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(S.D.)-North Carolina Air Guard Crew Remembered In Memorial Near Edgemont



By: Roxie Graham-Marski Posted at: 07/02/2013 11:39 AM

Photo: The C-130 MAFFS air tanker crash on July 1st, 2012. (U.S. Air Force photo-WildfireToday.com)

(EDGEMONT, S.D.) - Officials have dedicated a memorial in western South Dakota honoring North Carolina National Guardsmen who died a year ago when their air tanker crashed while fighting a wildfire.

The interpretive site on a ridge top northeast of Edgemont honors six airmen - four who died and two who were injured. It was dedicated Monday on the one-year anniversary of the crash in South Dakota's Black Hills.

More than 100 family, friends and colleagues were on hand for Monday's dedication ceremony. South Dakota Lt. Gov. Matt Michels (MY'-kuhls) also attended and spoke, expressing gratitude for the sacrifice of the airmen.

The Web site Wildfire Today says a U.S. Air Force report concluded last November that strong winds out of a thunderstorm caused the crash of the military C-130 air tanker. The accident occurred on the White Draw Fire near Edgemont and resulted in four fatalities. Two crewmen in the rear of the aircraft were injured but survived. Those two were operating the Modular Airborne FireFighting System (MAFFS) in the cargo hold, which enables the C-130 to function as an air tanker, capable of dropping up to 3,000 gallons of fire retardant.

Killed were 42-year-old Lt. Col. Paul Mikeal of Mooresville, N.C.; 36-year-old Maj. Joseph McCormick of Belmont; 35-year-old Maj. Ryan David of Boone; and 50-year-old Senior Master Sgt. Robert Cannon of Charlotte. Chief Master Sgt. Andy Huneycutt and Sgt. Josh Marlowe of Boiling Springs were seriously injured.

The report said a microburst of turbulent air out of a thunderstorm caused the crash. During a previous retardant drop on the fire, the aircraft experienced a drop in airspeed despite operating under full power. Before the second drop, the crew discussed the air speed problem, but decided they could adjust to the conditions. The plane crashed on the second drop about five minutes after the first one.

A lead plane flying a half-mile ahead of the C-130 experienced a microburst that pushed it within 10 feet of the ground.

The investigation also determined factors that substantially contributed to the mishap included the failure of the lead plane and air attack aircrews to communicate critical operational information, as well as conflicting operational guidance concerning thunderstorm avoidance.

“If you add all the pieces up, it was very clear they should not have attempted the second drop,” said Brig. Gen. Randall Guthrie, the Air Force Reserve officer who led the investigation. “With all apparent conditions, they should not have gone ahead.”

The aircraft that crashed was MAFFS #7 from the North Carolina Air National Guard’s 145th Airlift Wing based at Charlotte-Douglas International Airport.

More details of the crash are available online at <http://wildfiretoday.com/2012/11/14/air-force-report-says-micorburst-caused-crash-of-maffs-air-tanker/>.

--Information courtesy of The Associated Press and Wildfire Today