Aerial view of Huntington and the Marshall campus. Courtesy of Marshall University.

# The Heartbeat of Huntington

## A Tragedy Pulls a City Together

**By Eric Douglas**

Fifty years ago, on November 14, 1970, the Marshall University football team plane crashed at Tri-State Airport near Huntington, killing all 75 people aboard and changing lives forever. But the crash also changed Huntington, West Virginia, and Marshall University.

Marshall is located in the middle of Huntington, but, until 1970, it was separate to some degree. As with many college towns, the community supported the football and basketball teams on game days, but there wasn't what you might call a deeper connection, in part because so many students commuted. The relationship between the city—a combination of white-collar and blue-collar workers—and the university wasn't strained; they just had little to do with one another, other than the Huntington-area students who attended Marshall.

In the late 1960s, Huntington was a typical city for the region. It was trying to re-invent itself economically. Earlier in the 20th century, Huntington had a thriving business sector with steel-, nickel-, and glass-making factories as well as shops that manufactured and repaired railroad cars. Historically, it'd been a railroad city—built by agents for the Chesapeake & Ohio (C&O) Railway and named for its president, Collis P. Huntington.

By 1970, the city was suffering through financial adversity. The nation itself was in an economic slump, entering an official recession in 1969 and 1970. The heavy industry that had propelled Huntington to prominence began to close, and railroad shops and corporate offices downsized rapidly.

Then the plane crash occurred that would forever alter the future of Huntington and Marshall. On November 14, 1970, Southern

Airways Flight 932 was carrying 37 members of the Marshall Thundering Herd football team, 8 members of the coaching staff, 25 school boosters, and 5 flight crew members. The team was returning home after a 17-14 road loss to the East Carolina Pirates at Ficklen (now Dowdy-Ficklen) Stadium in Greenville, North Carolina. At 7:36 p.m., on a rainy foggy night, the aircraft crashed into a hillside just short of Tri-State Airport (Wayne County) in what remains the deadliest sports-related air tragedy in U.S. history. Seventy children lost at least one parent in the crash; 18 lost both parents.

Morris "Mac" McMillian was a student at Marshall when the plane crashed. He describes the atmosphere on campus in a single word: "devastated."

"Everything was closed, except for the old Shawkey Student Union. We sat there and stared at each other. We didn't know what to do. There were no announcements. The buildings were closed. There were no classes," Mac says.

And there was only one subject on everyone's mind. "People just walked around in a daze downtown," Mac remembers. "And then people would . . . get engaged in conversation with someone. It would be, 'Did you know anybody on the plane?'"

Like a lot of people who were on campus then, Mac knew members of the football team, and it's still a sensitive topic for him. He still hasn't been able to visit Spring Hill Cemetery, where several former players are buried, including six whose remains were never identified.

Mike Kirtner was a Marshall sophomore in 1970. He was working for WMUL, the student-led radio station, when he heard about the crash. Mike was on a date but immediately drove to Tri-State Airport. With his student press credentials, he gained access to the crash site.

"One vivid memory I have from that night is seeing the old school bus they used to take the team to campus," Mike recalls. "It was painted white, [and] it had Marshall University on the side. That bus was empty, and it was misting rain. I remember seeing that bus sitting there empty. For whatever reason, that's [my] most vivid memory of that evening."

Mike, who now owns Kindred Communications, grew up in the Huntington area. He describes it as a typical *Leave It to Beaver* town. "I think, when the plane crash occurred, that's when Marshall became a college town. That's when the transition started because suddenly, the innocence was gone. I mean, we'd been through the Silver Bridge Disaster [which killed 54 at Point Pleasant in 1967] and various things that happened, but after that happened in Huntington, it all changed."

For Mike, the aftermath of the plane crash brought about a grieving process for the entire city. By the next year, he'd become a radio DJ and was more aware of Huntington's emotional attachment to the team.

"I actually collected hundreds of names in support of the new football team. When they decided to play football again, that's when people started bonding with the football program, and they became emotionally attached to it, versus just being a sports attachment," Mike says.

Current Huntington Mayor Steve Williams, who started playing football for Marshall in 1974, grew up in the region and was already familiar with Huntington and the coaching staff. His father was almost a member of the staff, too, although the mayor didn't learn that until the movie *We Are Marshall* (2006) came out.

Dr. Don Williams, the mayor's father, was friends with Marshall Head Coach Rick Tolley. Williams had just quit his coaching job at Concord College (now University), where he'd led the Mountain Lions to their first two WVIAC (West Virginia Intercollegiate Athletic Conference) titles—in 1962 and 1966. Tolley offered Williams the offensive

coordinator position at Marshall, but Williams turned him down. If he hadn't, Williams likely would have been on the plane that took the lives of Tolley and most of the coaching staff.

In *We Are Marshall*, there's a scene after the crash where acting Marshall President Dr. Donald Dedmon is going through a list of potential new head coaches, calling them and then scratching names off the list. After watching the film with his parents, Steve Williams asked his dad if he'd ever gotten a call like that from Dedmon.

As Steve tells it, "Dad said, 'I did.' My mother's fork just dropped. She didn't even know that. Dad said he told the university he would only be interested if he could be head coach and athletic director. They said they were separating the two jobs. Dad went off that next year to Virginia Tech to work on his doctorate. When he finished . . . he got another call from Marshall. Marshall just kept calling our family. We were destined to be together."

Don Williams finally ended up at Marshall, serving as chair of the university's Department of Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance for decades. For Steve, the biggest lesson of the crash is determination. "If you want to understand Marshall, if you want to understand Huntington, understand we never give up. You think you're ever going to take us down? It might take us 30 years, but we're going to figure it out. We're going to come back, and we will end up prevailing," he says.

