
INFORMATION ON OBSERVING THE LOCATION OF THE MILITARY AIR CRASH THAT OCCURRED NEAR SPOKANE, WA, ON JULY 23, 1944

This is the air crash seen in the movie [Earth vs The Flying Saucers](#) and featured at [CHECK-SIX.COM](#)



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I. INTRODUCTION

On July 23rd, 1944, the Spokane Air Service Command (SPASC) staged a *war show* in an area northwest of Spokane, Washington. A parade of different military aircraft types was the opening event to this show. As a three ship formation of Army RA-25A 'Shrike' aircraft began performing their flyby an accident occurred where the #3 aircraft collided with the #2 aircraft during a right turn maneuver. This was the result of the #3 aircraft losing sight of the #2 aircraft and then cutting across the turn of the #2 aircraft. The #2 aircraft was sheared in half at the fuselage near the rear cockpit and lost the left wing. The #3 aircraft lost half of the left wing and plunged towards the ground. On impact the #3 aircraft exploded into a spreading ball of fire and debris. The mid-air collision and crash into the ground of the aircraft was filmed by a Paramount newsreel camera on location at the time.

This is a visually dramatic but mostly forgotten piece of the history of the U. S. Army Air Force presence in Spokane during World War II. It is made interesting and significant because the film made by the Paramount newsreel camera became stock film within the movie industry and was later incorporated into a number of motion pictures. Most notable was the use of this film as part of a special effect developed by Academy Award winning special effects artist, Ray Harryhausen, in the 1956 Columbia Pictures movie *Earth vs The Flying Saucers*.

Until I visited the web site CHECK-SIX.COM in the spring of 2007 I had never heard of this air crash. When I learned of this air crash I became determined to find and view the location where it occurred. As it turned out I was very familiar with the area surrounding the location of the crash as it was part of my outdoor sporting playground going back to the late 1960s'. This report documents my findings in my search for the location of this air crash.

In looking for the location of the crash there are two obvious sets of clues. The first clues are the *existence of a natural amphitheatre located north of Baxter General Hospital*. These clues are provided on the Internet at CHECK-SIX.COM and also in the August 1944 *War Department U. S. Army Air Forces Report of Aircraft Accident* for the two aircraft involved. The second set of clues are the background features which can be seen in the images of the Paramount newsreel film of the crash in the movie, *Earth vs The Flying Saucers*.

II. THE LOCATION OF BAXTER GENERAL HOSPITAL AND THE AMPHITHEATRE

Baxter General Hospital no longer exists and is little remembered locally. Baxter was built during the war to take care of wounded veterans and specialized in thoracic medicine (fig.II-A). In that day there was a poor prognosis for full recovery from penetrating or crushing injuries of the chest. This resulted in considerable disability to the injury victims. Treatments and therapy programs for improving this prognosis were developed and implemented at Baxter.

The location of Baxter was some where near the site of the present day Veterans Administration Hospital in northwest Spokane. Baxter was replaced by the Spokane VA hospital soon after the war.

The amphitheatre is easily found using GOOGLE EARTH (fig. II-B, C, D) by locating the Spokane VA hospital and moving 1 mile northwest. The amphitheatre is about one half mile across. The rim is easily accessible from the west end but the east end has a gated housing development that limits access. The interior basin of the amphitheatre is mostly filled with residential construction in a Ponderosa Pine/Douglas Fir forest setting. The forest in this area has become quite overgrown since the war due to fire suppression efforts and the taller trees can obstruct views from the rim. In 1994 a very hot, tree killing forest fire reached the west end and eliminated most of the view obstructing trees. As a result, access and photography is easiest from the west end while further to the east access is difficult and views are frequently obstructed by trees, large and small.

