

Discovery of Mystery Plane Wreck May Finally End 2 ½ Year Search

Flagstaff, Arizona, 4/22/09

The search for a missing aircraft with two people aboard may have finally ended--more than two and a half years after it began--in a deep, forested canyon ten miles northwest of Sedona. Last Saturday--acting on a tip derived from an old fire report--the missing passenger's father, together with a friend working on behalf of the pilot's family, hiked into the Secret Canyon Wilderness Area and photographed what appears to be the site where the single-engine Cessna carrying Marcy Randolph, 43, and pilot William Westover, 54, crashed after disappearing during a sightseeing flight on September 24, 2006.

From a precarious vantage point on a nearby ridge, Phil Randolph and Jayne McElFresh photographed evidence of a burn that matched the location of a fire reported by hikers shortly after the plane vanished from radar. This, combined with other known facts about the flight, led them to believe they'd finally found the crash site. The following day, the hikers who filed the original fire report--their curiosity piqued after having been interviewed by a search volunteer--hiked in and confirmed the presence of aircraft wreckage. Authorities were notified, and the all-volunteer search that had been planned for later in the week was called off.

For the past two days, officials from local agencies have been sifting through the wreckage in an attempt to confirm it is indeed the missing plane, and that the human remains found at the site are those of Marcy and Bill. Although he and Jayne were first on the scene, Phil Randolph is quick to point out that the discovery would never have been made were it not for the efforts of the Missing Aircraft Search Team, an ad hoc group of skilled volunteers who assist in searches long after the official search for a missing aircraft has ended.

The break came when Chris Killian, the MAST team leader, came across an old fire report while preparing for a combined ground and air search that was to begin this week. After interviewing the hikers who had called in the report, and determining it might be the long sought crash site, he alerted Phil and Jayne. They then worked with his brother to pinpoint the location using aerial photographs and the sophisticated geo-mapping system they developed during the years-long effort to find the plane. Now--nearly a thousand days after it began--the long quest for Cessna N2700Q and its occupants may have finally come to an end.