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A horrific plane crash took the lives of members of Lynyrd Skynyrd, their road crew and both the pilot and co-pilot on Oct. 20, 1977, irrevocably altering the course of the Southern rock outfit, their families and music history.Frontman Ronnie Van Zant, guitarist Steve Gaines and his sister, backup singer Cassie Gaines, were lost. Dean Kilpatrick, a personal assistant to the band, also died. The rest of those onboard suffered various injuries, the majority of them severe. Some passengers, in fact, were unable to make their way out of the wooded swampland in Gillsburg, Miss., a tiny town on the border of Louisiana where Lynyrd Skynyrd's Convair CV-240 went down.Drummer Artimus Pyle and two crew members sought help from a local farmer some distance away. The recovery effort was slow and laborious, first as rescue and emergency personnel struggled to reach the crash victims – and then as Lynyrd Skynyrd began their own lengthy healing process.During the decades since, some initial survivors have passed away, while others did their best to endure. Many dealt with their own demons in the wake of the disaster. Eventually, they returned to music – and then to Lynyrd Skynyrd. Here are their stories.Allen Collins suffered a cervical spine injury; he also almost lost his right arm after suffering a severe gash, according to Lynyrd Skynyrd: Remembering the Free Birds of Southern Rock. A couple years later, the guitarist got together with fellow Skynyrd member and guitarist Gary Rossington to form the Rossington Collins Band.Tragedy struck again: Collins' wife Kathy died of a hemorrhage when she suffered a miscarriage while he was on the inaugural Rossington Collins Band tour in 1980. Following the 1982 dissolution of that group, he created the Allen Collins Band, which included bassist Leon Wilkeson and keyboardist Billy Powell – both of whom were also key parts of Lynyrd Skynyrd.Collins' battles with depression, various substance addictions and law enforcement – he was reportedly arrested 18 times between 1974 and 1985 – came to a head Jan. 29, 1986, when he crashed his brand new Ford Thunderbird. The one-car accident killed his passenger, girlfriend Debra Watts. Collins was left paralyzed from the waist down, and charged with DUI manslaughter, ultimately receiving two years' probation.Unable to perform, Collins served as musical director for the Lynyrd Skynyrd Tribute Tour, which kicked off some 20 years after the crash in 1987. Two years later, the incapacitated guitarist contracted pneumonia. Collins lost that fight, succumbing to respiratory failure on Jan. 23, 1990 – almost four years to the day after his crippling car accident. Collins was 37 years old.Staff, Getty ImagesKnown as the "Mad Hatter of Southern Rock" due to his predilection to wearing caps of all fanciful shapes and sizes onstage, Leon Wilkeson suffered such a catastrophic arm injury that he had to reconfigure his bass so that he could play it in a unique, almost upright style. He also broke his leg and suffered a chest wound in the plane crash. Wilkeson's heart failed twice at the scene, according to Lynyrd Skynyrd: Remembering the Free Birds of Southern Rock. His teeth had also been knocked out.Wilkeson stayed close to his Skynyrd brethren in both the Rossington Collins Band and Allen Collins Band, then joined them for the tribute tour in 1987 and onward. Bad luck followed. While on the road in the early '90s, a sleeping Wilkeson had his throat slit aboard the Lynyrd Skynyrd tour bus. Guitarist Ed King blamed Wilkeson's wife for the injury, while she claimed it was King in an infamous article published by Spin. No one ever figured out who did it.Wilkeson was subsequently found dead in a hotel room July 27, 2001, at the age of 49. He had been dealing with liver and lung disease, and a combination of the two seems to have played a role. His passing was chalked up to "natural causes."Billy Powell's nose was nearly sliced off completely in the crash; he also suffered a right knee injury. Yet the keyboardist became the de facto spokesman for the band in the weeks that followed, giving updates on those still in the hospital to both print and broadcast media with stitches tracked across his deeply bruised face.Like Wilkeson, Powell joined the Rossington Collins Band, the Allen Collins Band and then the reunited Lynyrd Skynyrd. Along the way, he earned generations of new admirers through sturdy live interpretations "Free Bird," "Tuesday's Gone," "What's Your Name" and "Sweet Home Alabama," all of which featured notable contributions from Powell. He was on a break from Lynyrd Skynyrd's regular touring schedule in 2009 when he suffered a heart attack. Powell was 56.The sole member of Lynyrd Skynyrd to literally walk away from the mangled plane, Artimus Pyle's physical wounds somehow consisted of only cuts and abrasions. A couple of years later, however, Pyle had to bow out of the Rossington Collins Band after a motorcycle accident left his leg broken in 20 places.He later returned to music as leader of the Artimus Pyle Band before reconvening with Lynyrd Skynyrd from 1987 until the early '90s. He departed after recording of Lynyrd Skynyrd 1991, citing the toll from continued legal battles between the surviving band members and Ronnie Van Zant's widow Judy.After that, the drummer dealt with serious run ins with the law, and more court cases, while reviving the Artimus Pyle Band. He pleaded guilty and received probation on charges of attempted capital battery, and lewd and lascivious assault in the presence of a child in Jacksonville, Fla., in 1992. Fifteen years later, he was arrested for not properly registering as a sex offender