

Test site helicopter crash kills five

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An aircraft carrying three security workers and two pilots on a patrol mission may have hit power lines.

By K.J. Evans
Review-Journal

Initial evidence shows a helicopter crash that killed five men Wednesday night at the Nevada Test Site was caused when the chopper collided with a power line, Department of Energy officials said Thursday.

Department spokesman Chris West said the crash is the worst non-military aviation accident in the 40-year history of the nation's nuclear weapons testing site, 66 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

"We've had some helicopters lose power and make rough landings or have to feather the rotors down. And we've had Air Force jets crash, but never anything like this," West said.

Killed in the crash were pilots Glenn W. Ewton Jr., 54, of Las Vegas, captain of the craft, and Dennis J. Longman, 48, of Logandale. Both worked for EG&G Energy Measurements Inc., a government contractor.

The others, all from Las Vegas, were Richard C. Lowery, 51; George H. "Mike" Tolster, 34; and Robert D. Brooks, 28. They worked for Wackenhut Security Inc., hired by the department to provide security for the test site.

The final call on the cause of the accident will be made by a special crash team that arrived at the site late Thursday, West said. The team is made up of investigators from the Energy Department, Federal Aviation Administration and National Transportation Safety Board.

"We've established our own investigation board, which is customary whenever there is a major accident at the site

A videotape of the crash site viewed Thursday at the department's Las Vegas headquarters, showed widely scattered wreckage and power poles nearby, West said.

The crash site is in a mountainous area of Pahute Mesa.

"There are a lot of power lines in that area, but we're not sure that was a factor," West said.

No power poles were visible in the photographs the Energy Department released to the public of the crash site, 110 miles north west of Las Vegas.

The chopper carried no "black box" flight recorders. They are not required under FAA regulations, West said.

The helicopter was one of two Messerschmitt BO-105s assigned to a routine security patrol of the 1,350-square-mile test site. It was one of seven owned by the Energy Department and operated by EG&G, West said.

The five men were on a routine security patrol at the time of the accident, West said. Standard procedure has one pilot aboard day patrols, and two for night patrols, which he described as "more strenuous duty." The patrols usually last from one to 1-1/2 hours.

Shortly after the last radio call, there were reports of a short electric power interruption at the test site, which authorities say supports the theory that the chopper may have hit a power line.

Ewton radioed in at 9:15 p.m. and was to have checked back at 9:30 p.m., according to an Energy Department news release. The call didn't come.

Two Air Force helicopters carrying the search-and-rescue teams of the 66th Air Rescue Squadron were sent aloft then. About two hours later, they were the first to spot the burning wreckage, about 20 miles from the air strip where it took off, according to a Nellis Air Force Base spokesman. The death of the five crew members was confirmed at 1:40 a.m. Thursday.

Ewton had more than 20 years of experience flying helicopters, said Cindy Kimball, an EG&G spokeswoman. Much of his experience was as a pilot for the Houston Police Department, Kimball said. He graduated first in his class at the police academy and was the department's designated FAA flight examiner, she said.

Longman also had more than 20 years of flying experience. He was a former pilot for Valley Hospital's Flight for Life. Before then, he was the chief pilot for Rocky Mountain Helicopter in Provo, Utah. He also was a Vietnam veteran.

Ewton had been with EG&G since April 1988, and Langton since March of last year.

A Wackenhut official said Lowery had been with the company since 1981; Tolster since November 1983; and Brooks since March 1986.

[End of Article]

Photos: Photo of crash debris in desert, including what appears to be an engine and a bent rotor. A dirt road is seen snaking into distance. Below this are file photos of the five men killed.

Caption: A photo released by the Department of Energy shows the wreckage of a helicopter that crashed Wednesday night at the Nevada Test Site. The five men who died in the crash are, below from left, Robert D. Brooks, 28, Glenn W. Ewton Jr., 54, Dennis J. Longman, 48, Richard C. Lowery, 51, and George H. "Mike" Tolster, 34.

A map on second page shows the crash location, taking place inside the Nevada Test Site near the Pahute Mesa air strip.

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