

Rescue workers, volunteers share memories of Eagle plane crash

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ing around in a daze. Strips of trees were in flames.

Badham found one man, pinned under a section of fuselage, who told him something was crushing down on his chest. That man was 60-year-old Don Merkel of Wheaton, Ill.

"He was so polite about it," Stanley recalls. "He said, 'Sir, would you please consider...' like he didn't want to impose." Merkel sustained a broken arm, multiple rib fractures, a bruised lung and a left elbow fracture. Badham managed to free him.

Unlike Lewis, Merkel says he doesn't mind speaking of the crash today. He says his condition is improving and that he's back to work full time as an assistant vice-president of marketing research for a Chicago-based insurance company. He says the job includes considerable air travel.

"As for that night, my mind is just a blank," he says. "I don't remember any warning that the plane was going down."

"I have no memory of that evening other than what I've been told," Merkel says. He doesn't remember being carried by board through the dense underbrush, or when one of the volunteers told him he was sorry the branches were hitting him as they ran and stumbled with him through the woods. He told them he didn't care as long as they got him out of there.

Taking charge

Morrisville Fire Chief Tony Chiotakis was driving along Highway 54 with his two children, 9 and 13, when his pager sounded. The chief dropped the children off at home, then sped to the scene. "I expected a small engine plane, perhaps two or three people involved," he says. "Never what I found."

Captain David Ferrell arrived before the chief. Ferrell had been at his Morrisville Parkway home when his pager was activated. He went directly to the crash site. When Chiotakis set up the command post, Ferrell became the operations officer.

Chiotakis points out that all fire, police and EMS personnel are trained under the same system—the Wake County Incident Command System. It calls for specific actions in such emergencies and three phases of operation: response, stabilization and security.

Part of the job when in a response mode is "not to get excited, to concentrate," the chief points out.

"Looking back, I believe we did our jobs pretty good," Chiotakis says. "At one point later in the night, or maybe early morning, I opened the back hatch of my vehicle to get out of the rain, and looked out at the command area where little groups of people were doing their jobs. It reminded me of a football huddle where you get the plan of attack, individual assignments, break to positions and create."

Chiotakis remained at the scene until 4 a.m. and returned two and a half hours later after taking a rest. Twenty-four of the department's 25 members were on hand. The other was out of town.

A taste of fuel

Dale and Debbie Powell saw a series of small fires when they reached the crash scene. "They were flickering—like a movie set," Mrs. Powell says. She is a nurse; he was a volunteer with the Morrisville Fire Department at the time.

They were at their home on Highway 55 when they heard of the crash. Each grabbed a coat and a flashlight, drove as close to the scene as conditions allowed, then

went on foot through the woods.

"We never got a whole perspective of the scene until portable lighting arrived," she says.

Lewis. He was dead."

She recalls it was raining and the drops were hitting her face. "I remember tasting the drips across my lips," she says. "It was diesel fuel."

Rain was a blessing

Carolyn and Martin Howard heard a boom and then saw a big ball of fire as they rushed out the front door of their home on Koppers Road. They thought it might be a car crash around the bend of the road or maybe a gas explosion at the nearby Triangle Brick Co.

Meanwhile, their friends nearby, Sue Phillips, who is a nurse, and her husband, Lee, heard the noise and ran upstairs where their four children were playing. They thought furniture had been turned over.

When a call to 911 told them a plane had crashed, they didn't think twice. "They may need our help," Sue said. "Let's get there." Martin Howard and the Phillips drove to the site in the Phillips' 4-wheel-drive farm truck. It proved a smart move.

The hilly terrain was slippery with mud and the thick woods made it almost impossible for a light truck to get back and forth to

Debbie reacted one of the passengers who was still strapped in his passenger seat. It was Ron Lewis. "He was wearing a three-piece business suit and I asked him where he hurt. He was bleeding from his left leg," she says. "He asked me, 'Where's Bill?' Bill turned out to be Bill Peters, a co-worker with Lewis at Sears. Lewis told me his friend was in 3-C. Bill was lying outside, just below

the crash site. "We asked if we could help," said Sue, "but Dave told 'probably not.' Then Dave Stanley came running from the woods, yelling that more people were needed, that more bodies had been uncovered and they had to be carried."

During the night, Mrs. Phillips made three trips to the EMS station that had been set up outside the woods. "The bodies were put in back of our pickup truck," she explained.

