

# Former Senator Ted Stevens Killed in Plane Crash



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

Senator Ted Stevens with John McCain in 2003. [More Photos](#) »

By WILLIAM YARDLEY and LIZ ROBBINS  
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FAIRBANKS, Alaska — Former Senator [Ted Stevens](#) of Alaska was among five people who died in a plane crash in remote southwest Alaska on Monday while on a fishing trip, their small plane weaving through the mountains in clouds and rain before hitting a mountainside.

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Nine people were aboard the plane, a single-engine DeHavilland DHC-3T capable of landing on water. Many of them had deep connections to government and Mr. Stevens's long service in the Senate.

The body of Mr. Stevens, 86, the longest-serving Republican in the history of the Senate, was found just after daylight Tuesday, according to a former aide.

Few other American politicians equaled Mr. Stevens for endurance and grit. He survived enemy fire as a pilot during World War II and a plane crash that killed his first wife more than 30 years ago. He marched through six terms in the Senate, dismissing critics as he delivered billions of dollars for his home state. When a federal jury found him guilty of corruption in 2008, he insisted the verdict would be thrown out — and it eventually was, on grounds of prosecutorial misconduct, though not before

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grounds or prosecutorial misconduct, though not before costing him his seat.

Even so, local politicians still sought his endorsement, a stamp of Alaskan authenticity.

“Though small of stature, [Ted Stevens](#) seemed larger than life, and anybody who knew him, knew him that way, for he built for Alaska and he stood for Alaska and he fought for Alaskans,” Gov. [Sean Parnell](#) said at a news conference in Anchorage.

[President Obama](#), in a statement, described Mr. Stevens as “a decorated war hero” who “devoted his career to serving the people of Alaska and fighting for our men and women in uniform. Michelle and I extend our condolences to the entire Stevens family and to the families of those who perished alongside Senator Stevens in this terrible accident.”

[Sean O’Keefe](#), a former [NASA](#) administrator, and his son Kevin were among those on board who survived. A spokeswoman for Providence Alaska Medical Center said that Mr. O’Keefe was in critical condition and that Kevin was listed as serious. Now an executive with the European aerospace firm [EADS](#), Mr. O’Keefe was a longtime friend and fishing companion of Mr. Stevens.

Officials in Alaska said the plane, owned by GCI, an Alaska telecommunications provider, was first reported overdue about 7 p.m. on Monday by the company. The group had been staying at the company’s main lodge on Lake Aleknagik.

Deborah A. P. Hersman, chairwoman of the [National Transportation Safety Board](#), told reporters in Anchorage on Tuesday night that witnesses said the plane left GCI’s main lodge at the lake about 3:15 p.m. Monday on a day trip to a GCI fish camp nearby. Around 6 p.m., people at the lodge called the fish camp to see whether the party would be returning to the main lodge for dinner. Staff members at the fish camp said Mr. Stevens’s group had never arrived.

That prompted GCI to send up its own helicopter and other planes, which soon found the wreckage, at the end of a debris field about 100 yards long. Ms. Hersman said the witnesses speculated that the plane must have crashed about 15 minutes after taking off.

A doctor and two paramedics at the lodge were taken to the site by helicopter. One survivor, whom Ms. Hersman would not identify, was first seen walking outside the plane; the others were inside. The doctor and paramedics stayed with the victims overnight and communicated with rescue officials via satellite phone and handheld radio.

The group had not filed a flight plan, and one was not required. Had they done so, aviation officials would have known sooner that the plane was missing.

“Having no flight plan really screwed up the rescue,” said John Bouker, a longtime bush pilot in the Dillingham area who helped locate the crash site. “If we had known about this at 2 or 3 o’clock in the afternoon, we would have been on this four or five hours earlier.”



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The authorities said weather and remoteness prevented military and Coast Guard personnel from reaching the crash site until about 7 a.m. Tuesday. It was unclear whether any of the victims, who spent the night at the crash site, could have fared better if they had been reached sooner.

Mr. Bouker said the plane crashed about 1,000 feet up in the scrub of the Muklung Hills Range on a day when visibility was poor.

He said the pilot, Theron A. Smith, appeared to have been trying a sharp ascent when the plane crashed, perhaps realizing suddenly the proximity of mountains cloaked in the clouds. The authorities said the plane was found on a slope of about 40 degrees.

“The plane was in a steep incline,” Mr. Bouker said. “He bounced the airplane uphill once it hit. When you’re in the clouds, you don’t see nothing. He was going to try to climb out of the mountains and find somewhere where the weather was clear.”

Mr. Bouker said he was joined in the search by several private pilots, including two helicopter pilots.

“The plane was not all broken apart,” Mr. Bouker said. “It looked survivable to me. There were four last night that were definitely alive when the helicopters got there.”

Alaska officials said three others died in addition to Mr. Stevens and Mr. Smith: William D. Phillips Sr., a former chief of staff for Senator Stevens and a Washington lawyer; Dana Tindall, 48, a 24-year employee and vice president for GCI in Anchorage; and her daughter, Corey, 16.

The four survivors were Mr. O’Keefe; his son; William Phillips Jr., 13; and James Morhard, chief of staff for the Senate Appropriations Committee when Mr. Stevens was its chairman.

GCI executives often flew staff members, politicians and special guests from the Lower 48 to the handsome lodge for salmon fishing and sightseeing. Mike Porcaro, a local radio personality and advertising executive who has handled advertising for GCI since 1997, said he flew to the Aleknagik lodge last month on the same plane that crashed. The original engine in the plane, which had both wheels and floats, had been replaced with a turbine engine for power and stability, Mr. Porcaro said.

“The plane is old, but it was meticulously maintained,” he said. “It was gorgeous.”

Mr. Stevens was appointed to the Senate in 1968 and then elected to six terms. He had served for 40 years until he lost his bid for a seventh term in 2008 after he was found guilty of corruption charges. After the case was thrown out, Mr. Stevens, often called Uncle Ted in Alaska, seemed to retain much of his local stature.

“He weathered it pretty well,” former Gov. Bill Sheffield, a longtime friend, said of the scandal. “He felt good, looked good, walked faster than ever, played tennis several times a week.”

*William Yardley reported from Fairbanks, and Liz Robbins from New York. Reporting was contributed by Eric Schmitt, Matthew L. Wald and Jeff Zeleny in Washington; Kim Severson and Barbara Gray in New York; and Patti Epler in Anchorage.*

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