after his address changed. The case went to trial, and he was acquitted in 2009.More recently, his involvement in a proposed biopic called Street Survivor: The True Story of the Lynyrd Skynyrd Plane Crash led to new legal issues. A U.S. district judge halted production permanently, finding Pyle in violation of a 1987 consent order which prohibits anyone from participating in a band-related project without the participation of at least three surviving members from Lynyrd Skynyrd's pre-crash era.2014 Stagecoach California's Country Music Festival - Day 1Frazer Harrison, Getty ImagesGary Rossington was the most critically injured survivor of the 1977 plane crash, having broken both arms and wrists, both legs and ankles, and his pelvis. While his road to recuperation might've been the longest, the guitarist has also made the most of his second musical chance: He co-founded the Rossington Collins Band, and later the Rossington Band with his wife Dale-Krantz Rossington, then became the driving force behind Lynyrd Skynyrd's reunion – and, eventually, its final remaining original member.Still, Rossington has had to deal with his fair share of obstacles and setbacks. A well-publicized drug and alcohol addiction was immortalized in Lynyrd Skynyrd's "That Smell," a cautionary tale written by Collins and Van Zant after Rossington plowed his new car into an oak tree and then a house after passing out at the wheel. He's since sobered up, only to face a series of health issues.Rossington suffered a heart attack in late 2015, and had surgery to repair blockage in his arteries the following year. Still, he soldiers on, waving the Lynyrd Skynyrd flag proudly – and even reviving the Rossington Band with a 2016 LP that was appropriately titled Take It on Faith.You Think You Know Lynyrd Skynyrd? Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. 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their Draw the Line tour, but it was rejected because it was felt that neither the plane nor the crew were up to standard. Aerosmith's assistant chief of flight operations, Zunk Buker, told of observing pilots McCreary and Gray sharing a bottle of Jack Daniel's while he and his father inspected the plane.[15] Aerosmith's touring family were quite shaken after receiving word of the crash, as Steven Tyler and Joe Perry had pressured their management into renting that specific plane for use on their tour.[16] Scottish rock band Nazareth were touring with Lynyrd Skynyrd at the time of the crash, and narrowly avoided boarding the flight themselves. Bassist Pete Agnew explained: “Artimus Pyle had lived in Greensboro, where the plane took off from, and was having a barbecue. They’d invited us along and then on to the next gig with them. But we’d seen their plane – which looked like Gaffa Tape Airlines...” The fabricated excuse of "doing some promo" was ultimately used to get out of attending but Lynyrd Skynyrd's road crew, under the mistaken impression Nazareth had gone to the barbecue, announced that Nazareth too were among the fatalities. Vocalist Dan McCafferty recalled: "At the next gig, when I phoned the wife, she burst into tears with relief."[17] The doomed flight of October 20, 1977, was intended to be the last Lynyrd Skynyrd would make on the Convair. "We were flying in a plane that looked like it belonged to the Clampett family," said Pyle, and the band had decided that their status as one of the world's top rock acts warranted an upgrade. The band had planned on acquiring a Learjet after arriving in Baton Rouge, to replace the 30-year-old plane, which all in the band's circle agreed was well past its prime.[18] Rescuers had to cross a 20-foot-wide (6 m), waist-deep creek and struggle through an overgrown forest, while digging out rescue vehicles that got stuck in the mud.[19] Locals worked with rescue officials and drove victims to the hospital in the back of pick-up trucks. One local resident recalled, "I found someone on the ground alive. When I walked to the other side of the plane, I tripped on another person".[7] Another resident commended the actions of all those who helped and said, "Some of them were out on that highway directing traffic. Some of them went home and got tractors. My wife was home on a CB radio. I'm relaying messages on CB to her, ten miles away".[7] After the accident, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) removed, inspected, and tested the right engine's ignition magneto and found it to be operating normally, concluding, "No mechanical or electrical discrepancies were found during the examination of the right magneto."[1] The inspection also determined that, "All of the fuel cross-feed and fuel dump valves were in the closed position."[1] Billy Powell, among others, spoke of seeing flames shooting out of the plane's right engine during a flight just days before the crash. The subsequent report by the NTSB listed "an engine malfunction of undetermined nature" in that same engine as a contributing factor in the crash.[1] Pyle told Howard Stern years later in an interview that the fuel gauge in the older-model plane was known to malfunction and the pilots had neglected to check the tanks manually before taking off. Toxicology reports from both pilots' autopsies found no traces of alcohol or other drugs.[1] "Crew inattention to fuel supply" was ultimately determined to be responsible for the crash.