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'Sagebrush Triangle' search ends, 5 dead in 4 crashes

LAS VEGAS, Nev. (UPI) — An eight-day saga of four air crashes in Nevada's so-called "Sagebrush Triangle," which killed five persons and injured six, ended with the recovery of the last body in near-blizzard weather.

The body of Michael Helton, 21, who survived the crash of a light plane but died before help arrived, was airlifted from the snow-covered slopes of Charleston Peak Monday. His father lived.

The Helton crash was one of four within a week in a 10 mile area of desert and mountains, which caused it to be nicknamed after the Bermuda Triangle in the Atlantic Ocean where ships and planes have disappeared.

Two Air Force officers died in the crash of their O-2 Skymaster spotter plane. Two more officers, also in an O-2, died while searching for the downed planes.

Five men aboard a search helicopter that crashed escaped serious injury.

The series of accidents began Jan. 30 when the Skymaster, which had just taken off from Nellis Air Force Base, crashed on the northern slope of Mt. Charleston, scattering live rockets in the wreckage.

Ordnance teams removed the rockets before searchers, hampered by bad weather, could recover the bodies of Capt. Anthony Rosa of Palm Bay, Fla., stationed at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz.; and

Capt. Victor Villelunga of Alhambra, Calif., from Bergstrom Air Force Base, Tex.

Three days later, a rented plane piloted by Helton's father, Lt. Col. Billy Helton, 46, North Little Rock, Ark., crashed into the 11,000-foot mountain.

The younger Helton was injured and could not walk. His father went for help, wandered several days, and was rescued Saturday. Officers said he wanted to return to his son immediately, but was flown to the hospital at Nellis.

He was reported in good condition Monday.

The second O2 spotter crashed Friday while searching for the other two planes one mile west of Charleston Peak. Killed were

Capt. Lawrence K. Wilson of Memphis, Tenn., and stationed at Bergstrom; and Capt. Virgil Johnson, Hawthorne, Nev., and Davis-Monthan.

A helicopter hovering over the area where searchers found the elder Helton crashed Saturday. The five crewmen escaped serious injury.

Rescuers Saturday finally pinpointed the wreckage of the Helton crash at the 9,500 foot level of Wallace Canyon, but near-blizzard conditions in the Spring Mountain Range stalled the search.

Snow and high winds Sunday and Monday hampered rescuers. At 1 p.m. Monday four air force mountain-climbing survival experts struck out on snowshoes.