

Subject: Indy Star Indiana Crash

Firm's crash was 2nd in 4 years in Indiana

By Will Higgins

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Federal officials combed an Indiana cornfield Monday searching for clues to Sunday's deadly helicopter crash outside the Decatur County town of Burney. Three crew members -- pilot Roger Warren, flight nurse Sandra Pearson and paramedic and base manager Wade Weston -- were killed instantly, Decatur County officials said.

"The helicopter exploded on impact," Sheriff Daryl Templeton said. It was the fifth time in recent years that a medical helicopter operated by Air Evac EMS has crashed -- and the West Plains, Mo.-based company's second fatal crash in Indiana.

"We consider ourselves a very safe company," said Julie Heavrin, an Air Evac spokeswoman.

"Yes, we've had some crashes, but we also fly a lot of flight hours."

In April 2004, one of the company's copters was transporting a heart patient when it slammed into a hillside near Evansville. The crew survived, but the patient, Jerry Leonard, 63, suffocated after his stretcher's chest strap became positioned around his neck after the crash, according to the Warrick County coroner's office.

In June, an Air Evac helicopter crashed near Ash Fork, Ariz., injuring a paramedic on board.

In December, three people were killed when the Air Evac helicopter they were using to search for a lost hunter crashed near Barton, Ala.

And in February 2005, a man being transported after a traffic accident was killed when the Air Evac helicopter he was riding in crashed near Cherokee City, Ark.

Air Evac operates more than 100 helicopters in 13 states throughout the Midwest and South.

Having flown more than 135,000 "patient missions" since 1990, the company's Web site says, Air Evac "has experienced neither a weather-related accident nor an accident related to its maintenance program."

A USA Today study conducted in the wake of Jerry Leonard's death found that from 2000 to 2005, 60 people died in 84 air ambulance crashes, and that since 1978, three-quarters of all such crashes were due to pilot error.

Since 2000, at least five other people have died in Indiana helicopter crashes. Sunday's crash occurred shortly after takeoff, as the helicopter departed Burney for its base at Rush Memorial Hospital in Rushville.

The cause of the crash remains under investigation. The Federal Aviation Administration said the probe could take months. Officials from the National Transportation Safety Board were among those at the site Monday.

The three crew members were not on an ambulance run, but rather on a goodwill visit to Burney's annual antique tractor pull and hog roast.

Air Evac helicopters frequently attend such events, Heavrin said.

"We feel it's important," she said, "to give back to the community as much as we can."

Call Star reporter Will Higgins at (317) 444-6043.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.