

85 died 50 years ago in worst Tahoe plane crash

By Bill Kingman and Kathryn Reed

The worst plane crash in Lake Tahoe's history was 50 years ago on March 1, 1964, when all 85 people on board the Paradise Airlines flight died.

They were coming from the Bay Area to Lake Tahoe Airport, then known as Tahoe Valley Airport, in South Lake Tahoe when the plane struck Genoa Peak.

Weather at Tahoe was snow, alternating with clearing, then back to snow. It was heavy at times.

The captain had aborted his first landing approach due to near-zero visibility and then tried to loop around. But he failed to clear the trees atop Genoa Peak.

By early afternoon, it was apparent that the Paradise Airlines propeller-powered Lockheed Constellation in bound from San Jose to Tahoe was missing.

Search craft spotted the wreckage at the crest of Genoa Peak the next morning. Snow covered much of the debris.



This is a Lockheed Constellation at Tahoe Valley Airport in 1963.

Photo/Dave Borges

The peak has an elevation of 8,675 feet. Speculation is that had the plane been 300 feet higher it could have cleared the peak.

All 81 passengers and four crew members, including the airline's chief pilot, died.

Another pilot warned the Paradise of icing at 12,000 feet, according to Aviation Safety Network.

The cause of the crash was ruled, "The pilot's deviation from prescribed [visual flight rules] flight procedures in attempting a visual landing approach in adverse weather conditions. This resulted in an abandoned approach and geographical disorientation while flying below the minimum altitude prescribed for operations in mountainous areas."

There was no tower at the airport then. One was built later, but today it is not operational.

The Civil Aeronautics Board grounded the airline.

Mike Ritter would ride motorcycles up the dirt roads north of Kingsbury Grade in the early 1970s. In 1973, he came across the crash site.



The crash site in October 2013. Photo/Chuck Westby

"The crash site was fascinating, particularly to a former Air

Force radar controller who'd read his share of aircraft accident reports and even participated in a few," Ritter told *Lake Tahoe News*. "The crash site was about 10 years old by that time, but we could stand on the ridge looking west and see the path of the aircraft as it crashed through the tree tops, cutting them off. It appeared, from that path of broken tree tops, that the aircraft hit about 30 feet below the ridge and spread a debris field over the top and down the east side of the mountain. With the exception of what looked to be a very large landing gear strut, most of identifiable pieces of the plane had been removed. But the bushes on the east slope were covered with small deteriorating scraps of blue and grey plastic material, very likely upholstery covers and/or cabin trim. At the peak of the ridge, centered on the impact site, visitors, probably over a period of time, had built a rock cairn, close to 6-feet tall and personal property that folks had found around the crash site – wallets, shoes, glasses etc. – had been placed on the rocks of the cairn. I was impressed with how respectfully the site seemed to have been treated."

As a runner he revisited the site on occasion. Eventually the debris was removed or nature covered it.