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Incident Name: Big Elk Meadows Fire near Lyons, CO

Date: 7/18/2002, 1845 hours

Personnel: 2 lives lost

Age:

Agency/Organization: Hawkins & Powers Aviation under contract to the US Forest Service

Position:

Summary:

Rick Schwartz, pilot, age 57

Milt Stollak, pilot, age 56

Pilots Schwartz and Stollak were operating Air Tanker 123, an aircraft carrying 2,000 gallons of agent and 550 gallons of fuel. They were in the process of performing a fire retardant drop on the Big Elk fire near Lyons, Colorado. The plane had flown 7 previous air attack missions during the day. During the approach for an eighth drop, the left wing of the aircraft separated from the fuselage. Fire began as the wing separated, and the aircraft pitched nose down until it crashed into the terrain. Both pilots were killed in the crash. The aircraft involved in this crash was a World War II era PB4Y-2 Privateer which had originally been used as a military aircraft. (from the summary sent in to the USFA Memorial Database)

In December of 2002, the United States Forest Service permanently grounded all PB4Y-2 aircraft in its fleet, as well as all C-130A aircraft -- 33 aircraft in all. A C-130A had been involved in a [fatal structure-failure crash](#) earlier in the summer, and prior to that [a C-130A had crashed in 1994](#) . and in France in 2000.





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Report on Documenting Lessons Learned, USFS, AAP, WLF Staff research:
Rick Schwartz, M. Rick Schwartz, Milt Stollak
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[Wildland fire community links 2002 starting on July 16](#)



Media Articles and Reports Pulitzer Prize photo winners, 2003 for their wildfire coverage

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2003 PULITZER PRIZE WINNER

COLORADO'S WILDFIRES 2002

Matt Inden is Special to the News

Tanker 123 plunges to the ground in flames while fighting the Big Elk Fire near Estes Park, and killing its two pilots, both veteran firefighters. Witnesses said a wing came off the aircraft, then a fireball emerged as the plane prepared to drop slurry on the 1,200-acre wildfire.

AUDIO: Janet Reeves, director of photography

The Daily Courier, Jul 19, 2002

Stunned witnesses see firefighting plane crash near Denver

By JENNIFER HAMILTON
The Associated Press

LYONS, Colo. — Bystanders and firefighters looked on in horror as an air tanker disintegrated into flames and crashed while battling a 1,200-acre wildfire near Denver Thursday, killing both crew members.

"It was just a collective gasp by everybody. 'Oh, my God, it went down,'" Ray Salzman, who was taking pictures of the wildfire, said after the crash.

Investigators from the U.S. Forest Service and the National Transportation Safety Board were on the scene today near the rugged Rocky Mountain National Park, about 45 miles northwest of Denver.

The crew members' names were not immediately available. The crash prompted all firefighting planes nationwide to submit to grounding for 48 hours during the investigation.

The grounding could hamper efforts against the blaze, where steep terrain, high wind and even rainwater made aerial support the most effective firefighting technique Thursday.

"When we shut down the air tankers like this, we pretty much stop any aggressive action from taking place, with the exception of the minimal drops from helicopters," fire information officer Rick Dotson said.

Crews were left to battle the flames and "I feel pretty sick," said Dave Sherman, 42, a volunteer with the Allamogosa Fire District. "Whether you're on the ground or in the air, you're all part of a team. We just lost part of the team."

A small fire caused by the crash was quickly contained Thursday evening.

The four-engine PB4Y plane had spent the day dropping fire retardant on the flames and was carrying 2,000 gallons of retardant when it crashed, Forest Service spokesman Brett Giese said.

Safarim was in a group of 15 tankers who were

Air Tanker 123, a PB4Y2 from Hawkins & Power Aviation Inc., drops off load of the retardant on the Big Elk Fire Thursday near Lyons, Colo. The air tanker crashed Thursday while working to control a 1,200-acre wildfire burning near Rocky Mountain National Park, killing the two people on board, aviation officials said.

Walker, Calif., when the wings on a C-130A tank or snapped off in the air, sending the fuselage to the ground in a fireball.

The nation's C-130A tankers were grounded after the California crash, Hawkins & Power Aviation Inc. of Orland, Wis., owned the plane that crashed in Walker and the PB4Y that crashed

"One headlight apparently spun out to the liability insurers," said Ryan Powers, spokeswoman manager of the company. "The crew was the family in all of us — it's a pretty tight-knit community here."

The wildfire erupted Wednesday and spread quickly. About 120 houses were evacuated on Thursday and 300 were threatened. Officials said the fire was contained but could not say whether it was deliberately set. It was no worse than 5 percent contained early today, and expectations of high temperatures and low humidity brought forecasts of rapid fire growth.

"It's going to get up and move and crown," said fire meteorologist Matt Ivins.

Meanwhile in Arizona, federal prosecutors announced Thursday that they will file charges Valinda Elliott, a hiker who set a signal fire June 28 after opening two night tents in a fire.

The fire she set merged with another massive blaze to form the largest wildfire in Arizona history, one that destroyed at least 467 houses.

The decision not to prosecute was criticized by residents who lost their homes, but prosecutors said there was no evidence of criminal intent.

Elsewhere across the West on Thursday, rain slowed wildfires in Nevada but officials in Oregon posted voluntary evacuation notices in the small town of Buck, near the California line, and Pringle, in the central highlands.

More than 10,000 acres have been charred in sections of high desert and rugged mountain forest in the eastern and southern parts of Oregon during what has been an early and active fire season.

In Southern California, a brush fire erupted Thursday near a highway in San Luis Obispo County and quickly grew to 1,000 acres forcing the evacuation of 24 homes and a campground.

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Photo of the plane at the memorial site in Broomfield, CO



Photo of the memorial location in Broomfield, CO

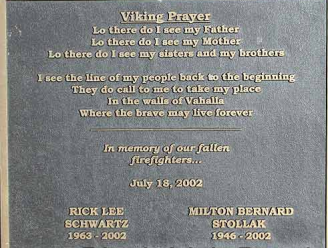


Photo of the memorial plaque in Broomfield, CO



[Reinhold Ross](#) and [Michael Kyatt](#) are wildland firefighters.



□ Please support the [Wildland Firefighter Foundation](#)