

Alex E. Krill: A brief biography of his life and final days

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Abstract. At the time of his death in 1972 at 44 years, Alex E. Krill had an established reputation as an authority on the topic of inherited retinal and choroidal dystrophies. He lived to see the publication of the first volume of his two volume textbook on Hereditary Retinal and Choroidal Diseases but perished in an airline crash before the completion of the second volume of this text. Although Dr. Krill had completed a substantial portion of the material for this second volume, the publication of a second volume would unlikely have resulted without major additional efforts from two of his colleagues Drs. Desmond Archer, Belfast, Northern Ireland, and August Deutman, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. This work is a testimonial to the scope of Alex Krill's knowledge of various retinal disorders and their proper investigation and classification by electrophysiologic and psychophysical procedures. It is also a lasting tribute to his memory by two generous and devoted colleagues.

Since Dr. Krill's other academic accomplishments are already in the public domain, this brief biography will highlight certain features of his personal life that are likely less well known to most readers.

He was born Alex Eugene Katz on October 20, 1928 in Cleveland, Ohio. His father, Sam Katz, was 65 years old at the time of Alex's birth while his mother, Bertha Rosner (Krill) was 39 years. During his childhood years, he was rather reserved and introverted (Fig. 1). Nevertheless, his half sister (Florence) described him as highly inquisitive and intuitively bright.

Sam Katz died when his son Alex was only 15 years old leaving a rather large financial void for Alex, his mother, two half brothers, and half sister. Fortunately for Alex he had developed skills as a musician, becoming accomplished on the clarinet, tenor saxophone, and flute. The opportunity to develop these skills was made possible by the gift of a clarinet from his first cousin, Dr. Robert Rosner, when Alex was only 12 years old. Robert Rosner would also play an influential role in Alex's later career development (Fig. 2). By age 16 years, Alex was playing in dance bands throughout Cleveland, Ohio earning the funds that would provide him with the opportunity to proceed with his graduate education (Fig. 3).

After graduating from John Adams High School in Cleveland, Ohio, Alex applied to Case Institute of Technology where he wanted to train for a career in chemical engineering. He was unsuccessful in obtaining admission. At this time, he was advised by his cousin, Dr. Rosner, to change his name to Krill,



Fig. 1. Alex Krill during his younger years.

which would match that of his half brothers, Harold and William Krill, and his half sister, Florence Krill. He then applied to Western Reserve University in Cleveland where he successfully gained acceptance. He graduated from this university in 1950 with a Bachelor's degree in mathematics.

Subsequently, again influenced by his cousin, Alex sought and gained admission to Ohio State School of Medicine in Columbus Ohio where he graduated in 1954 (Fig. 4).

He then entered a residency program in ophthalmology at the University of Illinois Eye and Ear Infirmary. His initial plans were to complete a residency and possibly enter practice with his cousin, Robert Rosner, who was then a practicing ophthalmologist in Cleveland, Ohio. It was during his residen-