She remembers helping survivors Lewis, Merkel and John Ciulla, whose wife of only one year was killed in the crash, and several others who would not survive.

"When you think back, you imagine that we were fortunate that it was raining so much," she said. "Everything was covered with diesel fuel. The smell was everywhere—on the clothes, the ground, the trees, the plane parts. Without that rain everything could have gone up in flames. It's a scary thought."

A mother says thanks

When Karen French got the word on her pager, she headed for Morrisville Fire Station No. 1 to get the 4-wheel-drive brush truck. A volunteer firefighter employed by a home care business in Raleigh, she and volunteer Ray Tyndall were among the first on the scene.

They used the vehicle to block off the roadway to help the state troopers secure the area. Both jumped in Rory McEacham's farm truck. Police Sgt. Earl Godwin got in the back and they rode toward the scene. The truck got stuck, however, and they had to go in by foot, carrying equipment.

Muddy and wet, they began pulling bodies out of the wreckage. Ms. French helped pull out two and got them to the EMS workers for attention.

"Later, when it was all over and we were back to routine life, one of the mothers of the men I helped get to EMS thanked me, even though the man had died," Ms. French recalls.

"I didn't want my baby to die alone," the mother said. Ms. French

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told her he didn't—that she tried to comfort him and held him when she was exsiccated. The mother later sent her flowers.

"What an overwhelming sense of loss," says Ms. French. "To see them, know they are somebody's father or somebody's son, that somebody loved and cherished

them. "You learn to live with the fact that we're all going to die. This sort of thing makes you face that fact, reflect that every day is precious, every minute, every second is precious. You learn to live life with a greater understanding of what life really means."

Painful

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son, Chris, from his job at a pizza parlor after the game, but found Chris had already left when he got there.

Chris had learned of the crash from a television report. He telephoned his father at school, but was told he couldn't be reached because he was with the team. Workers at the pizza parlor told Chris's father what had happened.

Anderson said he raced to the airport, trying to keep control of his feelings. "But I'll admit I expected the worst," he said. "Most people are killed in plane crashes."

Lauren had for some reason stuck an Elon ID card in her pullover," Anderson said. "That's how she was identified. She was found lying against a tree in the rain and mud, covered with diesel fuel, and muttering for someone to 'Please tell my mother.'"

Lauren was taken to the Duke Medical Center intensive care unit. When her parents and brother arrived the following morning, she was rigid in bed.

"There were rods in her spine and her lung had collapsed. Her body was twice the normal size from the impact," her father said. "They told us the plane was dropping 200 miles per hour when it hit ground. She had a compound fracture of the left leg, broken bones in her spine, internal injuries and all bones in her face were broken."

Seven weeks later, Lauren returned to college only because everyone felt it would be best to live as normally as possible. "She manages to walk and get around campus with crutches, but the rods still remain in her spine," her father said. "She's become an older woman. She's bent and moves slowly. She's a sophomore, but she's been cheated out of her college years."

Diary of accident describes eerie site

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side and put his coat over him to shield him from the elements.

East of the fuselage approximately 15 feet there was a fire. I could identify no parts of the plane in or behind the fire but I could see knocked-over trees burning. The fire was about four to five feet high and 20 feet long. I heard a small explosion that startled us. Between the fire and the fuselage on the north side was a mangled propeller. It was standing up and one of the tips was curled up. I barely touched it but it was very sharp because I managed to cut my finger slightly on it. At the edge of the fire there was a man lying face down headed toward the fuselage. He appeared to be dead. His whole body was grotesquely swollen and a cut on his left calf was open a few inches. His shoes were missing and he was on fire in various locations. The seams of his pants had burst open. David said he was gone so I left him alone. Next I heard a man call out from underneath the north side of the fuselage. He said very calmly that something was pressing on his chest and could I help him. I walked around to the open end of the fuselage and removed a blue carry-on bag and a few pieces of sheet metal that rested on top of this man.

By this time (some five to 10 minutes later) a third person had arrived and he advised me to watch where I was throwing the sheet metal because I was throwing it near another person who I had not seen. This man was on his right side still buckled in his seat. His shirt was pulled up a little and I could see his stomach moving as he breathed. He wasn't saying anything or moaning. I couldn't think of anything I could do to help him. The man trying to get out of the

fuselage called out again very politely, as I recall, so I stepped inside the fuselage to try to pull off whatever was leaning on the man. I was able to shift something and he said not to let that down. It seemed stable so I turned my attention to a woman in the fuselage who was still buckled in her seat at a 45-degree angle with her hands and feet pointed downward. She seemed to be coming in and out of consciousness. Once she awoke, she acted very anxious as she flailed her arms frantically and muttered something indiscernible, then went limp. I reached to unbuckle her belt but could not locate it. I realized that if I released it she would fall so I decided to leave her alone.