[1] The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of this accident was fuel exhaustion and total loss of power from both engines due to crew inattention to fuel supply. Contributing to the fuel exhaustion were inadequate flight planning and an engine malfunction of undetermined nature in the right engine that resulted in "torching" and higher-than-normal fuel consumption. —NTSB Accident Report[1] The accident report records that the aircraft was both owned and operated by L & J Company,[1] but the lease to Lynyrd Skynyrd's production company specified that Lynyrd Skynyrd was the operator[1] and therefore was responsible for regulatory compliance (including managing the flight crew).[1] The flight crew were employed by a third party,[1] and the lease period was three weeks.[1] The report records the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) as taking legal action against L & J Company in relation to the operator responsibility,[1] and the analysis section concludes by asking, "How does the system in such a case protect a lessee who is uninformed either by design, by inadvertence, or by his own carelessness?"[1] The crash took place three days following the release of the band’s fifth studio album Street Survivors. The album cover showed the band surrounded by flames. Following the plane crash, MCA replaced the image with a new cover, showing the band against a simple black background, which was on the back of the original sleeve.[20] The site of the crash has become a memorial for fans, rescuers and survivors, with an oak tree that has been carved with Lynyrd Skynyrd iconography, while the site was also the location of a fortieth anniversary memorial by survivors and rescuers.[7] In 2017, surviving members of the band and family of those who died in the crash filed a lawsuit to block production and distribution of a film entitled Street Survivors: The True Story of the Lynyrd Skynyrd Plane Crash. The dispute stemmed from a "blood oath" by survivors, reportedly taken after the crash, never to use the name Lynyrd Skynyrd again in an effort to capitalize on the tragedy that had befallen them.[21] The film premiered at the Hollywood Reel Independent Film Festival on February 18, 2020.[22] List of music group fatalities from aviation accidents ^ a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p "Aircraft Accident Report – L & J Company, Convair 248, N55VM, Gillsburg, Mississippi, October 20, 1977" (PDF). National Transportation Safety Board. June 19, 1978. NTSB-AAR-78-06. Archived (PDF) from the original on February 7, 2020. Retrieved May 19, 2020. - Copy at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. ^ a b c "Aircraft accident Convair CV-240 N55VM Gillsburg, MS". Aviation Safety Network. Flight Safety Foundation. June 19, 1978. Archived from the original on November 5, 2012. Retrieved September 3, 2011. ^ a b Gwinn, John (October 22, 1977). "Why did plane run out of fuel?". Spartanburg Herald-Journal. 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Official Lynyrd Skynyrd website US NTSB Report on Plane Crash Check-Six.com – Lynyrd Skynyrd's Crash – includes full crew and passenger list Official Lynyrd Skynyrd History site Portals: Aviation Rock music United States Retrieved from " Hello Skynyrd Nation. Besides being the newest member of Lynyrd Skynyrd, I also have a history as a conflict journalist. A passion for experience and sharing have always been the driving force behind my creativity. My love of music and words have compelled me to bring them together in a new blog dedicated to sharing the reality of life in the Modern Lynyrd Skynyrd. Return to the Beacon The Beacon Theater, New York City The last time I stepped on stage at the Beacon Theater in New York City, I was so high on drugs that I ruined a night of live recording for my band, the Black Crowes. I had always given myself permission to do all the drugs I wanted, as long as I never let drugs ruin my musicianship. That night at the Beacon, I crossed the line. After being up for days fueled by bottles of Jack Daniels and fistfuls of cocaine, I finally came unglued at the worst possible time—on stage and in the middle of the show. As my fingers stopped responding to the twisted messages being sent from my drug addled brain, my bass playing slowly unraveled and finally disintegrated. I collapsed somewhere near the end of the set. Like an airplane whose wings fell off mid-flight, I crashed, I burned, hitting my bottom right there in public under the white hot spot lights of the Beacon Theater. It took days for me to fully sober up, and when my head finally cleared, I was mortified. Not only did I let my band down, but that night’s wreckage was recorded on professional Ampex 2 inch hi-fidelity studio tape. That recording, which cost the band $25,000 dollars in recording costs, was utterly useless. The truth had been captured in tragic, unimpeachable detail. What do you say to your band after that? What about your fans? More importantly, what do say to yourself? Blowing a show because you’re high might sound like a totally rock-n-roll thing to do, like something from the pages of Up And Down With The Rolling Stones—but in reality, it just makes you an asshole. If I didn’t have enough courage or self-respect to keep the straw out of my nose or the bottle away from my lips in order to play a great show, then I knew that I should put it down out of respect to the fans and out of respect to the legacy of the musicians who inspired me to learn music; musicians like the members of Lynryd Skynyrd. Even back when I was eight years old, I heard about the perils of drug use in Ronnie Van Zant’s lyrics to the epic Lynyrd Skynyrd song, ‘That Smell.’ With vivid lyrics and an unforgettable story, one might think I would have absorbed its message to steer clear of drugs. In fairness to myself, I was just a kid in my early twenties trying to imitate my heroes at the time I blew that Beacon show. The Beacon disaster showed me that music was no longer the guiding priority in my life. I had crossed the line and there was no going back. It was time to clean up my act and I was stunned to discover that unshackling myself from drugs and booze proved to be tougher than I could have ever imagined. ********* I have been in multiple bands since the Black Crowes and talking about the Crowe days can feel a little bit like talking about high school. Yet today I find myself standing backstage at the Beacon Theater for the first time since that dark and infamous night so many years ago. Only this night, I am member of Lynyrd Skynyrd. Isn’t Fate a funny thing? There are a lot of members in Lynyrd Skynyrd and every damn one of them stands larger than life. The count down to show time means a crazy scene backstage for the band. I pass by the Honkettes dressing room (Skynyrd’s famous female back up singers), and I stop to enjoy how beautiful Dale Rossington and Carol Chase not only look, but how much better their dressing room smells than mine. A tight left turn and I am standing face to face with a man who embodies the term “larger than life,” Mr. Rickey Medlocke. I consider Rickey to be my brother from another mother. We hug like men do, chest in, hips out. Rickey’s ‘Indian’ tattoo wraps boldly across his forearm and pops out in sharp contrast to the dressing room’s muted tones. I do not see our guitarist ‘Sparky’ anywhere, but If there is one man you can depend on to play his guitar right, every time, every night, that’s Sparky. No need to worry, Sparky will show up. Outside the Beacon, Manhattan throbs loudly to the rhythms of the street. Inside the Beacon, I crowd into the main dressing room with our band’s drummer Michael Cartellone and pianist, the aptly-named Peter Keys. Michael warms up by drumming a migraine-inducing pattern on a rubber pad and cracking wise at passersby every few minutes. Michael’s sense of humor is lost on most, but he never seems to care, chuckling to himself behind his drum sticks. Meanwhile, Peter Keys is adding and simultaneously removing layers of clothing to his outfit for tonight’s show. Peter keeps pacing a hole in the floor with his bottomless cup of coffee as if movement and caffeine are the only two things harnessing his sheer, unbridled talent. Gary Rossington, a legend and an institution all to himself, quietly slides into the room with the ease and grace of an elder statesman of rock-n-roll. Gary joins the action and starts talking shit with short snappy verbal punches. While discussing the movie Lawless, Gary, Rickey and I tune our guitars as the conversation naturally turns to brass knuckles, throat punches and stories of past—fights that grow taller and more epic with the passage of time. We enjoy the refined air of totally bullshit that fills the room. Johnny Van Zant suddenly blows through the door, bigger than life, and with a massive smile spread across his face. Johnny’s positive energy is instantly contagious. When I ask him where he’s been all night, he responds, “Been talking with fans and friends at the meet greet downstairs." If Southern Rock has a mayor, it is Mr. Johnny Van Zant. Johnny is the type of man who would pull his tour bus over to help a stranger change a tire. I shit you not friends. ********* The elevator arrives to take us down to the stage. We cram into the tiny box and I suddenly feel like I am gonna throw up on everyone’s shoes. The ghost of my Beacon show past has arrived and my nerves feel raw and frayed. Tonight’s intro music blares through the theater’s sound system as we exit the elevator. Standing on the wings of the stage, we raise our right hands with fingers pointing to the sky. Johnny leads us in a Skynyrd tradition, a group prayer. As Johnny voices the band’s collective gratitude, I crack one eye open and look at the sold out audience. My feet feel glued to the floor and I feel my breath grow short as my mind flashes me back to that night with the Black Crowes almost seventeen years ago. The memory brings me to the verge of a panic attack. The first notes the audience hear of tonight’s Beacon show is the signature sound of Gary Rossington playing slide guitar. Standing alone under a single spotlight, Gary breaks into the title track of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s latest record Last Of A Dying Breed. Seconds away from joining Gary and the rest of the band on stage, an inner voice—the one that loves to beat me up to convince me to give up and fail—grabs me by the shoulder, sticks out it’s forked tongue and says, "Hey asshole, you don’t deserve to be in Lynyrd Skynyrd...you’re just gonna blow it on that stage again and in front of all those people! " I look up as a trio of spotlights now take aim at Gary and his Les Paul. The inimitable sound of his guitar and its warm, golden tone has the entire building transfixed. How can it be so difficult to be in this building and play this show. After all, shouldn’t I be taking comfort in the fact that I am about to walk on stage with the man that inspired Ronnie Van Zant to write “That Smell” as a warning about his drug abuse. If any one in this whole wide world could understand how I feel right now, it would have to be Gary Rossington. So what’s it gonna be? I ask myself, will tonight’s performance be a redemption, or does my past mistake have the power to make me choke on stage? Johnny Van Zant cues me with a nod and by the time I nod back, we’re walking on stage and under the lights. The first notes from my bass rumble across the floor like a depth charge. It is time to silence the voices in my head and put the anxiety to rest. It is time to get on with doing what I do best, and doing it as a member of one of the greatest rock-n-roll bands of all times. Since I