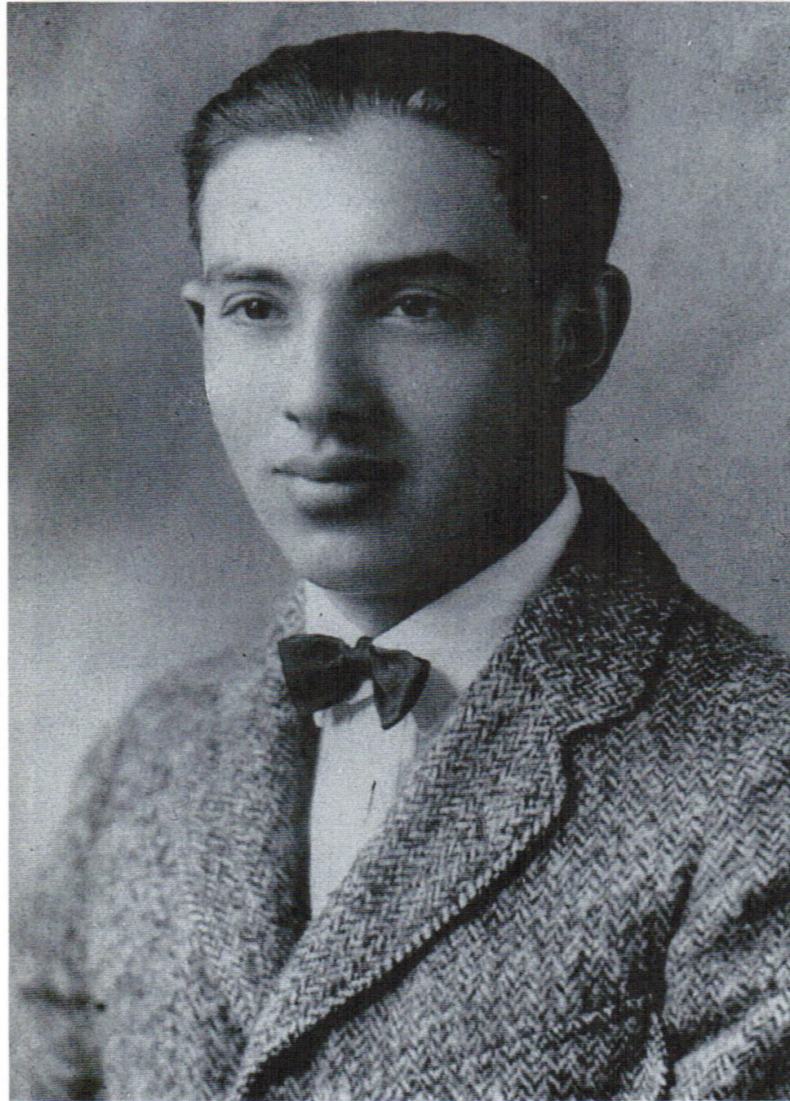


Fig. 2. Dr. Robert Rosner, a first cousin of Alex Krill, who was influential in the early development of his professional career.

cy that Alex developed his interest and expertise in electrophysiologic and psychophysical testing of retinal function in patients with various retinal and choroidal disorders. Part of his training was as a Public Health Service trainee. This allowed him to prepare for a career in clinical research while developing basic skills in ophthalmology. His research experience was enhanced by six months that he spent in the laboratory of Dr. Matthew Alpern at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He credited Dr. Alpern with helping him to think more critically as an investigator.

After completing his residency, Dr. Krill joined the staff at the University of Chicago in 1961, where in 1968 he became a full Professor of Ophthalmology



Fig. 3. Alex Krill during a time when he played in dance bands in Cleveland, Ohio.

(Fig. 5). His professional career was enriched by the opportunity of working with colleagues such as, among others, Drs. Albert Potts, Tibor Farkas, Bertha Klien, Steven Kramer, Terry Ernest, Desmond Archer, August Deutman, and Frank Newell at the University of Chicago. His personal life was similarly enriched by his wife Suzanne and his daughter Eileen.

His expertise in hereditary retinal diseases led to an invitation to speak at the National Eye Institute on December 8, 1972 where he lectured on the topic of fundus flavimaculatus. He completed his lecture and visit with colleagues between approximately 12:30 and 1:00 pm. Initially, he considered taking public transportation to Washington National Airport. However, he was anxious to return to Chicago and thus accepted an invitation by Dr. Donald

