



Plane crash located, search for bodies

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Foothills N.W. of Banning
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By Kevin Walker

Once again we would hope. We would hope to find survivors, At a little after 8:00 PM Thursday, RMRU member Walt Walker received a call from Capt. Ray Canova of the Sheriff's Department. He told Walt that there was an ELT (Emergency Locator Transmitter) signal emitting from the mountains Northwest of Banning. A CAP (Civil Air Patrol) member was driving through the Banning Pass in the early evening and picked up the 121.5 Emergency signal. The CAP reported the signal to Scott Air Force Base who handles all CAP operations and they also reported it to the Sheriff's Department who then called RMRU.

The team was activated and met at the North end of Highland Springs Road. While waiting for the Riverside members to arrive, John Dew, his son Roy, and myself in my jeep followed Sgt. Pete Kiyasu in the Sheriff's four-wheel drive. With Pete were new members Glenn Henderson and Bruce Gahagan. Also in the caravan were two teams from the CAP. We drove along the base of the Banning foothills taking readings with our ELT locators, As we slowly moved West the signal became stronger. Back at base camp work was being done to see if there had been an aircraft reported overdue, with no results. Also to make matters worse we were searching in a bitter cold fog. Base contacted me and told me that there were more members present and waiting for assignments. Walt wanted me to return and try and mark on the map what we had searched and the bearings we had taken with the locators. So I stopped and took one last bearing before returning to base. But this time the signal was quite strong and it seemed that we were beginning to move around to the west of the ELT. John and I felt very strongly that we were close, so I assigned Bruce and Glenn to John, and they started in followed by a group from the CAP. Sgt. Kiyasu, Roy, and myself returned to Base. After giving a general location to Walt, we decided to put two more hiking teams in at another road headed to the North, Again, we loaded up the vehicles and drove into another 4-wheeler road. As we neared the end, and reached the trail head, John radioed to base that they had found where something had struck the ridge they were now on, and that they were beginning to find small pieces of aircraft parts. John's team was close, very close. As they continued, we started in. Because of the dense fog it was difficult to navigate. We had been hiking for only a short time when John reported to base that they and the CAP had located the main wreck, covered with a thin layer of snow, of what was once a Beach Baron, a twin engine aircraft. They searched the area for some time but could find no survivors. We

found there location just as John reached the ridge where we were standing. John reported that since the wreckage was so badly destroyed who ever was in the plane had to either have been thrown out or crushed under the wreckage. With that we slowly hiked out for a quick meal and a couple of hours of sleep.

At first light (5:30) Friday morning Don Landells arrived in 40MC (four-zero-Mike-Charlie) to assist in locating the crash victims. The first load in was Walt, Rick and myself with the brush cutting and aircraft extraction tools. Don let us off on the ridge across from the wreckage. While Don flew out for more members we cut brush and improved the helispot, As more members were flown in we moved around and then down the ridge to where the craft rested. What apparently had happened was that the twin struck a first ridge anywhere from 140 to 180 miles per hour, and then went another 400 feet dropping small pieces of debris until it struck the side of a second ridge, approximately 50 feet from the top. Being daylight now we expected to find the bodies quickly, somewhere near the main wreckage. Upon reaching the craft though, we found nothing, There were however, four seats. Two near the plane, and two actually in the wreckage. This was strange because there was no sign that anyone had been sitting in them.

The coroner was flown in and thought it was strange also that there was no sign of anyone. Normally, around a crash site things can get pretty messy, but nothing. There was some thought that maybe the bodies could be underneath the plane. But before we could try to move the craft, we would have to wait until the NTSB (National Transportation Safety Board) personnel arrived. While waiting we started doing line searches from where the plane first struck the ridge to final resting point. Don assisted from the air searching the areas that were too steep to try and walk. All that was found was small bits of debris, extra clothing and lots of papers.

When the NTSB personnel arrived, we were hopeful that we could resolve the search. After getting all the necessary photos, we were given the OK to move the wreck. After tying a sling to what was left of a wing, we had Don come in. With the cargo rope hooked up to our sling, Don applied power and started to pull up and back. It took just about all of the powerful helicopter's force to move it, but it was enough to tip the plane back, so that we could see underneath. But again, nothing. Don had to fly to Blythe, so he was cleared. One of the other pilots, Mike Donovan was enroute to replace Don however, so that if need arose, he would be there.

We were all quite baffled as to what could have happened, when one of the NTSB men came up and said that the four seats that were at the crash site were passenger seats, and that this particular plane was a six-seater and not a four. So we decided to do another sweep from the ridge. About twelve of us lined up, and started down to the wash below and then up to and past the crash site. Still nothing, so we continued on over the ridge and down the other side. As we started up the side of the third ridge, nearly 450 feet from the crash, Rick made a grim discovery. Within about 20 feet of each other were the bodies of two men, still strapped to their seats. With that, Mike flew in the body bags and the cargo net, and with the coroners O.K., the bodies were

placed in the bags and then in the cargo net. Mike was called back in for a cargo pick up. Joe Erickson guided the chopper in with hand signals, and once in position, Walt hooked the line up to the cargo hook on the bottom of the bird. And with a thumbs up signal from Joe, Mike pulled up and away.

Our job was done. As we were walking out, one could not help but wonder why it happened. To imagine their terror upon first striking the ridge. And of course the loss that would be felt by family and friends. Why?

RMRU is a volunteer search and rescue team that covers Riverside County and assists other teams with 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.