

# Six Days of Tragedy - The Sagebrush Triangle Search

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30 January – 5 February 1978 Mission number RRC 8-103/110/112/115. Six days that taxed the Nevada Wing and Civil Air Patrol like no others. Total losses, two O-2 Cessna Skymasters, one civilian Piper Warrior, one air force helicopter UH-1N, five people were killed, six people were injured.

The Sagebrush Triangle is a roughly triangular shaped area of mountainous terrain going to about 9000 feet near Mt. Charleston. The area seems to have acquired its nickname after the more famous and ominous Bermuda Triangle. During these six days it earned that name.

The mission began on 30 January 1978 when a O-2A Cessna Skymaster call sign Spar 14 launched on a planned Red Flag Forward Air Control mission for a flight of F-4 Phantoms. The mission launched VFR at 1355 hours and lost radio contact 11 minutes later. <sup>1</sup> Flying Spar 14 were Capt. Anthony Rosa from Davis-Monthan AFB, AZ and Capt. Victor Vellelunga from Bergstrom AFB, TX. <sup>2</sup> Radar Contact was lost 5 minutes after the last radio contact and when they missed their 1445 check in, the air and ground search began. <sup>3</sup>

On day two of the mission Nevada Wing mobilized with assistance from California Wing. A SAR base in a trailer was opened and a Command Post on Nellis AFB opened. Lt Col Doris North, Deputy Commander Nevada Wing CAP, was the Mission Coordinator. The Air Force contributed a HC-130 Hercules, Huey UN-1N, HH53 Super Jolly Green Giant Helicopters, more O-2 Skymasters and OV-10 Broncos. The Civil Air Patrol had at peak 13 aircraft from NV and 16 from CA. <sup>4</sup> During day 2 there were no findings.

Day three was uneventful with no findings. Efforts were continued by the Civil Air Patrol and USAF with the above assets in play. Contributing to the difficulty of the search was the vast emptiness of the Southwest desert and high terrain.

Day four found the search continuing. Separate from the search Lt. Col. Jimmy Helton and his son Michael took off in a Piper Warrior to look for camp sites over Charleston. The owner of the aircraft reported it missing and Nellis was informed about 1445 pm that day. The search was expanded. <sup>5,6,7</sup>

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1 "a six tragic days". United States Air Force Aerospace Safety. July 1978, V35 N 6 P1

2 "Anthony John Rosa '64" Derux American High School, France Alumni web site 2010 [http://www.dreuxalumni.org/anthony\\_john\\_rosa\\_obit.htm](http://www.dreuxalumni.org/anthony_john_rosa_obit.htm)

3 "a six tragic days" p 1

4 North, Doris, Lt. Col. Unpublished mission notes February 1978.

5 Ibid.

6 Adler, Jeff. "2<sup>nd</sup> Aircraft Lost in 'Sagebrush Triangle'". The Las Vegas Sun. 3 Feb. 1978

7 "a six tragic days". p 1

Also during day four, aerial photography was being utilized. During the evening the photographs were assessed and potential target areas were chosen. The next day flights were planned for those areas. <sup>8</sup>

On Day five, Capt. Lawrence K. Wilson from the 27<sup>th</sup> Tactical Air Support Squadron at Bergstrom AFB and Capt. Vergene Johnson from the 23<sup>rd</sup> TAS Squadron at Davis-Monthan AFB launched in support of the search in an O-2A Skymaster. They checked in at 0759 and called in search area at 0814. At 0900 they checked in. At 0910 they missed a radio call and at 0930 they missed check in. The search was again expanded. <sup>9, 10</sup> After this loss all O-2's in the search were grounded until a safety check could be completed. <sup>11</sup>

Day six found ground teams from Clark County Sheriffs SAR team out on the mountain side. This team located the O-2 from day five at 8000 feet in a box canyon. <sup>12</sup> Two helicopters were launched in response. While the search team was active in the area, Lt. Col. Jimmy Helton walked up to them. He had been wandering in the desert for two days seeking help. He saw the activity and approached. He was evacuated by one of the helicopters. The second helicopter began trying to track the Lt. Col.'s footprints in the snow. It crashed. <sup>13</sup> The helicopter was located the same day with all five crew members alive with various injuries.

Later in day six the first OV-2A was located. Only one crew member was found. He was deceased. It was found by a blood hound team from Nellis AFB. <sup>14</sup> The Pilot remained missing. CAP had suspended the search post the Huey crash. Michael Helton's remains were recovered 6 Feb 1978. <sup>15</sup>

After the search was suspended 22 February 1978 Maj. Jim Coombs, commander of the Nellis AFB Survival Training Squadron – and member of Clark County Composite Squadron CAP, took his personnel in to the crash site and did a line search. The remains of the pilot of the first OV-2A were located under a bush away from the aircraft.

The Nevada and California Wings contributed 29 aircraft, 87 sorties, 86 seniors and 7 cadets to the search. In total 3 aircraft were located, 1 survivor, 6 deceased, 6 Air Force members injured. The USAF provided 21 aircraft and approximately 20 more were provided by the Nye County and Clark County Sheriffs Departments. The total number of sorties was 240. <sup>16, 17</sup>

Members still active in 2021, Capt. Robert Furtek and Maj. Gary Coleman both members of the Nellis Senior Squadron and who both are 50 year members.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Adler, Jeff. "'Sagebrush Triangle' Claims Third Plane." The Las Vegas Sun, 4 Feb. 1978

11 Ibid.

12 Donahue, Mike. "Downed Planes Found". The Las Vegas Sun, 5 Feb. 1978

13 North, Doris, Lt. Col. Unpublished mission notes. Feb 1978.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Speights, James, SSgt. "Extensive Search and Rescue Effort a Success." The Bullseye, 10 Feb. 1978

17 North, Doris, Lt. Col. Unpublished mission notes, Feb. 1978.