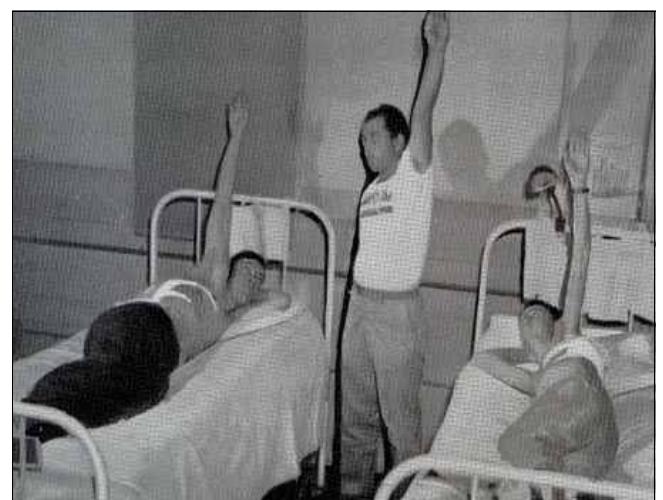


Figure II-A: Recovering chest injury patients performing prescribed physical therapy exercises at Baxter General Hospital.
<http://history.amedd.army.mil/booksdocs/wwii/thoracicsurgeryvoll/chapter13.htm>



Figure II-B: Relationship of the VA hospital to the amphitheatre. Coordinates: VA hospital - 47 42 08.27N 117 28 39.57W; Amphitheatre - 47 42 53.72N 117 29 10.82W. GOOGLE EARTH image.



Figure II-C: Amphitheatre looking towards the south. GOOGLE EARTH image.



Figure II-D: Amphitheatre looking towards the east. GOOGLE EARTH image.

III. THE BACKGROUND FEATURES SEEN IN THE PARAMOUNT NEWSREEL FILM

There are distinct and identifiable features seen in the background of the newsreel film as seen in *Earth vs The Flying Saucers* (fig. III-A). These features are seen today and can be used to find and view the location of the crash (fig. III-B).



Figure III-A: Panoramic view of the crash area in July of 1944 made from screen captures taken from the Paramount newsreel film used in the movie *Earth vs The Flying Saucers*. The arrows point to some of the natural background features which can be seen and used to identify the site today.

