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4 dead in 2 crashes

By Jeffrey Leib, George Lane, Marilyn Robinson and Andrew Guy Jr.
Denver Post Staff Writers

Jan. 25, 2001, updated 12:15 p.m. - Two men described as experienced pilots were found dead today in the wreckage of a small plane in northeastern El Paso County, authorities said. The victims were identified as Tassilo Bilka, 54, of Colorado Springs, and Ryan Starr, 26, of Castle Rock, said Lt. Melissa Hartman of the El Paso County sheriff's office.

Hartman said members of a search team found the wreckage at about 6:30 a.m. spread out over about 200 yards in a heavily wooded area near the Black Forest. The Cessna 182 had been reported missing Wednesday night after a signal from an emergency locator transmitter was detected.

The pilot had refueled at the nearby Meadow Lakes Airport earlier Wednesday, then flew to Boulder and may have been heading back to the airport, Hartman said. There was no flight plan filed.

"At approximately 10 p.m. last night, the pilot was talking to Denver control and made some type of comments of being lost, shortly after that the emergency locator transmitter was activated," Hartman said.

Heavy fog in the area hampered search efforts overnight but it was unclear if the weather was a factor in the crash, Hartman said.

Investigators with the National Transportation and Safety Board were at the scene Thursday trying to determine what caused the crash.

On Wednesday, Atlas Air Inc. chairman Michael Chowdry and Wall Street Journal reporter Jeff Cole were killed late Wednesday morning in the crash of Chowdry's Czech-built jet fighter-trainer minutes after taking off from Front Range Airport.

Chowdry, 46, had not filed a flight plan, and the jet appeared to be on a local flight, said Norm Wiemeyer, chief of the Denver field

- graphic illustrates
crash

office of the National Transportation Safety Board.

Wiemeyer said the plane crashed near Watkins, about 4 miles south of Front Range, a general-aviation airport southeast of Denver International Airport. The crash site was near East 29th Avenue and Imboden Road, about one-half mile from houses, said Adams County Sheriff Bill Shearer.

Wreckage was scattered over a 5-acre site, and fire damage covered about 1 acre, Wiemeyer said. "We had intense fire."

The fuselage disintegrated, leaving only a portion of the tail visible on the ground.

The NTSB official said some who witnessed the crash reported no evidence the plane was in trouble before it went down. The plane's wreckage was being hauled to a hangar in Greeley for further inspection by federal officials, Wiemeyer said.

But questions were raised almost immediately about the plane's airworthiness.

Clint Webster, whose company, Windchaser Aviation, has hangars at Front Range, said Chowdry had experienced "a lot of problems" with the Czech fighter.

"It scared him bad enough that he put it up for sale," said Webster, whose company housed other planes in Chowdry's personal fleet.

Webster said Chowdry put the plane up for sale last summer after a disturbing incident with the aircraft. The problem involved a malfunctioning air intake on the side of the plane, Webster said.

Chowdry "limped around" in the air briefly with the air-intake problem and then finally managed to land with fire alarms going off because the engine had overheated, Webster said.

Over the past two months, Chowdry housed the L-39 in Jetter Aviation's hangar at Front Range, said Jetter owner Bud Lewis.

Wednesday was the first time Chowdry had flown the plane in that time, Lewis said.

Lewis said Chowdry's staff asked him to pull the plane out of the hangar for a 10 a.m. departure.

"He took off about 11 a.m. I didn't watch the actual takeoff but saw him taxi off," Lewis said.

He said someone walked in the restaurant (at Front Range) and said Michael Chowdry had just crashed. "I looked out the window and saw the smoke."

Lewis said his company did no maintenance on Chowdry's L-39, but the plane appeared to be in excellent shape. Because of its "meticulously maintained" exterior, Lewis said, he assumed the plane was very well maintained mechanically, too.

John McAvoy, owner of Czech Jet Inc. of Milpitas, Calif., said there are about 150 of the L-39 jet trainers operating in the United States.

"It's a very easy airplane to fly," McAvoy said. "It's one of the most

docile airplanes I've ever flown - docile meaning very forgiving. "I'm almost willing to bet you can put a nonpilot in that plane and he'll be able to fly it. It's not overly sensitive and it has no nasty habits."

At a hastily called news conference, Atlas executive vice president Richard Shuyler said Chowdry had piloted the Czech jet for about two years and he was "an exceptionally skilled pilot."

