

By NANCY KLETECKA • Guymon Daily Herald GUYMON, Okla. – A Colorado couple have been identified as the sole passengers in a vintage 1966 Mooney, single engine aircraft that crashed last week about 3 miles north and 4.5 miles west of Guymon in a pasture.

Authorities said it appeared the craft had hit the ground nose-first, and much of it had been consumed by fire.

The craft took off from an airport in El Reno, Okla., on Monday with pilot Neil Asting, 68, and his wife, Karen Berousek, 68, of Monument, Colo., on board.

Family members say the couple had been visiting family for the Easter holiday and were enroute back home. When they failed to show up as planned, they called for help to look for them.

According to Tom Latson, Air Safety Investigator for the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), the family called the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) on Tuesday. “When the family called and said, ‘our family member has not returned, would you please search for them,’ it was some heroes in the FAA who activated a search and rescue plan,” Latson said.

A missing aircraft alert was initiated by the Oklahoma Highway Patrol at the request of the Federal Emergency Management Agency about 6:30 p.m., Tuesday.

The plan referred to by Latson, was done through the coordinated efforts of the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center (AFCC) and the Civil Air Patrol (CAP).

“The FAA radar controller went back following the departure time from El Reno and tracked the aircraft to an area near Guymon,” Latson explained. “Then, the AFCC used cellphone pings to locate the airplane further in this area.”

The plane was then ultimately located at 3:45 p.m., Wednesday, when Guymon Airport Manager Greg Downing went up in the air.

After the discovery by Downing, officials from the OHP dispatched a trooper to investigate the possible sighting. The tail number of the downed aircraft was confirmed as the same one on the missing aircraft piloted by Asting.

According to Latson, CAP was also in the air actively searching for the downed craft.

“CAP is a volunteer group of volunteer pilots,” he said. “They have a very proud history of combat service in WWII.”

Latson along with an FAA inspector and a representative for the engine manufacturer of the craft's engine, arrived on scene Thursday afternoon as well as some family members of the couple.

"I have already talked with both families," Latson said. "We truly want to send our condolences and sorrow to the families of the victims."

After accompanying the family members for a brief visit to the site around 2 p.m. Thursday, Latson and the other investigators' work began.

"We examine all of the facts, record those facts and document the scene very thoroughly," Latson said.

Latson was hopeful to retrieve what he referred to as "volatile memory" on board the electronic systems.

The aircraft would not have the "black box" found on larger craft.

"The black box on airliners is actually orange or yellow and it is called a cockpit voice recorder and a flight data recorder," Latson explained. "It is not required on small aircraft like this; however, with all of the increase in electronics systems, we have found even in severely crash damaged pieces of equipment and fire damaged equipment we can extract amazing detail. I hope to be able to find those pieces of that evidence here."

If he is successful in finding this "non-volatile memory and electronics," Latson said, he will retrieve it and send it to a lab in Washington D.C.

Latson expected to document the wreckage and engine on scene Thursday. Heavy equipment was brought in around 3:30 Thursday afternoon to remove the engine from the craft.

The rest of the wreckage was removed Friday, according to Latson.

"If I am not able to finish my on-scene examination (Friday), the wreckage may possibly go to another secure storage location facility in the Dallas area where it will stay probably for several years under bonded storage," he said. "That is typically what happens in a fatal accident like this."

Latson said several other specialists will also be involved in the investigation.

"I have a senior meteorologist in our Washington offices who has already sent a preliminary review," Latson said. "He will be doing a complete meteorological study for this flight and document the conditions at the time of the accident. Our medical officer is a senior physician and professor of emergency medicine - she is also a fulltime NTSB employee and will be reviewing the medical records and history for the pilot. I will be getting the maintenance records for the aircraft as well."

Latson had already checked on the weather for when the pilot took off from El Reno.

“He had filed a flight plan over Guymon,” Latson said. “The weather at the time at noon on April 1 was about 10 miles visibility and the ceiling was about 1,000 feet at the base of the clouds. They were flying from El Reno to LaJunta, Colo.”

Other authorities reported that Asting had planned to fly from El Reno to Clinton, to Guymon to LaJunta and then on to Colorado Springs. The last contact anyone had with him, a spokesperson claimed, was at 5 p.m. on Monday; however, some believe the craft may have gone down around noon that day.

According to Latson, the pilot had received the preflight weather briefing, but he did not file a Visual Flight Rules (VFR) plan, and he was not talking to Air Traffic Controllers.

“The FAA was able to back track the day after the accident based on his departure time from El Reno,” Latson said. “They saw he headed to the Northwest.”

Latson along with the FAA investigator and the engine manufacturer representative planned to meet Thursday evening and this morning after being at the site to go over their findings.

“We will compile all of our our field notes and decide what things need to be done in the future,” Latson said. “The on-scene field work will will be completed tomorrow morning (today) and we will go back to our respective homes - Denver, Lubbock and Houston.”

A final report on the crash will most likely not be available for several months, Latson said.

Latson was quick to show appreciation for the first responders to the crash site.

“The public should know that at a scene like this when fire departments, highway patrol, sheriff, EMS, and other emergency first responders come – it is horrific and disturbing for them,” he said. “The victims are always treated with respect by them, and if you find an emergency first responder you should thank them for their work. It is sometimes a very difficult job.”

Asting, who was a retired chemistry professor, would have turned 69 next week. He had a PhD in physical inorganic chemistry. His family said he had an “advanced pilot’s license” that allowed him to “fly blind” in no-visibility conditions. He and his wife, Berousek, had only been married for about two years. Family members said they were “high school sweethearts” and had gotten back together at a high school reunion a few years ago.

If anyone saw this aircraft prior to the crash or witnessed the crash itself, contact Latson by sending an e-mail to witness@ntsb.gov.