



Plane Crash

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Long Canyon, Desert Hot Springs
1976-016

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Shortly after 1700 on the afternoon of 1 March, a call was received by the Los Angeles Tower that a light plane was in trouble. Contact was broken soon thereafter.

About this time, a Water Department employee working in the Long Canyon area saw a plane go down somewhere up canyon of him. Seeing a ball of flame and believing it to be close by, the Sheriff and the Palm Desert Fire Dept. were notified.

The Fire Dept. personnel drove up Long Canyon as far as possible, and finding nothing, began hiking in, hoping to come upon the wreckage. A Civil Air Patrol plane, out of Palm Springs, arrived and spotted the wreckage, still burning. Due to the use of four radio frequencies being used (Fire Dept., Sheriff, Palm Springs Tower, and CAP) the communications and coordination were very poor.

By now, darkness had fallen and no contact had been made by ground units. The weather, stormy and windy all day, was getting even worse. One of the firemen had fallen on a cholla cactus and the others, with no extended search equipment were called off. At this time the Sheriff's Dept. called for RMRU.

RMRU member Bob Claybrook, having monitored some of the previous transmissions on his scanner, was already on his way. After having spoken with personnel at the roadhead, determining that no fixed position had been located, that the plane had still been burning when last seen, and that no life had been seen near the wreckage, he surmised further search for possible survivors would be futile at this point and waited to brief other RMRU members as they arrived.

Members turning out were Bob Claybrook, Keith Borges, John Dew, Bernie McIlvoy, Pete Carlson (Ops Leader), Jim Fairchild, Rich Quackenbush, Art Bridge, Rick Pohlers, Gary Anderson, and Steve Zappe. Phil Blank, from the Riverside Amateur Radio Association, was also out with us and several of his cohorts were monitoring from their homes.

Upon arrival of several members, the van, and the Ops Leader, it was decided to

follow Bob's conclusion and return at daybreak. Desert Hot Springs Fire Dept. had offered the Fire Station for bedding down, most members graciously accepted.

Reveille went at 0450 (somebody flipped the lights on early). The Sheriff arrived about 0530 and everyone started for the roadhead. Shortly after setting up base, Don Landells arrived with his Bell Ranger 206 helicopter.

Jim Fairchild and Bob Claybrook flew with Don for the search and initial contact. The wreckage was spotted by Bob, after the bird had flown in the general direction and started a circular search pattern.

The wreckage was on a Southwesterly slope of an adjacent canyon with approximately 60 grade, 3300' el. Initial survey indicated the plane had impacted, burst into flame, and slid approximately 40 feet. The wreckage was so badly mangled, burned, and melted that aircraft identification was indiscernible at this time.

Initially, two bodies were found and the Coroner was contacted. Coroner's instructions were to leave the bodies as is until his arrival at the scene. During the wait for the Coroner, it was discovered that there were two bodies together at one point, making a total of three. At this time it was also determined to be a single engine plane, still of unknown make.

Also during the wait, it was determined that those members at base who wished could secure from the mission. At this time several members left for home and work. Pete Carlson turned Ops Leader duties over to Bernie McIlvoy at this time and left also.

Upon the Coroner's arrival, John Dew, Keith Borges, and the Coroner flew to the scene. During removal of the bodies, Jim spotted another engine and the Coroner found a plate marked "Piper". Don presumed the plane was a Piper Aztec. At this time John and Keith were flown out with the bodies.

The bodies were laid out at base to await the arrival of the Coroner's wagon. A Sheriff's Deputy was flown to the scene to await FAA investigators. On the return flight, Jim and Bob returned to base. For RMRU personnel, the mission was at an end.

RMRU members retired to Hayden's Coffee Shop for breakfast, following which members returned home and to work. This tragic, but successful, mission will be remembered by some for a long time.

search and rescue efforts in other counties. Each member purchases their own equipment and takes time off work, without compensation, to participate in search and rescue missions. Team equipment is purchased from contributions from the community. We are a non-profit organization and are funded by [donations](#) from people like you.