

Sleigh Ride

Second Lieutenant Donald Herbert Clayton probably felt lucky. His name had been selected by lot for a trip home for the holidays under a Defense Department program called Operation Sleigh Ride. The idea was to get service members home from Korea and other duty stations in time to celebrate Christmas with their families. Clayton's flight was scheduled to depart Larson Air Force Base, Washington on December 20, 1952. With a scheduled stop at Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, Clayton would have ample time to make it home by Christmas.

Clayton was a member of Clemson's Class of 1952 who had come to the college from Greenwood. He was a chemical engineering major and a member of both the American Chemical Society and the American Institute of Chemical Engineers. He was also active in the Wesley Foundation. Clayton chose the Air Force ROTC program and attended training at Chanute Air Force Base, Illinois the summer before his senior year on campus. As a senior, Clayton was a second lieutenant and platoon leader assigned to Company D, 2nd Battalion of the Cadet Regiment.

After graduation, Clayton was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Air Force and was assigned to the 62nd Supply Squadron at Larson Air Force Base. The squadron conducted troop carrier operations, tactical exercises, air transport, and humanitarian missions reaching around the globe.



On Saturday, December 20, 1952, Second Lieutenant Clayton reported to the flight line for his early flight to Texas and then on to points in the east. He was one of 105 lucky passengers who had won the lottery for a seat on one of the Air Force's massive transport aircraft, the C-124 Globemaster. The Globemaster was a behemoth of an

airplane with a 174-foot wingspan and a 130-foot length. It had to be big to carry armored vehicles or up to 200 combat-ready soldiers. It was powered by four 3,800 horsepower Pratt & Whitney engines. It had to be powerful to lift a gross weight of 185,000 pounds. For this

Saturday morning flight, the aircraft's crew would be 10 officers and airmen in addition to the passengers.

Like most aircraft, the C-124 was equipped with gust locks, devices that lock the control surfaces while the airplane is parked on the ground and non-operational. Gust locks prevent wind from causing unexpected movements and damage to control surfaces—rudders, ailerons, elevators—and the linked controls inside the aircraft. Intended to prevent damage, gust locks on the Sleigh Ride Globemaster were about to do the opposite.

Loaded with its holiday cargo of soldiers and airmen headed home, the big airplane lumbered down Larson's runway, gradually building up the speed and lift necessary to climb into the morning sky. Just seconds after leaving the runway at 0627 hours, the Globemaster's left wing struck the ground and the aircraft cartwheeled, broke up, and exploded. Eighty-two passengers and five crewmembers were killed in what was at the time the deadliest aviation accident ever involving a single airplane. Victims were rushed to the base hospital and more than 80 volunteers donated blood to help the injured. Miraculously, 23 service members survived the crash. Second Lieutenant Clayton was not among them.

Investigators determined that the gust locks securing the elevators—which enabled the airplane to climb—and the rudder—which steered the Globemaster—had not been removed prior to takeoff. Without the ability to control the aircraft in flight, a crash was inevitable.

Second Lieutenant Donald Herbert Clayton was survived by his parents. He was awarded the National Defense Service Medal. He is buried in the Zion United Methodist Church Cemetery in Dorchester County.

