

Lost Over Cuba

In January 1957, six B-47 bombers were dispatched from Florida's Homestead Air Force Base to participate in a night exercise. Only four would return.

Earl Sebastian Chrisawn of Sumter majored in mechanical engineering at Clemson. A member of the Class of 1954, Chrisawn was an honors student and a member of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. He participated in the Baptist Student Union and the YMCA Council which he served as secretary and treasurer. An Air Force ROTC cadet, he was a member of Arnold Air Society and completed summer training at Keesler Air Force Base in Mississippi prior to the start of his senior year.



Chrisawn entered the Air Force following graduation. His basic training took place at Marianna, Florida. He then went to Greenville Air Force Base in Mississippi where he earned his wings in September 1955.

Chrisawn was assigned to a bomber squadron flying the B-47, the world's first swept-wing bomber. The B-47 was capable of cruising at better than 550 miles per hour at 40,000 feet, but its range was limited—a problem given that its mission was to deliver nuclear bombs to targets in the Soviet Union. To accommodate the mission, an aerial refueling capability was developed for the aircraft.



A B-47 refuels in daylight.

On January 24, 1957, Chrisawn was part of the three-man flight crew of a B-47 bomber tasked to participate in a nighttime refueling exercise. Six bombers were sent aloft on the mission which was planned to take place in the dark skies above Cuba. Each aircraft would rendezvous with the aerial tanker for refueling. Before and after its turn topping off its tanks, the bombers would remain nearby in formation. During the course of the exercise, though not when they were actually engaged in refueling operations, Chrisawn's and one of the other bombers

collided. Officers in other aircraft watched in horror as the ships exploded. Afire, the two airplanes fell into the dark sea near the Isle of Pines off the southwest coast of Cuba.



Miami-based Air Force amphibious aircraft rescued three of the fliers the following day, two from one of the planes in one life raft, the sole survivor of the other aircraft by himself. Three other crew members from the two planes were still missing, including First Lieutenant Chrisawn. Rescue planes joined by Coast Guard vessels and units from the Cuban Navy continued to search in the area for four days.

Chrisawn's and one other body were recovered, but the remains of the sixth crewman were never found. Chrisawn's body was returned to Sumter for burial in Evergreen Memorial Park. He was survived by his parents and two sisters.