was a boy, Lynyrd Skynyrd vinyl spun around and around my turntable. ‘Angel of darkness is upon you Stuck a needle in your arm So take another toke, have a blow for your nose One more drink fool, will drown you ..... Damn Ronnie, how right you were. I wish I would have listened to you the first time, But I guess there are some lessons a man’s gotta learn the hard way. ...Thank you to Joe Daly & Rosie Colt for additional editing. On October 20, 1977, six of the 11 members of Lynyrd Skynyrd died in a plane crash over Mississippi. Tragically, rock stars dying in an aviation crash is not an uncommon occurrence, as it has also happened to John Denver, Buddy Holly, Jim Croce, and many more. However, what separates Lynyrd Skynrd’s tale from the rest is the story of how it happened, when it happened, and what occurred after it happened. One of the most commonly quoted tellers of the story is the band’s surviving drummer, Artimus Pyle. Pyle is an interesting individual, to say the least. Besides playing with Skynrd, the man has had quite a life both in the army and with his run-ins with the law. Though, that is not the focus of this story. Rather, Pyle has given a detailed account of that fateful day of the plane accident on numerous occasions., and the following is his version of the story.In 2022, Pyle sat down with Forbes to discuss what he experienced during the crash. “It’s been 45 years since the plane crash, but it seems like yesterday,” Pyle said. “And I think about it every day.”Pyle recalled the event with a lot of emotion, as one would expect from the survivor of a horrifically traumatizing event.“I was going back and forth from the cockpit to the cabin, talking to the pilots, telling everybody to put out their cigarettes, turn off any lights, and conserve any power we had,” he began the tale. “I didn’t have time to think, oh my God, we’re having a plane crash, but I knew it was serious.”Subsequently, he detailed his last interaction with the band’s infamous lead singer, Ronnie Van Zandt. “Ronnie went to the back of the plane, and I remember thinking to myself, that’s a good idea,” Pyle said. “You’re going to the back of the plane where it’s probably a little safer. But then, he came back forward. He stopped at my seat, did the old hippie handshake, then gave me a beautiful smile. Ronnie had a great smile. And that’s the last time I saw Ronnie.”When the plane crashed and Artimus Pyle found himself still alive, he ran to the closest place for help. Pyle allegedly found a nearby house and claimed that he was shot by a farmer who owned the house. “I know the farmer was only protecting his family,” Pyle sympathized. “He came out of the house, and I looked like Charles Manson all covered in blood, with my long hair and beard. So, [sic] he shot me.”The farmer denied these claims and it was later suggested that the “gunshot” might have really been a ricochet shot. However, Pyle felt what he felt and saw what he saw, and he still believes he was shot with a gun.“He yelled stop, I saw the gun,” Pyle continued. “I was stumbling because I had injuries and thought I was dying. Then, something tore through my arm, and I yelled, ‘plane crash!’ with what I thought was my last breath.”Following their interaction, Pyle and the farmer made it to the wreckage and were able to save the remaining 19 passengers who survived the plane crash in Gillsburg, Mississippi.Photo by Alicia Funderburk/Getty Images 1977 aviation accident in Mississippi, USA Convair CV-240 N55VM crashA Convair CV-240 similar to the accident aircraftAccidentDateOctober 20, 197718:52 (CST)[1]SummaryFuel exhaustionSiteHeavily wooded swamp, Amite County, Mississippi, United States,five miles (8 km) northeastof Gillsburg 31°04′19″N 90°35′57″W / 31.07194°N 90.59917°W / 31.07194; -90.59917[1]:3AircraftAircraft typeConvair CV-240[2]OperatorL & J Company ofAddison, TexasCall sign5 VICTOR MIKERegistrationN55VMFlight originLouisville, Kentucky (Freedom Hall)StopoverMcComb-Pike County Airport, Pike County, Mississippi (emergency attempt)DestinationBaton Rouge Metropolitan Airport, Baton Rouge, LouisianaOccupants26Passengers24Crew2Fatalities6Injuries20Survivors20 crash siteGreenvilleBaton Rougeclass=notpageimage| The flight departed Greenville, South Carolina for Baton Rouge, Louisiana, ultimately crashing near Gillsburg, Mississippi On October 20, 1977, a Convair CV-240 passenger aircraft ran out of fuel and crashed in a wooded area near Gillsburg, Mississippi, United States. Chartered by the rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd from L & J Company of Addison, Texas, it was flying from Greenville, South Carolina, to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, crashing near its destination.[3][4] Lynyrd Skynyrd lead vocalist and founding member Ronnie Van Zant, guitarist and vocalist Steve Gaines, backing vocalist Cassie Gaines (Steve's older sister), assistant road manager Dean Kilpatrick, Captain Walter McCreary, and First Officer William John Gray all died as a result of the crash, while twenty others survived.[5] The tragedy abruptly halted Lynyrd Skynyrd's career until Van Zant's brother Johnny reformed the band ten years later. On October 19, 1977, two days after releasing their album Street Survivors, Lynyrd Skynyrd performed at the Greenville Memorial Auditorium in Greenville, South Carolina. The following day they boarded a Convair CV-240 airplane to take them to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where they were to perform at Louisiana State University. The plane ran out of fuel near the end of the flight.