

'Sagebrush Triangle' Crashes Probed

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What caused three airplanes and one helicopter to crash in the same area in the space of one week?

That's the question confronting both military and civilian aviation disaster investigators while searchers comb the "sagebrush triangle" for its last victim, an Air Force pilot missing since Jan. 30.

Final totals still aren't in, but it stacks up this way:

- Four men are dead, five were injured, one is still missing and one man survived the ordeal by hiking through mountainous terrain for two days before being found by searchers;

- A helicopter, two military planes and a private plane all crashed within 10 miles of one another within a five-day period.

Hundreds of military personnel as well as police search and rescue teams participated in the search concentrated in an area surrounding Mount Charleston that came to be known as the "sagebrush triangle," after the infamous Bermuda Triangle, because of its high aircraft mortality rate.

Although crash investigators have

just begun their inquiry into the chain of crashes, several theories have already surfaced. None imparts any special or "mysterious" circumstances to the crashes.

Lt. Frank Kim, commander of Metro's special operations bureau, which routinely searches for downed aircraft, said he believes the three crashes happening together was a coincidence.

"That particular area is very hazardous for light aircraft," Kim said. "My

guess is that the crashes were caused by severe down drafts."

Kim explained that air currents follow the curvature of the earth. In mountainous terrain the currents whip around and are unpredictable. He said that phenomenon is called clear air turbulence.

One Air Force official agreed with Lt. Kim's assessment. "It's a pretty fair guess that it was down drafts," Maj. Jerry Broening, Nellis Air Force Base public information officer, said.

"If you've ever flown in a light plane in the mountains you'd know," Broening said. "Flying in mountains is inherently dangerous."

Broening also said that mechanical failure couldn't be ruled out as a cause of the crashes.

He said the Air Force would be convening three separate accident boards to determine the cause of each crash.

"They'll take those engines apart and find out if they were running when the plane hit and what angle the plane hit at," Broening said.

He also suggested that pilot error might have been a factor in the crashes.

A pilot might have become disoriented in the mountains.

A third theory purports that each plane's wings iced up during the flight over the mountains, interrupting the air flow over its wings, causing it to crash.

In any case, it will be months before both the Air Force and the Federal Aviation Administration have finished their investigations and release their findings.

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