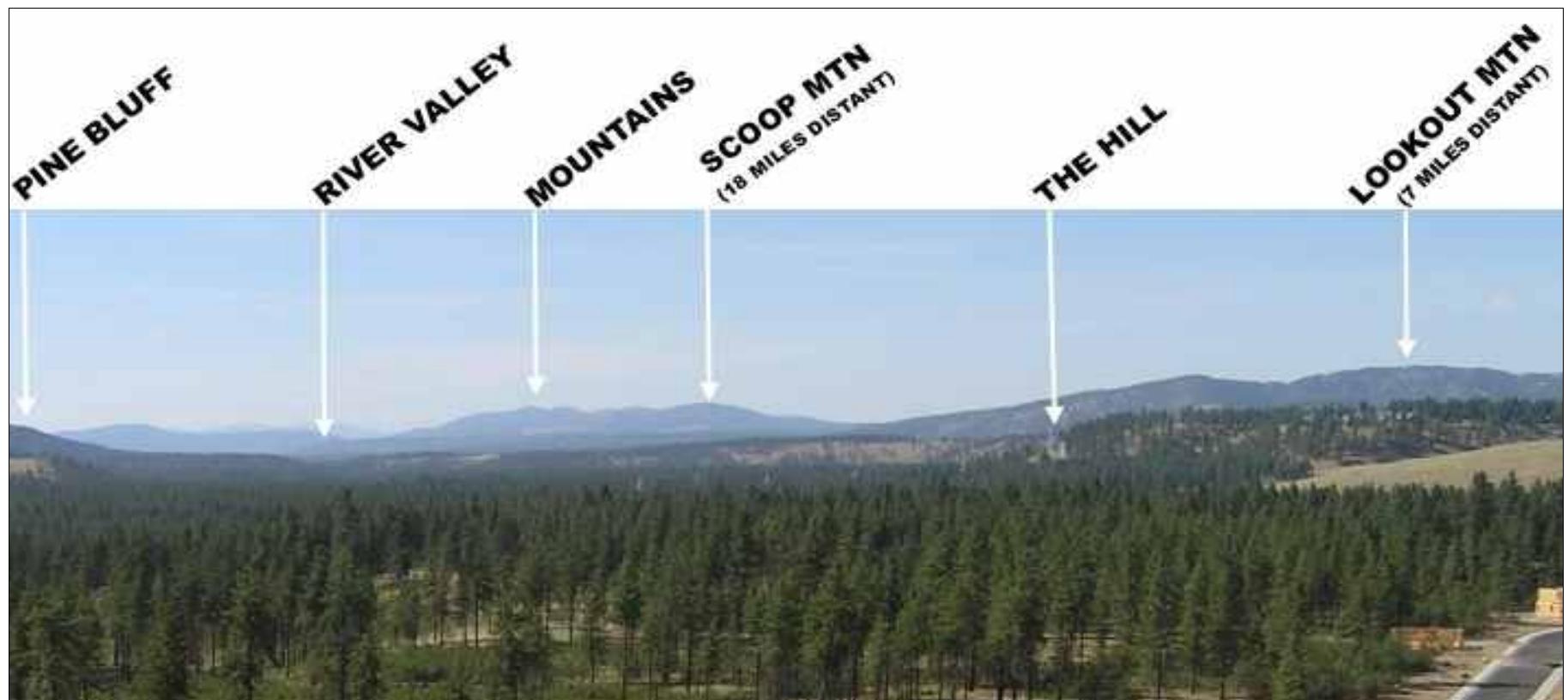


Figure III-B: July 2007 panorama view taken west of the crash area. The background features seen in the newsreel images are pointed out. Some are identified by name. The Hill feature does not line up relative to the background mountains like in the newsreel. For example, the profile of Scoop Mountain is to the right of The Hill in the newsreel images while it is seen to the left in this photograph. This is because this photograph was shot west on the rim of where the newsreel camera was located.

Of particular interest is what I call *The Hill* feature and its location relative to the contours of the distant mountains seen behind it (figs. III-C, D). This feature is created by a bend in a hillside leading up to an area of northwest Spokane known locally as Indian Trail. Figure III-E shows this bend.



Figure III-C: The Hill in a July 1944 image from the newsreel.



Figure III-D: The Hill as seen in October 2007.

The Hill feature ranges roughly from 1.75 to 2.00 miles from the amphitheatre rim depending on the location on the rim of the observer. The mountains in the background are up to 40+ miles distant. Since The Hill feature is relatively close in comparison to the background mountains it provides a convenient guide for finding the approximate position of the Paramount newsreel movie camera in 1944.

As an observer moves along the rim of the amphitheatre the view of The Hill can be used as



Figure III-E: GOOGLE MAPS image. The bend in the hillside which creates the view of The Hill feature.

a pointer that changes position in relation to the contours of the background mountains. By finding a position on the rim where the relative position of The Hill to the background mountain contours line up as they do in the newsreel film images, the observer can find an approximate position in the amphitheatre for the newsreel camera in 1944. Once this position is found then it follows one can study the view and compare it to the images of the crash from the newsreel and then make some good ballpark estimates of where the crash had occurred within the amphitheatre basin.

Photographs taken in October 2007 showed a good match between the contours of the background mountains in comparison to the July 1944 movie images. An animation was made where the October 2007 view was overlayed on the July 1944 view with the background mountain contours matched between the images and then fading the overlay in 10% transparency increments. Unfortunately, I was unable to find a way to show this animation in this document. Instead five frames of the animation are provided (figs. III-F.1 through III-F.5). The results were as predicted: the mountain contours matched perfectly although The Hill seemed to move to somewhat to the left as it revealed itself in the 1944 image from under the October 2007 image suggesting the photograph was taken to the west of the location of the newsreel camera.