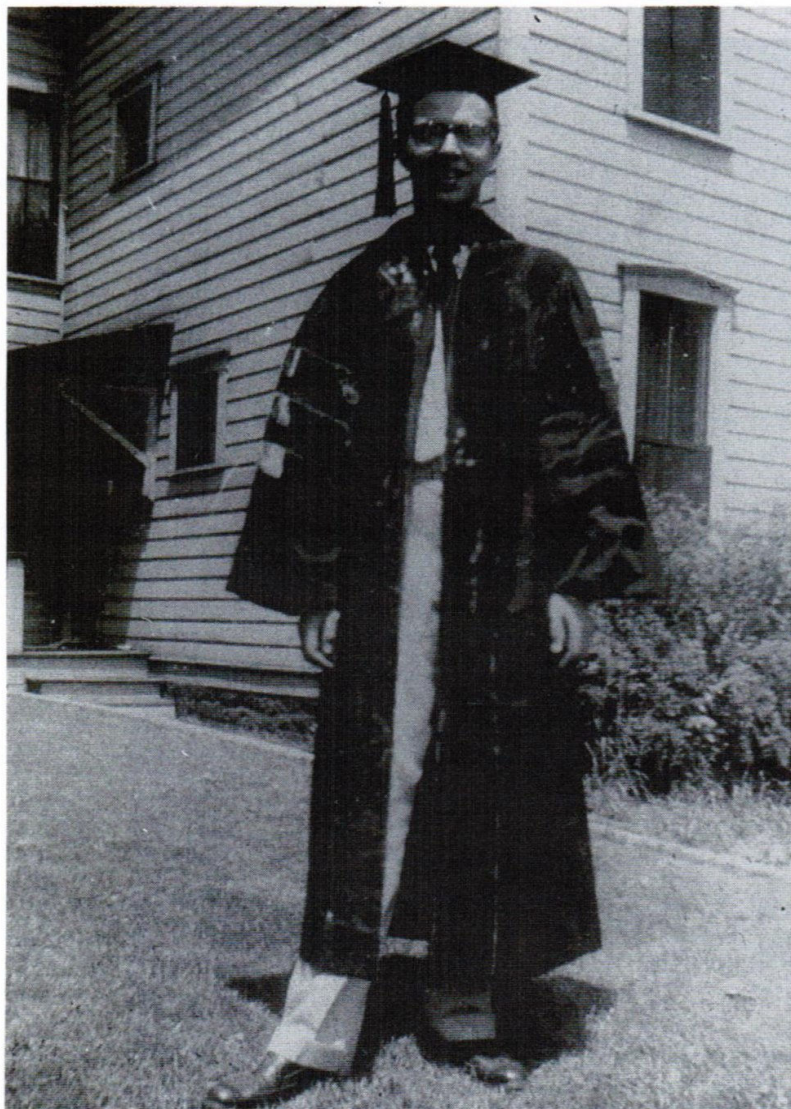


Fig. 4. Dr. Krill at the time of his graduation from Ohio State School of Medicine in 1954

Bergsma, (now practicing ophthalmology in Louisiana) to be driven to the airport. Since Dr. Krill was likely scheduled for a return flight to Midway Airport at about 2:30 to 2:45 pm, Dr. Bergsma did not indicate that there was any particular haste in transporting him to Washington National Airport. However, since they arrived appreciably before his initially scheduled flight, Alex proceeded with alacrity in an attempt to possibly make an earlier flight. His last words to Dr. Bergsma were 'I doubt I will be able to make the flight'.

United Flight 553 left Washington National Airport at 1:50 EST with Alex Krill aboard. It crashed at 2:28 CST, approximately two minutes before it was due to arrive at Midway Airport in Chicago (Fig. 6). There were 55