I mentioned to David that I was concerned about the fire, that it might spread. There appeared to be fuel everywhere. I moved a few small pine branches away from the fuselage. The man who was trying to escape was also aware of the fire and was eager to get free from the wreckage. I tried to make a larger opening in the plane so he could crawl out. I vaguely remember a motionless woman's hand coming out of the wreckage near this man. He asked politely for my help several times and I told him I didn't want to hurt him but if the fire got any closer I would pull him out. He asked if his face had blood on it and I told him it did but it wasn't too bad. He told me that he could not believe that this was happening. I agreed. I removed his necktie, which was yellow and blood stained. Finally I pulled away enough of the plane to create a hole large enough for him to crawl out and away to the northwest.

By now I had been there approximately 15 minutes and the first fireman arrived, David Ferrell. I heard him say on his portable phone that it was definitely a plane crash and there were a lot of injuries and we needed lots of help. Looking down the hole in the fuselage I saw a man facing me leaning up against the side. We established eye contact. His eyes were very widely open and his face was expressionless. He had a small stream of blood down the right side of his face. He had on a white shirt and a black coat. I have a vague recollection of a person dressed similarly next to him but slumped over. I thought they were in the forward-most part of the plane and I believed them to be the pilots (incorrectly as it turns out). Although I could establish a line of sight with him, I could not get to him. I asked him how he was and he did not reply. At the time I thought that he might be acting very calm because he was trained to do so. He appeared to be comfortable. I proceeded around to the southwest side of the fuselage and located a woman lying on her left side. She was complaining that her back hurt. Also, she wanted to locate her shoes. I told her that was not going to be a problem. I asked her how many people were on the plane but she did not answer.

By now I had been there 25 to 30 minutes and several rescue people arrived along with at least one policeman. The policeman asked for a light and I gave him mine as I was using the light of the fire to see by. I pointed out the man in the fire to the medical person and he and I pulled him free of the fire by his arms. I had the unsettling thought that his arms might come detached. As the medical person went to check on others, I took a piece of debris and used it to swat out the fire on him. I asked the policeman if we should remove his identification. He said leave it, so I did. I heard a message over David Ferrell's radio that anyone without protective clothing should be asked to leave. Shortly thereafter, David relayed that message to me and I walked home the way I had come. The wreckage turned out to be 200 to 300 yards from my yard.

I had three drinks when I got home, called a few friends and family and took a hot bath. I gave my first telephone interview at 9:30 p.m. I answered calls until about 12:30, slept very little, and was awakened about 6:30 a.m. by the press. I talked to numerous press people for the next two days. I was feeling very somber and did not feel like doing interviews for TV. I did think it was helpful to tell the story as I recalled it. I was later chagrined to read some stories that made me sound heroic. I did not do anything that any ordinary person would not have done. If a plane crashed near your house you would go to it; if people called out for help you would try to help.

Citizens stick up for mayor

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Melvin Barnes asked the board to outline the responsibilities of the mayor and received a briefing from the town attorney.

Many of the approximately 75 people in attendance broke out in applause twice before Sauls requested that such responses be held until the end of the public comments.

"I'm very pleased so many people care enough to come and speak out," Ms. Broadwell said after the board went into closed session. "I don't presume to know what the board might do."

"It won't stop me from being an effective mayor if they don't reconsider," she said, "but it would make my job easier. The public should have a mayor's office in a Town Hall that cost \$2 million."

Ms. Broadwell said she had not

heard from Sauls since the election. "We last talked in May after Mayor (Ernest) Lumley resigned," she said. "I called him (Sauls) and others on the board to tell them I would serve if they wanted me."

The mayor-elect will be sworn in Dec. 11 along with Mark Silver-Smith, who won the District 3 seat vacated by Ufferman. Silver-Smith defeated Rosemary Johnston 153 to 134.

Ms. Broadwell, who served two four-year terms on the board before losing the 1993 mayor's race, was rebuffed in her attempt to have "The Impossible Dream" sung at the swearing-in ceremony.

Sauls, calling that idea "tacky," did agree to her request for a color guard, the reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance, and having the oaths of office administered by a judge of her choice.

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