

3 die in crash

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EVERY'S CREEK - A Georgia man flying to Asheville to buy a BMW for his wife's birthday was killed in a plane crash Friday in dense woods near the Blue Ridge Parkway.

A close friend and political supporter of Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue was also killed, along with a driver with a car dealership in Dublin, Ga., where the three men lived.

James V. Hilburn, 62, was piloting the Cessna 182 also carrying Jefferson I. Davis III, 58, and James Rodney Connell, 59.

The single-propeller-driven aircraft left Dublin about 9:30 a.m. Air traffic controllers at Asheville Regional Airport reported losing contact with the plane about 11 a.m., said Kathleen Bergen, spokeswoman for the Federal Aviation Administration in Atlanta.

Avery's Creek resident Jim Robinson said he heard the plane go down near his home on Ball Gap Road while he was sending an e-mail. "It was a point-blank impact," he said.

Searchers in a Mission Hospitals helicopter spotted the twisted wreckage in a rhododendron and laurel thicket near the top of Ball Mountain about noon, said Ryan Cole, battalion chief with the Skyland Fire and Rescue Department.

"They had very low visibility they were working against, trying to find the wreckage," Cole said. "It was obvious that the plane made a high-speed impact crash."

Federal investigators will try to determine the cause of the crash today. Weather reports just before 11 a.m. showed fog and clouds about 200 feet above the Asheville airport, according to the National Weather Service.

A birthday present

The men planned to pick up the car for Hilburn's wife, a birthday present that would have been delivered later in the day, said J.C. Pitts Jr., a friend of the men and co-owner of Pitts Toyota and Scion in Dublin, about 140 miles southeast of Atlanta.

Hilburn, a lawyer in Dublin, was flying the plane with Davis as co-pilot, Pitts said.

Connell, who worked for the Dublin car dealership as an independent driver, planned to deliver the newly purchased BMW to Dublin while the other two men planned to fly back, Pitts said.

Pitts said Hilburn bought the car through his dealership.

"This community is really, really stunned and is going to be at a big loss for quite a while," he said.

Pitts said Hilburn and Davis were experienced pilots who had flown to Asheville frequently over the past 20 years.

Every year, he said he joined both men on a flight to Asheville to play golf. He said Hilburn was a careful pilot who would never even risk flying through a thunderstorm.

"A lot of people thought I was on that airplane," Pitts said.

Georgia politics

Davis' son, Jefferson Davis IV, said his father had been a lifelong friend with Hilburn and had retired recently from Uniroyal Chemical Co. as a district salesman.

"He and Mr. Hilburn were great friends, and I know they both led great lives," his son said.

His involvement in Georgia state politics made him a close friend with the governor when he worked closely with him on his first campaign, Jefferson Davis IV said.

In a statement released Friday, Perdue said Davis was as "loyal as a Lab and as feisty as a Chihuahua. If he was your friend, he loved you, warts and all."

Neighbors living along Ball Gap Road said they joined in the search for the downed plane.

Ronald Mashburn and his father were walking the back roads on their property clearing trees and branches when emergency crews arrived.

"We were probably less than 100 yards from where it crashed, but it was in a thicket," Mashburn said.

Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board and the Federal Aviation Administration are expected to comb through the wreckage today.

Both agencies were on the scene Friday evening, said Skyland Fire Chief Dennis Presley. Representatives of the Cessna company were also expected to check the engine to determine if there was a mechanical failure, he said.

A Cessna 182, or Skylane model, is a small, single-propeller-driven plane that costs about \$349,000. A current model of the plane is 29 feet long with a wingspan of 36 feet. It can carry 200 pounds of baggage along with four people.

It has a range of 930 nautical miles during about a 7 1/2-hour flight at 10,000 feet.

The crash comes less than a month after a single-engine Piper Lance plane went down near the Andrews-Murphy Airport in Cherokee County on April 9 killing two men.

A survivor, Dr. Larry Opoliner of Murphy, is in stable condition and recovering from burns at the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, sister Jan Opoliner said Friday.

A full report on that crash has not yet been released pending full autopsy and toxicology reports, said Corky Smith, a senior NTSB investigator.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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