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Family, friends reflect on lives of crash victims

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Red roses and freshly cut flowers were placed gently on three stone monuments, shielded by the trees standing guard where Air Evac 16 crashed one year ago.

A red and black bow tied to a darkly charred tree moved in a cool December wind. Evan Bragwell made his first visit Tuesday morning to the site where his father, Allan Bragwell, died with two other flight crew members while on a search mission for a lost hunter.

On Tuesday night, with three large wreaths and three candles lined along the front porch of the Air Evac 16 base, the 18-year-old Bragwell read a poem about his father, who he called his best friend. The words brought tears to the eyes of the more than 100 family, friends and colleagues who were present at the memorial service.

"The day (the crash happened) was the worst day of my life," said Bragwell.

"I thought he was invincible, that he was Superman; nothing would happen to him."

But at 3 a.m. on Sunday, Dec. 30, 2007, an Air Evac helicopter crashed in the wooded area of Freedom Hills in western Colbert County, killing pilot Michael Baker, flight nurse Tiffany Miles and paramedic Allan Bragwell.

"We grieve, but we celebrate their lives," Air Evac area manager David Gardner said during the memorial service, reading from a note written by Michael Baker's father, Jim.



Daniel Giles/TimesDaily photos
Sunlight streaming through the trees casts light on a rose placed on a marker for flight nurse Tiffany Miles at the crash site memorial for the Air Evac crew who lost their lives one year ago.

"And we remember them for what they did and stood for."

During the service, Colbert County 911 members read poems and others shared memories as friends, family and colleagues stood together in a circle of unity. An evening breeze flickered the lighted candles they held in memory of the three Air Evac crew members.

"It's wonderful for us to see how many people loved her and honored her," said Miles' mother, Carol Crowson. "(Tiffany) loved God and she loved caring and helping people."

She said her two grandsons - Owen, 2, and Noah, 7 - still miss their mommy and cry for her from time to time.

"Owen, who was about 18 months when the accident happened, was at my house some time ago and went into a bedroom and saw a picture we had of Tiffany. He started pointing at the picture saying 'momma,' like she was still there."

Crowson said now that it's been a year since the accident happened, she realizes it's time to "let Tiffany go."

"It was like a bad dream," she said as she reflected on the accident. "But I have 29 beautiful years of memories. (Tiffany) was a blessing from God."

"But there will never be closure for momma. I'll always have a piece of me missing that I will have to try and fill with memories."

On Tuesday morning, members of Bragwell and Miles families were taken down the nearly mile-long path from Mt. Mills Fire Town Road in four-wheelers and all-terrain vehicles to the site where the three stone monuments rest with a stone bench carved with the image of Air Evac 16. Also on the stone bench that overlooks the three monuments are carved the words, "You laid down your lives for a stranger."

They are words that Steve Bragwell, the father of Allan Bragwell, has read every time he visits the site, a place where he said he "feels close" to his son.

Steve Bragwell said he often comes to the site and sits on the bench and talks with his son.

"We were close, very close," Steve Bragwell said. "We talked a lot, usually talked two to three times a week. If one of us had a bad day at work, we'd call the other."

"There will be times when I'm having a bad day and I'll start to pick up the phone and realize I can't call him anymore."

Steve Bragwell said he still has his son's telephone number in his cell phone and his picture as his screen saver.

"That allows me to keep him close," Steve Bragwell said, pulling the phone out of his shirt pocket and opening the it to show off his son's photo.

"Sometimes I open it just to see him."

The last time Evan Bragwell talked with his father was Christmas 2007. He was on a youth trip to Gatlinburg, Tenn., and had just arrived when the accident happened.

"I was planning on calling him to tell him we made it OK. I never got to," Evan Bragwell said. "But I have some great memories of my dad, and those memories will be with me for the rest of my life."

And as Evan Bragwell starts building his own adult life, he's preparing to follow in his father's footsteps by enrolling to become an Emergency Medical Technician.

"I've looked up to him and the people he worked with all my life. I try every day to make him proud of me, and I think he would be glad that I want to be like him."

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