

ELIZABETHTON, Tenn., Sept. 3, 2007



This video still from CBS affiliate WJHL shows police tape around a densely wooded area close to where a small plane carrying five Jehovah's Witness ministers crashed in eastern Tennessee, Sept. 2, 2007. (CBS/WJHL)

(CBS/AP) A plane carrying five Jehovah's Witness ministers crashed in a remote area of eastern Tennessee, killing all aboard, officials said.

The crash, which happened around 10:30 a.m. Saturday, wasn't discovered until more than eight hours later, when another pilot spotted the wreckage.

Authorities had to clear a path Sunday to get to the crash site in the Cherokee National Forest on Holston Mountain. Five bodies were found, said Carter County Sheriff Chris Mathes. One of the ministers was believed to be the pilot, he said.

QUOTE

"All of the congregations in this region are devastated by this news, and will continue to keep the families in their prayers."

Robert Burpitt, Jehovah's Witness elder

"They were working their way down the ridges and I think one of the crew members in the back just happened to see a wisp of smoke," Steve Lewis, of Johnson City Medical Center's Wings Air Rescue, told CBS News affiliate WVLT in Knoxville.

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Rescuers say it took so long to find the wreckage because it was in a very rugged and remote area.

"In this part of the country, a crash site is very difficult to locate because when an aircraft goes into the trees, the trees give. The branches give and it all kinds of closes back in over," Lewis told WVLT.

The single-engine Beech Bonanza crashed after leaving the Elizabethton Municipal Airport, officials said. The aircraft had taken off from Hamblen County and landed in Elizabethton to pick up two passengers. It was destined for Virginia Highlands Airport near Abingdon, Va., about 40 miles from Elizabethton.

Robert Burpitt, an elder with the Woodland Heights congregation of Jehovah's Witness in Kingsport, said the ministers were all from East Tennessee and members of a regional building committee that makes decisions regarding Kingdom Hall building projects. The names of the ministers were not released.

He said the men were on their way to Abingdon Saturday morning to meet with congregation members to discuss building a new church.

"All of the congregations in this region are devastated by this news, and will continue to keep the families in their prayers," he said.

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