[2][6] Upon realizing that the plane had insufficient fuel, the pilots attempted to navigate to McComb Airport, about 10 miles (16 km) northeast of the eventual crash site in Amite County, Mississippi, but soon realized that the plane would not make it. As a last resort, they attempted an emergency landing in an open field about 300 yd (270 m) from where the plane eventually went down.[7] Despite their efforts, at approximately 6:52 pm[1] the plane skimmed about 100 yd (90 m) along the top of the tree line before smashing into a large tree and splitting into pieces near Gillsburg, Mississippi. Early in the flight, witnesses recall that lead vocalist Ronnie Van Zant was lying on the floor with a pillow, having been up most of the previous night and being in need of sleep. Several other passengers passed the time by playing cards. At some point the passengers became aware that something was wrong, and drummer Artimus Pyle recalled entering the flight deck and being told by the terrified captain, Walter McCreary, to go back and strap himself in. With the gravity of the situation clear, the passengers sat in silence, some praying.[8] Guitarist Gary Rossington recalled hearing what sounded like hundreds of baseball bats hitting the plane's fuselage as it began striking trees. The sound got louder and louder until Rossington was knocked unconscious; he awoke some time later on the ground with the plane's door on top of him.[9] Keyboard player Billy Powell's nose was nearly torn off in the crash as he suffered severe facial lacerations and deep lacerations to his right leg. Decades later, he gave an account of the flight's final moments on a VH1 Behind the Music special, stating that Van Zant, who was not wearing a seat belt, was thrown violently from his seat and died immediately when his head hit a tree as the plane broke apart. Some elements of Powell's version of the events, however, have been disputed by both drummer Pyle and Van Zant's widow Judy Van Zant Jenness, who posted the autopsy reports on the band's web site in early 1998, while confirming other aspects of Powell's account.[10] Pyle suffered broken ribs but, with two other crash survivors, managed to leave the crash site and reach a local farm. The farmer mistook them for escaped convicts and fired a shot in the air, warning them to get off his property. Pyle was finally able to convince him that they had been involved in a plane crash and needed help.[6] Van Zant, guitarist/vocalist Steve Gaines, backing vocalist Cassie Gaines (Steve's sister), assistant road manager Dean Kilpatrick, Captain McCreary and First Officer William John Gray all died in the crash.[2][3][4] Most of the survivors had been seated toward the back of the plane.[7] The survivors, all of whom were seriously injured, were transported to different hospitals for treatment and were not immediately aware of the fatalities. Rossington, for instance, was not informed until days later by his mother in the hospital that Van Zant had been killed.[9] Cassie Gaines had been so fearful of flying in the Convair that she had preferred to travel in the band's cramped equipment truck instead, but Van Zant convinced her to board the plane on October 20.[11] Another member of the band's trio of back-up singers (collectively known as the "Honkettes"), JoJo Billingsley, was not on the plane as she was under a doctor's care in Senatobia, Mississippi, dealing with health problems brought about by substance abuse.[12] Billingsley planned on re-joining the tour in Little Rock, Arkansas, on October 23.[13] She reported dreaming of the plane crash and begging guitarist and founding member Allen Collins by telephone not to continue using the Convair.[11] The band's ex-guitarist, Ed King, said later that he "always knew it wasn't gonna end well" for the band due to their penchant for drinking and brawling, but he could never have envisioned it ending the way it did, and recalls being overcome with sadness upon learning of the crash.[14] Lynyrd Skynyrd in 1977 It was later discovered that the very same aircraft had earlier been inspected by members of Aerosmith's flight crew for possible use in their Draw the Line tour, but it was rejected because it was felt that neither the plane nor the crew were up to standard. Aerosmith's assistant chief of flight operations, Zunk Buker, told of observing pilots McCreary and Gray sharing a bottle of Jack Daniel's while he and his father inspected the plane.[15] Aerosmith's touring family were quite shaken after receiving word of the crash, as Steven Tyler and Joe Perry had pressured their management into renting that specific plane for use on their tour.[16] Scottish rock band Nazareth were touring with Lynyrd Skynyrd at the time of the crash, and narrowly avoided boarding the flight themselves. Bassist Pete Agnew explained: “Artimus Pyle had lived in Greensboro, where the plane took off from, and was having a barbecue. They’d invited us along and then on to the next gig with them. But we’d seen their plane – which looked like Gaffa Tape Airlines..." The fabricated excuse of "doing some promo" was ultimately used to get out of attending but Lynyrd Skynyrd's road crew, under the mistaken impression Nazareth had gone to the barbecue, announced that Nazareth too were among the fatalities. Vocalist Dan McCafferty recalled: "At the next gig, when I phoned the wife, she burst into tears with relief."[17] The doomed flight of October 20, 1977, was intended to be the last Lynyrd Skynyrd would make on the Convair. "We were flying in a plane that looked like it belonged to the Clampett family," said Pyle, and the band had decided that their status as one of the world's top rock acts warranted an upgrade. The band had planned on acquiring a Learjet after arriving in Baton Rouge, to replace the 30-year-old plane, which all in the band's circle agreed was well past its prime.