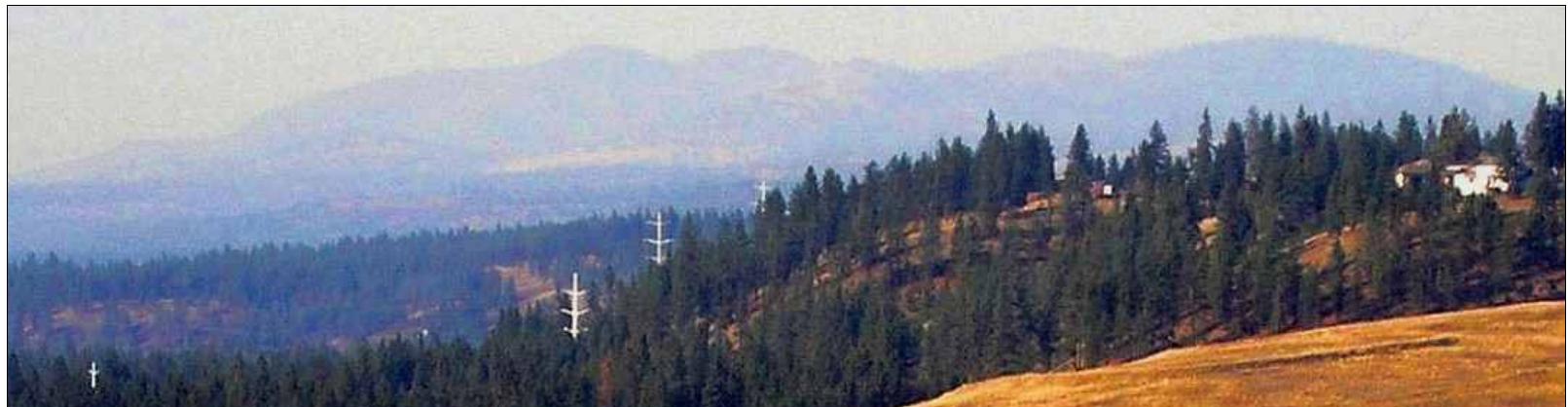


Figure III-F.1: 0% transparency



Figure III-F.2: 30% transparency



Figure III-F.3: 50% transparency



Figure III-F.4 70% transparency



Figure III-F.5: 100% transparency

As of October 28, 2007, approximately 2/3 of the amphitheatre had been walked. My last photographs were taken on that date and showed a good contour match with the mountain contours but the view of The Hill feature in October 2007 seemed to be to the right of the view of The Hill feature seen in the 1944 newsreel images. This suggested I was still to the west (to the left) of the actual newsreel location. The objective remained to find the site where the newsreel camera was located in 1944 and I wondered if this 'sweet spot' was all the way to the end of the amphitheatre.



Figure III-G. GOOGLE MAPS terrain image. Sight lines and distances to The Hill feature are shown for my position on October 28, 2007, and for the far east end of the amphitheatre. Values for distances have been determined from Google Earth and Google Maps and are rounded off to provide 'clean' numbers. These values are rough estimates which should be assumed to have an error as large as 10%.

Figure III-G shows, using The Hill as a reference point, the October 2007 position is about 0.15 miles further to the left in line of sight of The Hill and 0.25 miles further distant from The Hill in relation to the far east end of the amphitheatre. If the newsreel camera had been located all the way to the end of the amphitheatre it would drastically alter the view of where the aircraft had crashed into the ground compared to the October location. Was the newsreel camera was located located at the far end and could I determine whether or not this was the location with the data I already had? I believe I was able to do just that.

The images were reviewed to see if any features not yet identified could be seen. In viewing images of the newsreel shortly after the air-to-air collision revealed a man-made structure on the ground I had not previously noticed. Figure III-H shows this feature. This is an old and long gone road bed. This road bed was built like a ramp and was for transit from the higher ground of north Spokane to the lower Spokane river basin through a deep gully formation. Figure III-I shows this gully formation and highway 291 which runs through it.