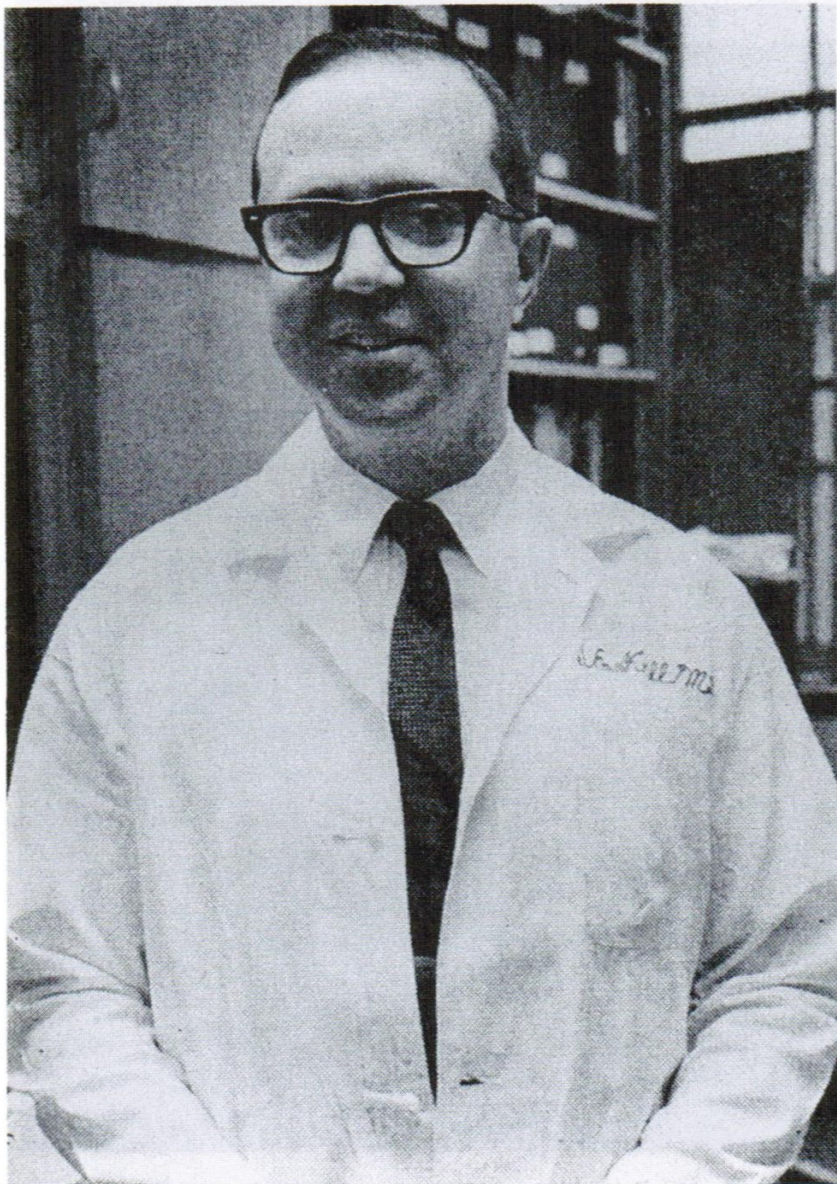


Fig. 5. Alex Krill as a member of the Department of Ophthalmology at the University of Chicago.

passengers and 6 crew members aboard the aircraft. Forty-passengers and three crew members were killed. Two persons on the ground also received fatal injuries.

A highly questionable theory that the flight was sabotaged was not confirmed by a National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation. What the NTSB did determine was that procedure failures by the captain and co-pilots during the landing approach to Midway Airport led the aircraft to stall and no longer maintain its flight level.

Alex Krill's passing impacted on a number of people including his family, friends, patients, and colleagues from all over the world. The Chicago Oph-

