

Inmates to clear hiking trail near B-52 bomber crash site | View Clip
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BARTON - Several inmates of the Western Correctional Institution are scheduled Tuesday to begin clearing a 3-mile section of the Big Savage Hiking Trail that will lead to the site where a new memorial honoring the crew of a B-52 bomber that crashed in 1964 will be placed on public land.

The memorial will be constructed adjacent to the private property in Garrett County near Barton where a stone cross now sits in tribute to bombardier Maj. Robert Townley, who died at the crash site. He was one of three members of the five-man crew who perished in the crash.

"Four to five WCI minimum-security inmates and two WCI maintenance officers will accompany WCI Administrative Officer Bill Jewell to the remote mountainside location for the two-day trail clearing," said Mark Vernarelli, spokesman for the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services.

The inmates will initially remove branches and trees to clear a 3- to 4-foot path to the planned memorial site, which is located 200 yards from the plane crash location.

At about 1:30 a.m. on Jan. 13, 1964, the B-52 Strato-Fortress carrying two unarmed thermo-nuclear bombs fell from the sky. Four of the five crew members were able to eject from the plane which was flying landward at an estimated speed of 120 miles per hour. The men and the plane's wreckage were scattered over three counties in Maryland and Pennsylvania.

Although four of the crew managed to eject from the aircraft, two of the men had injuries that prevented them from walking through the blizzard once they landed on the ground.

The plane's nuclear payload remained intact despite the crash.

Vernarelli said the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services "has been a leader in efforts to put more inmates to work on meaningful, community-enhancing projects which at the same time allow the inmates to learn and respect local history." He noted that Maryland also has one of the few inmate-run thoroughbred horse rescue farms, and is the only state to have extensively developed inmate environmental projects that protect oysters, grow bay grasses and restore island shorelines.

Last spring, WCI Administrative Officer Bill Jewell spoke to the Savage River State Forest manager to voice interest in having the inmates clear part or all of the 17.2-mile Big Savage Hiking Trail, which has suffered from gypsy moth deforestation in 2006 and 2007 and a severe ice storm in 2002.