[18] Rescuers had to cross a 20-foot-wide (6 m), waist-deep creek and struggle through an overgrown forest, while digging out rescue vehicles that got stuck in the mud.[19] Locals worked with rescue officials and drove victims to the hospital in the back of pick-up trucks. One local resident recalled, "I found someone on the ground alive. When I walked to the other side of the plane, I tripped on another person".[7] Another resident commended the actions of all those who helped and said, "Some of them were out on that highway directing traffic. Some of them went home and got tractors. My wife was home on a CB radio. I'm relaying messages on CB to her, ten miles away".[7] After the accident, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) removed, inspected, and tested the right engine's ignition magneto and found it to be operating normally, concluding, "No mechanical or electrical discrepancies were found during the examination of the right magneto."[1] The inspection also determined that, "All of the fuel cross-feed and fuel dump valves were in the closed position."[1] Billy Powell, among others, spoke of seeing flames shooting out of the plane's right engine during a flight just days before the crash. The subsequent report by the NTSB listed "an engine malfunction of undetermined nature" in that same engine as a contributing factor in the crash.[1] Pyle told Howard Stern years later in an interview that the fuel gauge in the older-model plane was known to malfunction and the pilots had neglected to check the tanks manually before taking off. Toxicology reports from both pilots' autopsies found no traces of alcohol or other drugs.[1] "Crew inattention to fuel supply" was ultimately determined to be responsible for the crash.[1] The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of this accident was fuel exhaustion and total loss of power from both engines due to crew inattention to fuel supply. Contributing to the fuel exhaustion were inadequate flight planning and an engine malfunction of undetermined nature in the right engine that resulted in "torching" and higher-than-normal fuel consumption. —NTSB Accident Report[1] The accident report records that the aircraft was both owned and operated by L & J Company,[1] but the lease to Lynyrd Skynyrd's production company specified that Lynyrd Skynyrd was the operator[1] and therefore was responsible for regulatory compliance (including managing the flight crew).[1] The flight crew were employed by a third party,[1] and the lease period was three weeks.[1] The report records the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) as taking legal action against L & J Company in relation to the operator responsibility,[1] and the analysis section concludes by asking, "How does the system in such a case protect a lessee who is uninformed either by design, by inadvertence, or by his own carelessness?"[1] The crash took place three days following the release of the band’s fifth studio album Street Survivors. The album cover showed the band surrounded by flames. Following the plane crash, MCA replaced the image with a new cover, showing the band against a simple black background, which was on the back of the original sleeve.[20] The site of the crash has become a memorial for fans, rescuers and survivors, with an oak tree that has been carved with Lynyrd Skynyrd iconography, while the site was also the location of a fortieth anniversary memorial by survivors and rescuers.[7] In 2017, surviving members of the band and family of those who died in the crash filed a lawsuit to block production and distribution of a film entitled Street Survivors: The True Story of the Lynyrd Skynyrd Plane Crash. The dispute stemmed from a "blood oath" by survivors, reportedly taken after the crash, never to use the name Lynyrd Skynyrd again in an effort to capitalize on the tragedy that had befallen them.[21] The film premiered at the Hollywood Reel Independent Film Festival on February 18, 2020.[22] List of music group fatalities from aviation accidents ^ a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p "Aircraft Accident Report – L & J Company, Convair 248, N55VM, Gillsburg, Mississippi, October 20, 1977" (PDF). National Transportation Safety Board. June 19, 1978. NTSB-AAR-78-06. Archived (PDF) from the original on February 7, 2020. Retrieved May 19, 2020. - Copy at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. ^ a b c "Aircraft accident Convair CV-240 N55VM Gillsburg, MS". Aviation Safety Network. Flight Safety Foundation. June 19, 1978. Archived from the original on November 5, 2012. Retrieved September 3, 2011. ^ a b Gwinn, John (October 22, 1977). "Why did plane run out of fuel?". Spartanburg Herald-Journal. 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Official Lynyrd Skynyrd website US NTSB Report on Plane Crash Check-Six.com – Lynyrd Skynyrd's Crash – includes full crew and passenger list Official Lynyrd Skynyrd History site Portals: Aviation Rock music United States Retrieved from " The 'Lynyrd Skynyrd' CrashNear Gillsburg, MississippiOctober 20th, 1977"Born in the Bayou"'Lynyrd Skynyrd', one of the most commercially successful and critically acclaimed Southern Rock groups of the 1970's, was founded in the mid-1960s when five friends - singer Ronnie Van Zant, guitarist Gary Rossington, guitarist Allen Collins, bassist Leon Wilkeson, and drummer Bob Burns - formed at Robert E. Lee High School in Jacksonville, Florida, initially as the group, 'My Backyard.' By 1969, the band's name had changed to 'Lynard Skynard' to immortalize (and jab at) their school gym teacher and coach Leonard Skinner, who was regarded by the long haired