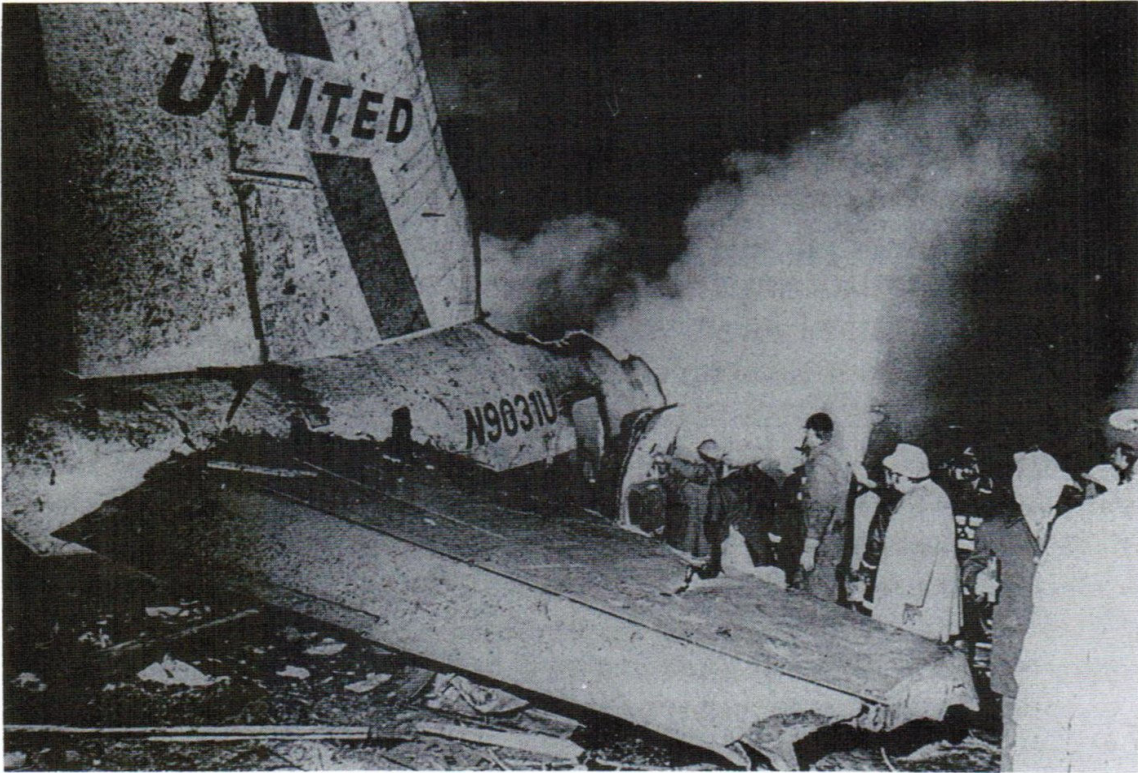


Fig. 6. Crash of United flight 553 on December 8, 1972 near Midway airport in Chicago.

thalmological Society has established a Krill Memorial Lecture each year dedicated in memory of Alex. A dedicated lab technician, Mrs. Deidre Martin, named her daughter (Alexis) in honor of Dr. Krill. Dr. David Newsome, (now practicing ophthalmology in Louisiana) told me of the impact Alex's lecture at the National Eye Institute had on his future professional career. He stated that Alex showed him how exciting the study of non-surgical medical diseases could be. His presentation impacted on Dr. Newsome's motivation to pursue a career in the clinical and laboratory investigation of various medical retinal disorders.

In 1985, I first became aware of how Dr. Krill's death impacted on Dr. David Cogan, to whose memory this volume is dedicated. I was riding on a bus with Dr. Cogan en route to a concert as part of a Dedication Gala for the Lions of Illinois Eye Research Institute in Chicago. While discussing our preferences in music, I mentioned the name of Alex Krill. Suddenly, and out of context, Dr. Cogan spontaneously said to me that he felt responsible for Alex Krill's death. He subsequently explained that he had been scheduled to meet with Dr. Krill that afternoon but, because of other commitments, was compelled to cancel their appointment. Dr. Cogan was harboring remorse that

had he not cancelled this appointment, Alex would not have perished in the air crash disaster.

This was certainly yet another example of Dr. David Cogan's humanity and deep sensitivity. I admired both men. Each personified both academic excellence and an abiding exemplary commitment to patient care.

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