Chowdry, 46, was the founder, chairman, president and chief executive of Atlas, an international air freight company he helped build into the cargo giant with more than \$600 million in annual revenues. From its start in 1992, Chowdry had Atlas based in Golden, until last year, when he relocated its headquarters to Westchester County, N.Y., just outside New York City. He kept his home in Colorado.

In a statement issued to all Wall Street Journal employees late Wednesday afternoon, managing editor Paul Steiger said Cole "was absolutely fearless and totally determined in pursuit of a story." "He was one of the greatest news-breakers I have ever known, and one of the finest men."

Cole, 45, was the aerospace editor of the Journal and was based in Seattle. He oversaw coverage of the aerospace industry and reported on it. He won numerous awards.

Cole was in Denver to do a story on Chowdry and his jet. Chowdry was known to enjoy the aerobatic qualities of the L-39. However, there was no evidence Wednesday that Chowdry was performing aerobatic maneuvers.

In order to keep their "skills sharp and senses honed," pilots of the L-39 should fly the plane two hours a day or 10 hours a week, McAvoy said. "If you're flying 20 hours a year, it's not to say you're not safe, but you're not proficient."

Chowdry, a native of Pakistan, emigrated first to England while in his teens and then to the United States in the mid-1970s. He attended the University of Minnesota at Crookston for a time and soon after got a pilot's license.

Chowdry flew crop dusters for a while and later got into aircraft sales.

He moved to Colorado in the early 1980s and began operating an aircraft leasing company. When a customer returned a Boeing 747 to Chowdry's company in the early 1990s, he used the plane to help launch Atlas.

Chowdry trained to fly a number of planes in his personal fleet. For a time, he owned a DC-3 and more recently he acquired a Boeing Business Jet, a modified 737 used by business officials and companies.

Chowdry relished the power and performance of the Czech jet, as well as the flamboyant image he presented, donning a fighter-pilot's

helmet and squeezing into the tight front seat in the cockpit of the bubble-topped jet.

Shirley Holtz, who operates an aircraft maintenance operation at Front Range, said Chowdry would take his son up in the Czech jet on occasions. The Atlas chairman also invited friends and members of the media to sit in the rear seat and fly with him at times.

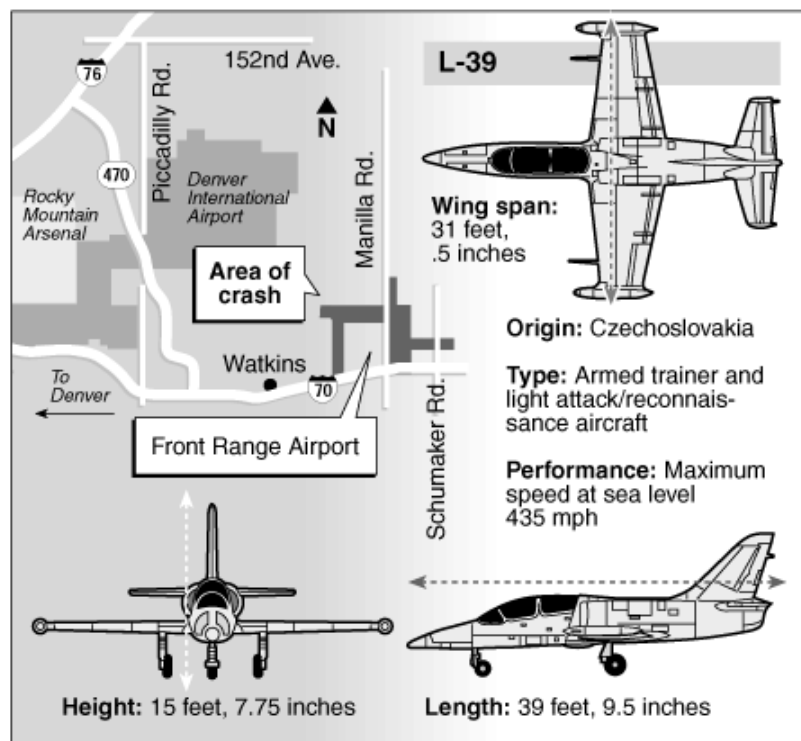
Chowdry is survived by his wife, a son, a daughter and two stepdaughters.

Cole is survived by his wife, a son and a daughter.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

Two die in plane crash

The president and chairman of Atlas Air and a reporter for The Wall Street Journal were killed in a plane crash Wednesday morning near Front Range Airport in Adams County.



Source: The Pocket Guide to Military Aircraft

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