He adds that Marshall is the heartbeat of Huntington: "Make no mistake about it, Marshall today is the heart and soul of the city, and it became that way because of the crash."

For a long time, though, no one in Huntington mentioned it much. Joe "Woody" Woodrum, longtime team manager and former color football commentator, notes, "We didn't talk too much about the crash. I mean, it was largely avoided my first 10 years here."

Current Huntington Mayor and former Thundering Herd football player Steve Williams. Courtesy of the mayor's office.

Woody, who came to Marshall in January 1975, recalls, "We were trying to rebuild the program."

He has newspapers and other print materials from those early years, and there's little to no mention of the plane crash at all.

"I've got a media guide from 1971," he says. "It has a brief bit about the crash and the worst disaster in modern sports history. And that was it."

*We Are Marshall* documents the decision to bring back football the year after the crash, but Woody remembers those discussions happening for years, especially while Marshall was struggling to put a winning team on the field.

"I remember [sportswriter] Bill Smith in the Charleston *Daily Mail* wrote a column about 1979 or '80 and said, 'Marshall should give up football. You've got a great basketball program. Why not put more money into that?'" Woody says.

From Woody's perspective, the thing that helped people begin opening up about the crash was when the team began winning. That first winning season took until 1984—14 years after the tragedy [see p. 34].

"I think that's when people began to accept and be able to talk about the plane crash," Woody says.

Current Athletic Director Mike Hamrick played football for Marshall during the rebuilding years. He arrived in January 1976 and played from 1976 to 1979. He went on to a long career in university athletics before returning to Marshall as athletic director in 2009.

Roses left by football players at the Marshall Memorial Fountain, November 14, 2019. Photo by Steve Brightwell.

"There were people into the mid to late '70s that didn't think Marshall should have football," Mike remembers. "Just imagine, you are an 18- or 19-year-old college kid, and you're playing for the Thundering Herd, and people in the community are telling you, 'Man, we don't need football here. Let's just forget about football.' In the '70s, we didn't refer to the plane crash at all."

Mike credits the players from those early years after the crash for keeping the program alive even though the team wasn't winning. He feels that "without the guys in the '70s, [and] the late '70s, the program probably would have gone away. I'm telling you, I was there. There were people that wanted the program to go away. And thank goodness for the leadership at Marshall at the time. They kept football going, and look what it's done for our university today."

As Marshall President Dr. Jerome Gilbert writes in his guest column for this magazine, he attended his first Memorial Service on November 14, 2015—before he was actually sworn in as president.

"It was very moving and emotional and hard to describe if you've never been there," Dr. Gilbert says. "The intensity of the emotion and the intensity of the feelings that are present on that day with so many people gathered there to pay their respects. It made me feel there was a very special bond at Marshall due to the tragedy."

Dr. Gilbert agrees with Mayor Williams about the connection between the school and the town: "When you look at a lot of universities in cities and towns, there's often the town-gown rivalry. The townsfolk don't want to associate with the university folks, and there's some of that vice versa. That was a positive side effect of the plane crash. It really drew the city and the university closer together.

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Students read sympathy telegrams from across the country, including one from President Nixon to Marshall acting President Dedmon, 1970. Courtesy of Marshall University Special Collections.

There's very little distinction between the city and the university. They embrace each other. And I think that's the way it should be."

Dr. Gilbert equates the plane crash and Huntington's reaction to it with the trauma of war: "You see a lot of World War II veterans that never talked about the war when they were younger, and then, in their later years, they started talking about it. My father-in-law was certainly in that camp. He wanted to put it out of his mind because it was such a horrible experience. I think it's something that you have to give time to be able to psychologically deal with it. So I think that has been part of it over the years—to sort of make peace with the whole event and to be able to talk about it and commemorate it in appropriate ways as we're doing now."

Fifty years later, the Marshall community—both the school and the city that surrounds it—discuss the crash publicly. There's still emotion, and there are tears, but they're

The official laying of the wreath in 2019, showing (left-right) Head Coach Doc Holliday and a Ceredo Fire Department veteran who responded to the crash 50 years ago. Photo by Steve Brightwell.

mixed with pride at what the university has accomplished since November 14, 1970. Those involved with the football program today make sure new arrivals appreciate that legacy.

"The parents of the recruits really understand it—when they're doing their homework, before they come up with their son on their recruiting trip. But if they don't understand it before they get here, I can promise you, they understand that once they get here," Mike Hamrick says.

As part of the visits, potential recruits hear people tell about losing their parents or losing an aunt or an uncle or a grandparent or a friend.

Mike adds, "It doesn't take them long once they get on this campus to understand what that fountain means, and to run up to Spring Hill Cemetery and see that memorial and look at the graves of those unidentified players. It sinks in real quick what this is all about."

Before *We Are Marshall* was the 2000 documentary *Marshall University: Ashes to Glory*, which helped the community begin talking about the crash. In the 50 years since the disaster and 20 years since that documentary, Marshall alumni and supporters around the world have developed a better understanding of that connection between the city and university.

"Over the years," Mike concludes, "Marshall and Huntington have grown as one, and we are one. I don't think either one of us could survive in the manner that we would like if we were not joined together. So yeah, we're all in this together. November 14, 1970, is a part of Huntington, it's a part of Marshall, and it will always be that way."

ERIC DOUGLAS is a Charleston-area author. He grew up in West Virginia, and even though he left the mountains for a few years, they never left him. He has a series of adventure novels and has recorded more than 150 oral histories. This is his second contribution to GOLDENSEAL. His first was "Growing Up Jewish in Charleston" in Winter 2018.