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Live rockets, storm slow crash search

LAS VEGAS, Nev. (UPI) — Experts had to remove live rockets Sunday before they could recover the bodies of two Air Force officers killed in a plane crash, while near-blizzard weather conditions temporarily halted the search for a civilian survivor of another crash.

Two other officers were killed in still a third crash. The three planes all went down within a five-day period in a Southern Nevada area known as the "Sagebrush Triangle."

Wreckage from all three was found Saturday, but only two of the victims and one survivor were picked up Sunday.

1st Lt. Col. Billy Helton, 46, North Little Rock, Ark., wandered in the mountains for several days before he was rescued Saturday. He was reported in stable condition Sunday at a nearby air force hospital.

Near-blizzard conditions halted the search for Helton's son Michael, 21, hurt in the crash Thursday of a Piper Cherokee in Wallace Canyon north of the 11,000-foot high, snowcapped

Charleston Peak.

Ground crews, four wheel drive vehicles and 20 air force planes conducted an all-night search for the younger Helton before weather conditions forced a halt Sunday.

Ordnance teams had to remove live rockets from another crash site before they could recover the bodies of Capt. Anthony Rosa of Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., and Capt. Victor Villelunga of Bergstrom Air Force Base, Tex.

Their 0-2 Skymaster spotter military craft crashed during a military training mission Jan. 30, spraying the live rockets around Indian Springs.

A second 0-2 spotter plane, looking for the two missing crafts, fell to earth Friday one mile west of Charleston Peak and about four miles away from the Heltons.

Dead in that crash were Capt. Lawrence K. Wilson of Bergstrom and Capt. Virgil Johnson of Davis-Monthan.

Following the second 0-2 crash, all Skymaster planes in the 12th Air Force

were grounded to determine if the equipment was faulty.

A search helicopter, hovering at a low altitude, also crashed Saturday but none of the six crewmen was hurt.

The desert and mountainous "Sagebrush Triangle" is named after the Bermuda Triangle where ships and planes mysteriously have disappeared in the Atlantic Ocean.

The first 0-2 spotter disappeared from radar screens shortly after takeoff from Nellis Jan. 30.

The Heltons departed McCarran International Airport Thursday and crashed about 40 miles away and the second 0-2 was looking for both of them.

When the series of crashes began last week, planes from Nellis Air Force Base, the sheriff's Aerosquadron and Civil Air Patrol flew 2,000-square-mile triangular-shaped search patterns daily and more than 40 aircraft and several hundred men on foot and in vehicles were used at the height of the search.