Search for airplane, fireball seen at night

March 9, 1991
North Face San Jacinto
1991-008

On the night of March 7th, a Desert Hot Springs resident reported a fireball on the North Face of Mt San Jacinto. On March 8th, a small plane was reported overdue on a flight through the area. The informant was contacted to try to find out where the fireball was seen on the North Face.

After talking to the informant, we now had a good idea where the missing plane might have gone. But to find a plane in the wilderness is not an easy task. So a call out for the morning of March 9th was set up. We would have a helicopter and a plane to search for the missing plane.

At 6:00 a.m. on March 9th, we met at Snow Creek, the base of the North Face. A helicopter was used for searching the area, but by 9:00 a.m., the missing plane had still not been sighted. RMRU sent teams up the tramway to hike the ridges to view anything below. Also, one team was flown in to the top of Miller Peak. Five teams were out in the field and the helicopter continued searching.

Around 2:00 p.m. one team called in that they saw a tree on the face that looked like it had recently burned. Other teams started looking in the area and confirmed the report. The helicopter was guided in by the field teams and spotted the wreck down in a canyon. A team was dropped into the area and climbed down to the wreck. The team found no one alive.

Because it was getting dark, everyone either hiked out or were flown out. A limited call out of eight people were going to come back on March 10th and do the body recovery.

On the morning of March 10th the eight members met and flew in with ropes and a stretcher to do the evacuation. It was cloudy and windy, the flying was very hard. The body was finally ready to be flown out about 1:00 p.m. Just then a call for a search for a missing three year old boy came over the radio. Members at base left immediately for the search area, Piñon Flats. The field members were brought out just as a snow storm hit the area. The members left for the new search area. See mission 1991-009.

Additional Note: The NTSB report (LAX91FA124) indicated that the cargo pilot had probably fallen asleep, drifted 10 miles south, and collided with the mountain. The pilot had little sleep since the previous flight and may have taken Dimetapp decongestion pills which are know to cause drowsiness.

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.