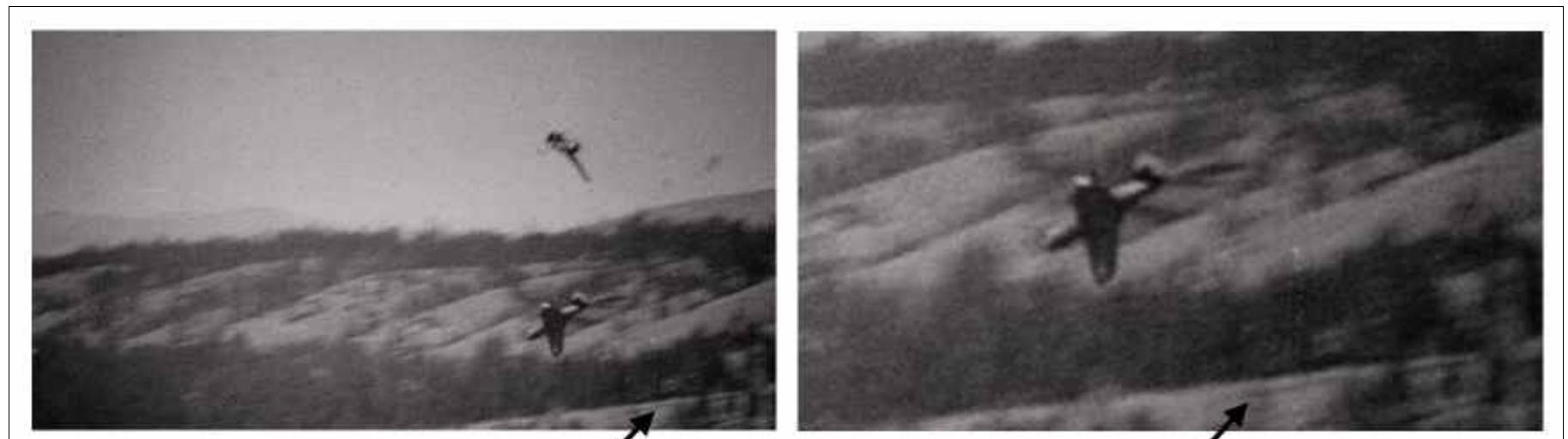


Figure III-H: The old road bed as seen in a frame from the movie on the left with a close up view on the right. I recall both the grade and the sides of the bed were steep. These images show that.

This gully formation provides a convenient route for traveling north of Spokane in this area. The road through this feature today is a modern four lane highway with the gully modified and sculpted to provide a gentle grade for the highway as it passes through. This modern highway was built in the 1970s'.

Prior to that there was this steeply graded two lane road which rested on a raised, high sided, and ramp like road bed through the unmodified gully. I knew this structure well as I used to transit through this gully on this old road bed frequently in the late 1960s' and early 1970s' on my cycling workouts north of Spokane.

The implication of the image in figure II-H is it rules out the end of the amphitheatre as the site of the newsreel movie camera in 1944. The camera would have been looking down on the road from this location rather than viewing it in profile from a distance. The profile view of the road bed seen in figure III-H could not be obtained at the end of the amphitheatre. The camera also had to have been set back from the end as well. Figure III-J shows the area in which I believe the newsreel camera was located.

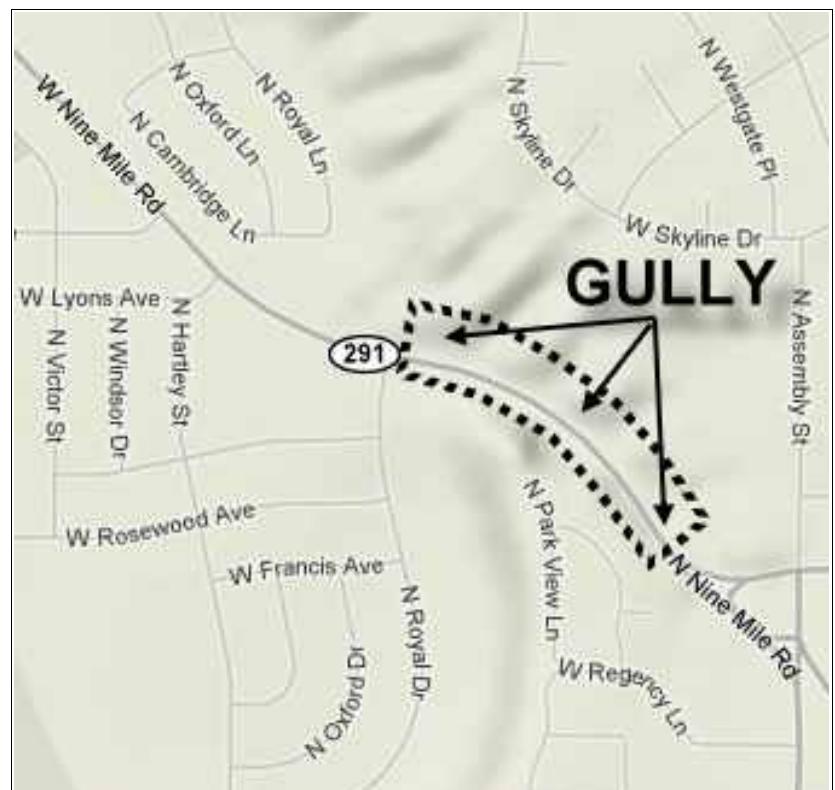


Figure III-I: GOOGLE MAPS topographic terrain map showing the gully that provides a convenient passage way from the higher terrain of north Spokane into the lower river valley terrain.

