2nd Lt. William T. Porter, 27, of Bala-Cynwyd, who attempted to parachute to safety but was too close to the ground for his chute to open. His body was found approximately 50 feet from his aircraft in the field adjacent to Kutztown Road.

Both men were World War II veterans. LeFever left behind a wife and infant son; Porter was living with his mother and sister and employed by a Philadelphia job placement firm.



Gethsemane Cemetery Scene

The crash site in the cemetery lies at 3139 Kutztown Road, near the Laureldale borough line. The cemetery was established in 1894 by Father Bornemann as a Catholic burial ground. On that day, it became a site of emergency response and wreckage removal, as firefighters battled burning aviation fuel and emergency crews struggled to reach LeFever's body through the flames.

Fire engines and ambulances from Riverside, Temple, Laureldale, Hyde Park, and other local companies converged on the site. Foam suppressant was used to extinguish the intense blaze in the cemetery, while military salvage teams worked overnight to remove debris. The Salvation Army served coffee and sandwiches to the airmen working through the night.

Eyewitness Accounts and Response

Frank Davis and Werner Kraheck, two Laureldale residents walking their dog, saw the crash unfold. Kraheck later told reporters he heard the aircraft above and looked up just in time to see the collision. They witnessed Porter bail out and hit the ground before his parachute could deploy. Other witnesses described seeing one aircraft lose its tail and spin downward, while the other appeared to roll before impact.

Crowds gathered quickly. More than 1,000 onlookers were drawn to the scene by the smoke, flames, and sirens. Police from Muhlenberg, Laureldale, the State Police, and National Guard units held back civilians while crews worked.

Early reports confused the crash location with Madeira Field across Kutztown Road. Some responders were initially sent there before rerouting to the actual impact sites. The flames from the cemetery crash could be seen for miles.

Investigation and Aftermath

Major Richard B. Posey, commander of the 148th Squadron, grounded the rest of the formation immediately after the incident. The squadron, which had flown over 5,000 hours without serious accident, launched an official investigation. A board was appointed to examine the cause, including Capt. Russell G. Ozan, Capt. Rodney C. Reed, and Major Posey himself.

This was the first fatal accident in the squadron's history. The only previous incident had been a minor taxiing mishap involving a trainer aircraft on the airport field.

The remains of both aircraft were recovered overnight and taken back to the Reading Municipal Airport for examination. Military investigators and civilian air safety personnel were involved in collecting witness statements and physical evidence from the scene.



Military Backgrounds of the Victims

Lt. LeFever had entered military service in July 1943 and was discharged in 1946 before joining the National Guard. He had trained at Stevens Trade School and was known as one of the top gunnery scorers in the 148th Squadron. He lived with his wife and child in Lancaster.

Lt. Porter had served in the Army Air Forces for three and a half years during the war. He trained at Cochran and Spence Fields and received recognition as a second lieutenant in 1947. He attended Girard College and took night courses at the American Institute of Banking and Palmer Business School.

Legacy

The 1948 collision left a lasting impression on Berks County residents who witnessed the disaster or heard the roaring crash overhead. Though no formal memorial exists at the cemetery today, the incident remains one of the most widely reported air disasters in county history.