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A disastrous day

Shelbyville man reflects on 20th anniversary of disaster at Ramstein airshow in Germany

Bettina Puckett

Staff Writer

Shelbyville resident Scott Spahr never will forget the horrific sights, sounds and smells he experienced firsthand when three Italian air force jets collided in mid-air, resulting in the Ramstein airshow disaster 20 years ago today.

"I've had more flashbacks from the airshow disaster than I did from (Operation) Desert Storm," Spahr said in an interview this week.

The airshow disaster in Germany - one of the worst in history - claimed the lives of 67 spectators and three pilots, and injured 346 people who were in the crowd of 300,000.

At the time of the catastrophe, Spahr was a 20-year-old private first class in the Army stationed at Ramstein Air Base, a U.S. Air Force installation in southeast Germany. He was one of about 200 soldiers based there among thousands of airmen.

The annual airshow was dubbed "Flugtag '88," which means "flight day" in German.

On that Sunday afternoon in August, Spahr was pulling guard duty about a mile away from the airfield. "We were protecting an ammo bunker," said Spahr, a Celina, Ohio, native who moved to Shelbyville about four years ago.

"Suddenly, I heard a big boom, and I knew something had gone wrong," said Spahr, who almost immediately heard a second boom. "The first one shook the guard shack," he said. "Our (Army)



An Italian jet catches fire before it plows into the crowd 20 years ago today after a collision during an airshow at Ramstein Air Base in Germany.



Scott Spahr displays the citation of the Army Achievement Medal he earned by providing first aid and comfort to victims of the Ramstein airshow disaster. **Dayla Thurston**

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radios started going crazy."

Spahr later learned that 10 Aermacchi MB-339 PAN jets from the Italian air force display team, Frecece Tricolori, were performing their "pierced heart" formation, in which two groups of aircraft create a heart shape. In the completion of the lower tip of the heart, the two groups of airplanes pass each other parallel to the runway. The heart is then pierced by a lone aircraft, in the direction toward the crowd below.

The mid-air collision, which still can be seen on YouTube clips, occurred as the two heart-forming groups passed each other and the heart-piercing plane hit them. The piercing jet crashed onto the runway. Its resulting fireball of aviation fuel fell into the spectator area, hitting the crowd.

One of the damaged aircraft from the heart-forming group then crashed into an American UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter parked on the flight line, fatally injuring the pilot, Capt. Kim Strader, who died three weeks later from burns he suffered.

The pilot of the Italian jet that hit the helicopter had ejected, but he died as he hit the runway before his parachute opened. The third aircraft disintegrated in the collision. Parts of that plane were spread along the runway.

Quick response

Spahr was serving at that time as a Vulcan gunner in the Army. A Vulcan is a mobile light anti-aircraft gun that can be mounted on an armored personnel carrier and used for air defense.

When the calamity happened, Spahr's Army five-ton truck was parked nearby. He and another soldier jumped in and quickly responded to the flight line, leaving one other soldier behind to guard the ammunition bunker.

What Spahr saw when he reached the airfield was surreal. As he ran toward the carnage, thousands of people were frantically running away from the burning wreckage. "It looked like a bunch of horses running toward you," he said. "People were knocking each other over as they ran. It was total chaos."

The scene resembled a war zone, Spahr said.

Spahr's basic first-aid Army training immediately kicked in as he began directing injured victims toward a triage tent that the U.S. Air Force had set up within about 10 minutes. "I saw this guy whose face was covered with blood, and I applied a field dressing to his wound," he recalled.

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As he feverishly worked to help everyone he could, Spahr didn't fully realize how dangerous the situation was. But as he was opening the door of a German police car, he burned his arm on the burning vehicle. Suddenly, the disaster was real.

"Everyone had a white face," Spahr said. "Everyone's mouth was hanging open.

We were all stunned."

Grisly task

His next gruesome task was to help gather the bodies on the airfield. "Out of 67 (dead victims) on the ground, my five-ton truck took care of 22 to 25 of them," said Spahr, who was assigned to Battery B, 3rd Battalion, 44th Air Defense Artillery Regiment.

Although he was a low-ranking private first class, rank didn't matter during the emergency. Everyone worked as a team to get the bodies into an airplane hangar that had been turned into a makeshift morgue.

"Nationality didn't matter," he said. "Rank didn't matter."

Many of the German and American spectators tried to get past security to find their loved ones. "But we had to be firm and tell them not to look at the bodies," Spahr said. Some of the airmen and soldiers had to use physical force to keep horrified friends and relatives away from the scene until they were able to get everyone to the hangar or triage tent.

Spahr worked well into the night. Exhausted, he finally made it back to his barracks, wearing his blood-soaked uniform.

Continuing to help

In the days that followed, he volunteered to take a week of his own leave to help out in the disaster information center that had been established in the base theater.

In an strange twist, he heard someone mention his last name of "Spahr" when he was working at the center. He suddenly realized that it was his mother, Alice Spahr, who had notified the American Red Cross to try to learn if her son was OK after she heard about the disaster on the television news back in the United States. Spahr quickly grabbed the phone to reassure his mother and tell her that he was all right.

Spahr was rewarded by the military for his efforts on that tragic August day. He earned an Army Achievement Medal, signed by the regiment's commander.

"PFC Spahr distinguished himself by providing aid and comfort to the injured and assisting in the grueling clean-up operation," said the award citation, dated Sept. 30, 1988. "Through his selfless and decisive action, PFC Spahr greatly contributed to the quick and thorough relief effort. His tremendous skill, compassion and sacrifice without regard for his own personal welfare are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit and the United States Army."

He also received a personally delivered letter from the base commander, Air Force Brig. Gen. Lawrence E. Boese, who said that Spahr's work at the disaster information center was an inspiration to the entire community.

"We pulled together as a team to get over this tragedy," Boese wrote. "I commend you and applaud your efforts."

Spahr today

Spahr moved to Shelbyville to be near his wife Kim's family in Arlington. The couple has a 3-year-old daughter named Emma Grace.

The Ramstein airshow disaster was not the only adversity Spahr has faced. He battled leukemia when he was 5 years old and was diagnosed with colon cancer 17 years ago. Instead of having one-fourth of his colon removed when he was diagnosed, he waited and later had to have his entire colon removed.

A 100 percent service-connected veteran, Spahr now must wear an ostomy bag, but he even jokes about that - saying that he saves his employer time by not having to go to the bathroom so much. Spahr is the manager of Charles Major Manor, an independent living facility for seniors located at 102 E. Franklin St. "I get paid to hang out with my friends," he said.

Spahr's mother Alice also is a Shelbyville resident, who lives in Martin Estates, 2301 Raleigh Blvd., the apartment complex he used to manage.

His wife works as a planner for Reebok-Adidas. "One day, (Indianapolis Colts center) Jeff Saturday was sitting in her office," Spahr said. "She has my dream job."

Reflecting back to the airshow disaster half a lifetime ago, Spahr said the tragedy molded him. "I've always been a helper," Spahr said. "I've never really had a talent, but I like to help people."

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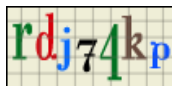
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