

Horrors and realities of Dakota crash

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Mirja Senke had planned on proposing to her pilot boyfriend Zack Smith yesterday (9 December). Instead Senke, the mother of one-year-old twins with Smith, was planning his funeral.

Smith, 29, was a captain in the SA Air Force (SAAF) and was among 11 who died last Wednesday (5 December) on a flight from Waterkloof Air Force Base in Pretoria to Mthatha Airport in the Eastern Cape.

The others on the flight included five members of the SAAF and five air force protection members who perished when their Dakota crashed in the Drakensberg.

Smith's brother Zane said the family were distraught. Senke was unable to speak as she was still in shock. "My brother was a hero to every one of us. Whenever we were down he would pick us up," he said.

Smith studied engineering before enrolling in the air force. Said Zane: "He had a lot of flying hours behind him and I know from his colleagues he was well respected. The family are so proud of what he's achieved in life."

Yesterday search and rescue workers, led by Lieutenant Jack Haskins, returned to the crash site.

The plane, dubbed *Gooney Bird*, was commanded by Smith and Major Kurt Misrole in what the SA National Defence Force said was a routine flight.

But, two hours after take-off around 8am last Wednesday (5 December), the control tower lost all radio contact with the aircraft.

The only sign that something was amiss was when Smith made an earlier call in which he spoke of severe weather conditions.

SAAF initiated a search operation but could not continue due to bad weather. They resumed at first light on Thursday (6 December). An army helicopter spotted the wreckage. Haskins, of the SAPS Pietermaritzburg Search and Rescue Unit, was one of the first to be airlifted to the crash site.

"It looked like the plane crashed into the side of the mountain and then catapulted on to the top. The first thing we noticed [as we approached] was the debris that was spread across the top of the mountain," he said.

Cloud and mist made it difficult for helicopters to take off and land.

"We were told to get off [the mountain] as soon as possible or we're going to be spending the night there. We did the body recoveries and got off just in the nick of time," Haskins said.

Experienced pilots are now questioning the planning around the flight.

The SANDF has launched its own investigation by convening a board of inquiry while also assisting the Civil Aviation Authority's (CAA) own probe.

Two senior pilots believed aircraft malfunction could not be to blame, describing the Dakota as having an "almost immaculate, safety history".

The aircraft was over 60 years old.

One pilot, who flew for the SAAF for 35 years, said: "I'm willing to put money down that this was poor planning and pilot error. This plane should never have flown in such bad weather in an area with high mountains. It's almost suicide."

Smith and Misrole were described as experienced pilots who had flown the route numerous times.

Another SAAF pilot, speaking on condition of anonymity, said: "I have flown to Mthatha and, on a clear day, you have absolutely no problem. You simply circumvent the mountain. When the weather is as bad as they say it was [on Wednesday], you have to follow an alternative route. The problem is the GPS will draw a straight line and take you right over that area [where the crash happened]."

An aviation expert speculated that the weather conditions were instrumental in the tragedy.

"In weather that bad it is not uncommon for ice to form that could affect the flow over the wings of the aircraft, especially one where [the cabin is not pressurised]."

Though having been converted from piston-powered engines to turbines, with a cabin that is not pressurised the Dakota normally flies at a maximum of about 3658m. The highest peak in the area where it crashed is around 3350m.

Army spokesman Brigadier-General Xolani Mabanga said the air force would assist the CAA "as, although this was an army plane, the accident happened in South African airspace".

He said meetings were under way with the families of the dead to arrange funerals and memorial services.

Source: *Sunday Times* via I-Net Bridge