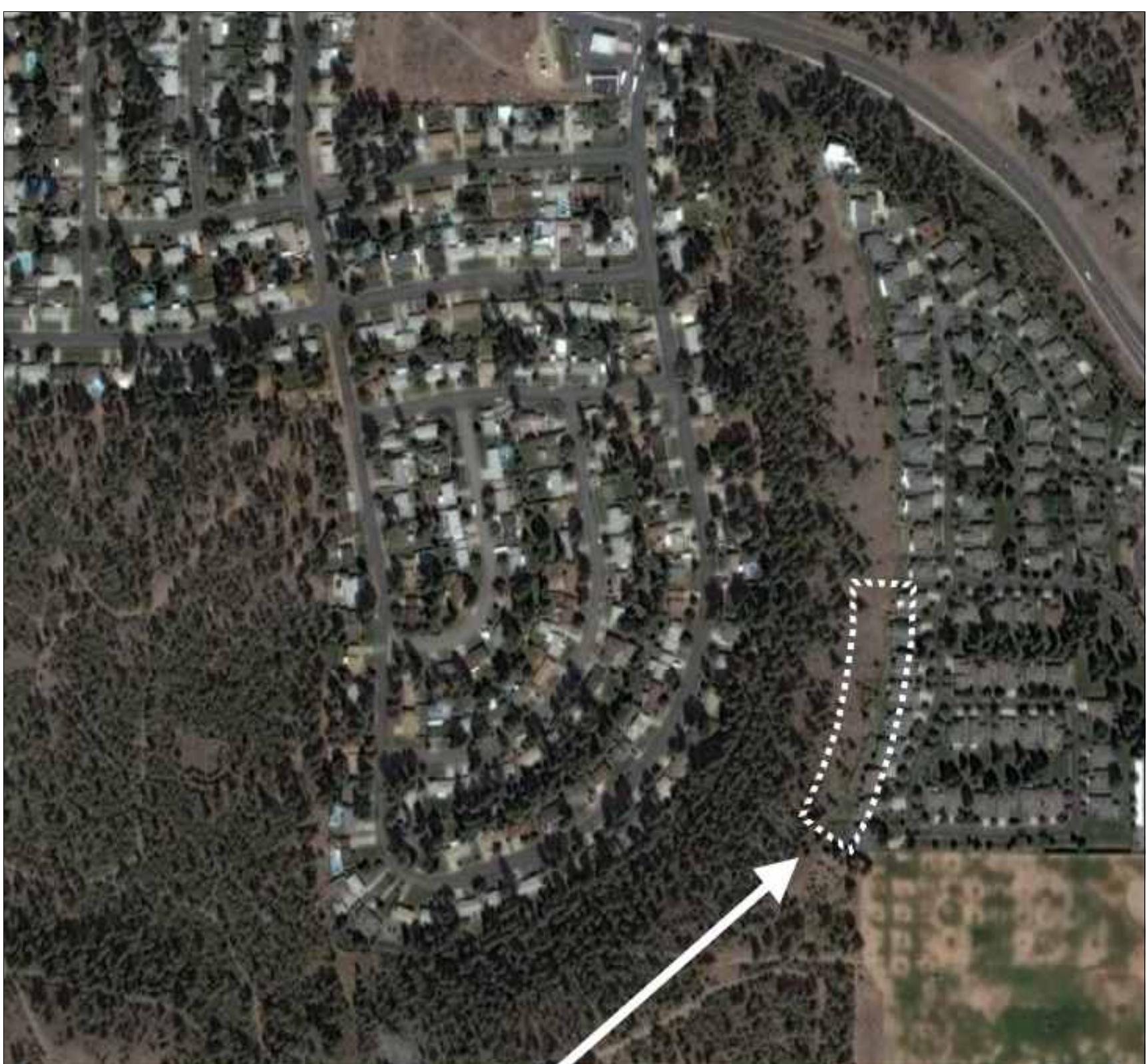


Figure III-J: A large GOOGLE EARTH image showing the area (outlined) in which the Paramount newsreel camera was most likely located on July 23, 1944.