students as a source of teen angst.In 1972, the band was discovered by producer Al Kooper of “Blood, Sweat, and Tears,” who had attended one of their shows at a club in Atlanta. The band changed the spelling of their name to "Lynyrd Skynyrd", and Kooper signed them to MCA Records, producing their first album, which was self-titled, in 1973, and featured their hit song "Free Bird", which received national airplay, eventually reaching #19 on the Billboard Hot 100 charts.The band enjoyed rising success, and Lynyrd Skynyrd was set to headline at some of the top venues in the nation, including Madison Square Garden -- fulfilling a lifelong dream of Van Zant's – on their “Street Survivor” tour of 1977, which started in Miami, Florida, on October 15th, 1977, and was set to end on February 1st, 1978, in Honolulu. The music group stood on the precipice of becoming one of America's favorite touring bands, coupled with the release of their sixth album, named Street Survivors, on October 17th, 1977, & sold a half million records immediately upon release. Of note, the cover of the album featured a photograph of the band, engulfed in flames. The album also included an order form for a "Lynyrd Skynyrd Survival Kit".“I Ain't The One”As an integral part of the tour, a airplane was required to transport the band, their management, entourage, and roadies, from gig to gig. The aircraft chosen, a Convair 240, was manufactured in 1948, the third one ever built, and originally delivered to Western Airlines on December 30, 1948 and registered NC8401H. The aircraft had gone through many owners before being purchased by the L&J Company of Addison, Texas, in April 1977, been registered as N55VM, and had accumulated over 29,000 flight hours in October of 1977. The plane was powered by two counter-rotating Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engines.Ironically, the same plane had been inspected by members of Aerosmith's flight crew for possible use in the early summer of 1977, but was rejected because it was felt that neither the plane nor the crew were up to standards. In an interview in the book “Walk This Way”, Aerosmith's assistant chief of flight operations Zunk Buker tells of seeing the pilots, Captain Walter W. McCreary and First Officer William J. Gray, Jr., employees of Falcon Aviation, trading a bottle of “Jack Daniels” back and forth while Buker and his father were inspecting the plane. In mid-October, during the tour, Kenneth Peden, a sound technician with Lynyrd Skynyrd, said a six-foot flame was shooting from one of the engines on a flight earlier in the week from Miami to Greenville. South Carolina. Peden also stated that several members had decided to take a vote on whether to continue flying on the plane as soon as it reached their Louisiana State University concert in Baton Rouge, that had been scheduled for that Friday night. Afterwards, Cassie Gaines indicated she wanted to ride with the band's equipment truck, but was talked out of itRonnie Van Zant's last words before he boarded that plane were, "If it's your time to go, it's your time to go.""I Know A Little"The Convair departed the Greenville Downtown Airport (GMU) a little after 4 PM, Eastern time, on October 20th, 1977, and bound for Ryan Airport (BTR) in Baton Rogue. Aboard were the two pilots, and 24 passengers, all associated with Lynyrd Skynyrd in one way or another.The intended route of flight for N55VM was to be, via Instrument Flight Rules, following radio navigation airway V-20 to Electric City, direct Atlanta, direct La Grango, direct Hattiesburg, V-222 to McComb, then V-194 direct to Baton Rouge. The pilot requested an altitude of 12,000 feet and stated that his time enroute would be 2 hours and 43 minutes, and that the aircraft had 5 hours of fuel on board. But, at around 6:42 PM, one of the pilots advised the air traffic controllers, based at Houston Center, "Yes sir, we need to get to an airport, the closest airport you've got, sir!"Houston Center responded by asking the crew if they were in an emergency status. The reply was, "Yes sir, we're low on fuel and we're just about out of it, we want vectors to McComb, post haste please, sir!"Houston Center gave the flight vectors to McComb and advised it to turn to a heading of 250 degrees. The flight did not confirm that a turn was initiated until a few moments later, but then the pilot of N55VM said, "We are not declaring an emergency, but we do need to get close to McComb as straight and good as we can get, sir!"A minute later, the crew of N55VM advised Houston Center saying, “55 Victor Mike, we're out of fuel!" Center replied, "Roger, understand you're out of fuel?" The flight replied, "I'm sorry, it's just an indication of it." The crew did not explain what that indication was. Then, Houston Center requested the flight's altitude. The response from the flight crew was, “We're at four point five." That was the last recorded communication between N55VM and Houston Center. A few minutes later, the sound of an emergency location transmitter was heard by a nearby aircraft, broadcasting from a remote wooded section near Gillsburg, Mississippi.“That Smell”Meanwhile, aboard N55VM, Billy Powell would recall his experiences in an interview with Rolling Stone in November of 1977, “We had decided the night before that we would definitely get rid of the plane in Baton Rouge. So we started partying to celebrate the last flight on it. The right engine started sputtering, and I went up to the cockpit. The pilot said they were just transferring oil from one wing to another, everything's okay. Later, the engine went dead. Artimus [Pyle] and I ran to the cockpit. The pilot was in shock. He said, 'Oh my God, strap in.' Ronnie [