

TIMES DAILY

www.TimesDaily.com

Dec 31, 2007

Air Evac helicopter crashes; three die

By Bernie Delinski and Tom Smith,
Of the TimesDaily



Photo illustration by T.J. Hildreth

A three-member Air Evac Lifeteam crew searching for a lost hunter died Sunday morning when the helicopter they were in crashed and burst into flames in a wooded area of Colbert County, authorities said.

The crash occurred at 2:45 a.m. in the Freedom Hills Wildlife Management area. The site is about a mile off Mount Mills Road in the southwestern part of the county.

Killed in the crash were pilot Michael Baker and medical technicians Allan Bragwell, 40, and Tiffany Miles, 29, both of Florence, authorities said.

Their bodies were removed from the wreckage Sunday afternoon, about 12 hours after the crash, according to emergency workers near the crash scene.

Investigators with the National Transportation Safety Board and the Federal Aviation Administration were on the scene Sunday afternoon and will begin a formal investigation today. The complete investigation could take from six to 12 months to complete, said safety board spokesman Robert Gretz.

They will try to determine what caused the helicopter to abruptly crash, said Gretz, who is senior air safety investigator for the safety board's Northeast Regional Office in Parsippany, N.J.

Many emergency officials knew the victims because of their work with Air Evac, and that made their work Sunday even more difficult.

"They were all good people, and they died doing what they did best, and that's helping someone else," Colbert County Coroner Carlton Utley said.

"What's so sad is you work with them, side by side, and the next thing you know, this happens," Colbert Emergency Management Agency Director Mike Melton said.

Colin Collins, president and chief executive officer at Air Evac's headquarters in Missouri, called Sunday a tragic day for the victims' families and everyone involved in his operation.

"These were our family members, and we are devastated at this loss," he said.

The tragedy also hit hard at Helen Keller Hospital in Sheffield. Bragwell, who lived in Greenhill, had worked for more than 17 years at the hospital and was interim director of emergency medical services at the facility. Miles was a registered nurse at the hospital for about seven years before resigning in 2006.

"I personally knew Allan, and he was well respected in his field and an outstanding professional," said Vanessa Gullett, a spokeswoman for Keller Hospital. "You won't find anyone who had an unkind word to say about Allan.

"All of these people are very dedicated to helping people. This is what they love to do. It's such a horrible tragedy. We're all devastated."

Air Evac, which has a unit based in Muscle Shoals, transports medical patients to hospitals and also assists in search and rescue efforts in the Shoals. The unit is one of 75 Air Evac operations in 12 states.

The local unit was responding to a call concerning a lost hunter, authorities said. The family of 25-year-old Matt McDowell, of Florence, called 911 operators just after 1 a.m. and the Colbert County EMA quickly responded with ground searchers and Air Evac launched its medical helicopter.

Melton said the hunter was spotted about 3 a.m. and the Air Evac team was shining a spotlight on the man in an effort to show ground rescuers where they could find him.

"They were hovering and all of a sudden it started down," said Melton, who was involved in the search. "At first, I thought they were landing but it kept going down. Then I heard the explosion. The first thing you feel is that lump in your throat."

Michael David Smith was also involved in the search and saw the crash.

"I heard the helicopter sputtering and I knew something was wrong," he said. "And it just went down and burst into flames on impact."

Another rescue worker said he heard a pop and saw the helicopter start spinning downward.

Forestry officials were called in to clear a path to the scene. The area was described by rescue workers as very rocky and rough.

The area where the Bell 206 LongRanger helicopter crashed is three-tiered, with a bluff, second tier and dropoff into a ravine. The helicopter is on the second tier. The site is surrounded by swampy land.

The tops of some trees appeared to have been taken out by the crash.

Gretz said officials with Bell and Rolls-Royce, which is the manufacturer of the engine in the helicopter, are helping with the investigation.

He said the transportation safety board would post a preliminary report on the crash on its Web site, ntsb.gov, in about five business days.

A factual report will be completed in about six months. Then a safety board in Washington, D.C., will reveal the apparent cause, Gretz said.

Gretz spent about 15-20 minutes at the site before speaking with the media. He said he didn't notice any power lines.

It appears more than 50 percent of the copter had been on fire, he said.

One thing authorities want to find out is how high the copter was flying. Weather conditions seemed fine, with a ceiling of about 1,000 feet and no wind, he said. The helicopter can operate as low as 500 feet above ground.

The three elements considered in an investigation are the pilot, environment and machine, Gretz said.

McDowell was taken to a local hospital for treatment, but his injuries were not life-threatening, authorities said. Efforts to contact him at his Florence home were unsuccessful Sunday night.

Emergency workers said McDowell reportedly began hunting deer in the area early Sunday morning and got lost.

The crash scene is very near where another helicopter crashed in the mid-1990s, authorities said.

Gretz said this is Air Evac's first fatal crash since 1985.

Utley said Lawrence County Coroner Michael Coffey assisted him in processing and sorting the scene. He said Coffey is a former Air Evac employee, so he is familiar with the seating arrangement in the helicopter.

Those who knew the victims say the trio were well thought of.

Jennifer White graduated from Winston High School with Miles in 1996.

"We were in the band and were always together," White said. "She was my best friend in high school. And we've continued to be friends."

White described Miles, whose maiden name is Crowson and who still has family living in the Double Springs area, as a "sweet person" and "very religious."

"She wasn't phony; she was genuinely a good person," White said.

She said Miles always wanted to be a nurse.

"Even in high school she was always the kind of person who helped others and that's what she wanted to do, she wanted to be a nurse to help others," White said. "And she loved being a nurse."

"I don't know if it's sunk in yet, but right now, I just feel numb. You don't ever think something like this is going to happen, especially to someone you know."

Muscle Shoals police officer Lee Smith grew up with Bragwell.

"He was a super nice guy," Smith said. "He was always laughing, joking and cutting up.

"He seemed to just always have a good time, but when it was time to work, he worked. He loved what he did and was good at it. When I first heard of it, I was stunned. It was like it really wasn't real."

Michael David Smith, a Colbert County 911 supervisor and member of the Colbert EMA, who also worked part-time with Keller Ambulance Service, was at the scene, searching with others for the missing hunter.

Smith and two others had made their way toward the area where the hunter had been located. As they worked their way through the woods and debris, the helicopter kept a search light on the stranded hunter.

"I heard a funny noise, then it seemed like the helicopter was sputtering," Smith said. "Then it went in a tailspin and started going down."

He and two searchers were standing directly under the helicopter when it started the spin.

"Standing there, it seemed like it was a long time, but it was probably only a matter of a few seconds," Smith said.

He said when the helicopter crashed, it ended up about 50 yards from where they were standing.

Smith said it landed and caught on fire.

"It didn't just hit and explode. There were a couple of small explosions, but it was just on fire. And within seconds it was fully involved," he said. "I couldn't believe what I was seeing."

Smith said he had known Miles and Bragwell for about 10 years, working with them through 911 as well as at Keller Ambulance Service.

"They were good people," he said.

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Courtesy of WHNT

Wreckage is seen from an Air Evac helicopter crash in Colbert County Sunday morning that killed pilot, Michael Baker, and medical technicians Allan Bragwell, 40, and Tiffany Miles, 29, both of Florence, authorities said.