IV. PHOTOGRAPHIC VIEWS FROM THE WEST END OF THE AMPHITHEATRE IN JULY 2007



Figure IV-A: July 15, 2007. The far west end of the amphitheatre (see fig. IV-B). This location and the point of view is well west of the location of the Paramount newsreel camera and images. Evidence of the very hot forest fire of 1994 can be seen in the foreground. If the air crash was visible in this field of view it would have been to the extreme right.

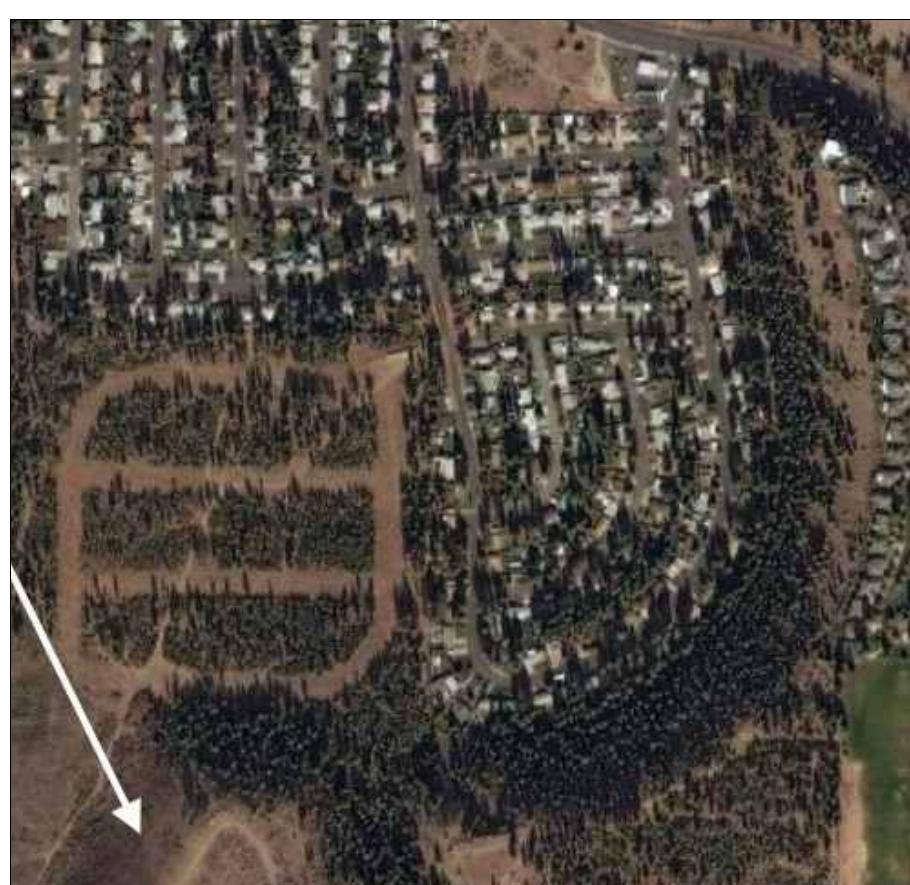


Figure IV-B: GOOGLE EARTH image shows location on July 15, 2007.



Figure IV-C: July 23, 2007. The air crash occurred 63 years to the day before the date this photograph was taken. It was a very clear day. Some of the mountains seen in the background are over 40 miles distant. The background mountain landmarks are clearly visible but are still too far left in relation to The Hill feature when compared to the newsreel images (see fig. IV-D for location). The crash would have occurred to the far right in this field of view.



Figure IV-D: GOOGLE EARTH image showing the photography location on July 23, 2007.



Figure IV-E: July 23, 2007. From the same day and position as fig. 9 but looking more eastward. The contours of Lookout Mountain can be clearly seen. From this position the air crash would have been seen but from a much different point of view than in the movie film. The light colored area spanning across the horizontal mid line is the Spokane Northside Landfill. This feature was not present in 1944 and has filled in much of the hill side contours seen in the 1944 newsreel images.



Figure IV-F: July, 2007. Panning further to the east and looking across to the far east end of the amphitheatre. The white multi-story structure to the right of center is on the point of the east end of the amphitheatre. Trees are beginning to obstruct the view.

V. PHOTOGRAPHIC VIEWS FROM NEAR THE CENTER OF THE AMPHITHEATRE IN OCTOBER 2007



Figure V-A: October 28, 2007: This is the furthest east point on the rim from where I have taken photographs (see fig. V-B). This location is in the ball park of where the newsreel camera was located but still to the west of the location. The landfill can be seen and its' overwhelming impact on the contours of the hillside.



Figure V-B: Image from GOOGLE EARTH showing the photography location on October 28, 2007



Figure V-C. October 28, 2007: This photograph was taken at same location as fig. V-B but pointing further west (to the left). Note the trees obstructing the view, an increasing problem as the observer moves east on the rim. From here the 1944 air crash and fire ball would have been seen spreading to the left in the foreground.



Figure V-D. October 28, 2007: Same location but looking even further west. The spreading fireball and debris of the crashing aircraft would have been seen somewhere in this field of view.

VI. COMBINING THE VIEWS

Just to see what it would look like I combined portions of selected frames from the movie and transposed these over grey-scaled transformations of the photos I had taken and then matched contours as best I could. As previously discussed all the contours cannot be matched exactly from the October position. The exact locations of impact points cannot be determined precisely with the data I have at this time, i.e., my photographs. Nevertheless, I believe these images are close enough to give somewhat of a view of the crash as if it occurred in October 2007.



Figure VI-A: The #2 aircraft tumbles in the air while the #3 aircraft below it heads towards the ground.



Figure VI-B: The #3 aircraft can be seen right before it hits the ground at the right. Then the fire ball and debris spreads across the amphitheatre floor.



Figure VI-C: The fireball and debris spreads further across the amphitheatre floor.

VII. NOTES AND COMMENTS

This is the location of the air crash seen in the movie *Earth vs The Flying Saucers*. There is no doubt. When I first began this project in the summer of 2007 I was not so sure. This was the result of the limitations of the standard Mark 1 human eyeball. The background features don't pop out when you have your boots on the ground at the site and only your Mark 1 eyeballs to view the situation. Unless you know what features to look for it is not evident this is the site and I started out not knowing what to look for. The real work in identification took some hours of looking at the screencap images made from the newsreel film used in *Earth vs The Flying Saucers* and comparing these to the photographs I had taken on site. Then I could see this was the site of this air crash, and beyond any doubt.

From somewhere on the Internet I read a comment that the newsreel film when used in the movie, *Earth vs The Flying Saucers*, had been flipped such it provides a mirror image of the actual newsreel film. That is, the aircraft were really moving from left to right during the the actual event and in the original newsreel film rather than from right to left, as seen in the movie. This could not possibly be true. There is no place in this area where you can find views like those seen in the movie and be consistent with the aircraft moving from left to right. The newsreel camera had to be facing north and panning from right to left, from east to west, as it filmed the event in order to have recorded the views of the background features seen in the movie. The direction of travel of the aircraft in the movie is how it was.

This project is not necessarily completed. I have not obtained that 'sweet' location where all the background features line up perfectly to my satisfaction. Figure II-J shows the area in which I believe this position should be located. I suspect there will be a day soon where the weather is nice and clear and I am looking for a reason not to do yard work at home. Then I will again go to the amphitheatre and, with better knowledge, seek this position. It may not be obtainable any more. It may be the private property of one of the homeowners on the amphitheatre rim. It may be obstructed by the pine trees which have had over 60 years to grow in height. I will still want to try. If there are good views then this document would be obsolete without revision.

The copy of the *War Department U. S. Army Air Forces Report of Aircraft Accident* I have says the incident occurred northeast of Baxter General Hospital. Clearly, the center point and eastern end of the amphitheatre is northwest of the present day location of the Veteran's Administration Hospital. How close Baxter was to the VA hospital and in what direction is data I do not have. Baxter would have to be located west of the VA hospital in order for the crash to have occurred northeast relative to Baxter. This is possible but there is a limit as to how far it could have been located to the west, probably less than 1/2 mile because of the geography, although this would be enough. Food for thought and further research.

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