

# What went wrong?

## Federal officials open inquiry into fatal plane crash

SARAH HALASZ GRAHAM  
THE SOUTHERN

National Transportation Safety Board investigators on Sunday morning arrived at the scene of a fatal plane crash that killed four Nashville residents, and a spokeswoman for the group said the results of a preliminary inquiry will be released in 10 days.

The twin-engine private plane, piloted by Marty Gutzler, 48, and carrying wife Kimberly Gutzler, 46; daughters Piper Gutzler, 9, and Sailor Gutzler, 7; and a cousin, Sierra Wilder, 14; went down in rural Lyons County, Kentucky, at about 6 p.m. Friday.

The NTSB is investigating the likely cause of the crash. After releasing the initial findings in 10 days, they will compile a full report over the course of about a year, Air Safety Investigator Heidi Moats said at a Sunday news conference live-streamed on the KFVS-12 website.

The only survivor, Sailor Gutzler, escaped the overturned plane and walked barefoot for 15-to-20 minutes through dark woods, wearing only shorts and a T-shirt, before finding help at a nearby home, said Lt. Brent White, a spokesman for the Kentucky State Police.

It was 38 degrees outside.

"She navigated downed trees. She navigated briars and bushes. She navigated significant ditch lines and was able to make it out to safety," White said at the news conference, adding that she told officials she did so "in order to enable assistance for her family."

The group had been visiting family in Key West, Florida. They departed from Key West earlier Friday on a Piper PA-34 aircraft, destined for Mt. Vernon.

At the news conference, White said Kentucky State Police officials received word from the Federal Aviation Administration's Memphis Center just before 6 p.m. that Gutzler had reported an emergency and requested to be diverted to the nearest airport in order to

**HELP OUT:**  
Find a link to a fund for Sailor Gutzler with this story online at [www.thesouthern.com](http://www.thesouthern.com).



Salvage workers bring out part of a Piper PA-34's fuselage, wing, and landing gear from a crash site Sunday in Kuttawa, Ky. Officials from the National Transportation Safety Board arrived at the crash site Sunday in Kentucky in which a 7-year-old girl survived and four of her family members were killed. Authorities said the child, dressed in a short-sleeve shirt, shorts and one sock, walked about a mile in near-freezing temperatures through thick briar patches and woods before finding a home where she sought help. The plane went down in a deeply wooded area and required special machinery to remove.

### VISITATION

**Family and close friends** of the Gutzlers will have private services. Visitation will be from 4 to 8 p.m. Thursday in the Nashville District 49 Middle School gymnasium at 750 E. Gorman St., according to the Campagna Funeral Homes website.

**Services for Sierra Wilder** will be at 10 a.m. Wednesday at Campagna Funeral Home, 171NW. Court St. in Nashville. Visitation will be from 4 to 8 p.m. Tuesday at the funeral home and 7:30 a.m. to 10 a.m. Wednesday.

make an emergency landing.

The crash site is just seven miles from Kentucky Dam Airport, near Calvert City in western Kentucky, White said.

Then, at 6:34 p.m., the state police fielded a 911 call from Larry Wilkins, of 196 Buckberry Trail in Kattawa, Kentucky, he said. Wilkins reported that a young girl had arrived at his door and told him she'd been involved in a plane crash.

"The little girl come to my door,"



PROVIDED

Sailor Gutzler

Wilkins told the Associated Press. "She was bleeding pretty bad, her legs were bleeding, her face had a bloody nose. She was barefoot, only had one sock on."

White confirmed Sailor Gutzler suffered at least one broken bone in one of her wrists or arms.

Within six minutes of the 911 call, EMS personnel arrived at Wilkins' home. Just before 7 p.m., additional first responders

initiated a search for the downed plane, White said. A trooper located the wreckage at 8:50 p.m.

White said the bodies of the four deceased victims — who appeared to be strapped to their seats when emergency officials arrived — were transported to the Kentucky State Medical Examiner's office in Lexington, Kentucky, for autopsy.

The crash site lies in a 1,200- to 1,500-acre wooded area in between KY 1271, KY 810 South and Chestnut Oak Road, White said.

### 'The man, the machine and the environment'

In the days and months ahead, NTSB investigators will look into "the man, the machine and the environment" as they piece together the final moments of the flight, Moats said.

The investigators' final report will be submitted to the NTSB's five-member safety board, which will make a final determination on the cause of the wreck.

Moats said a salvage crew already is on site and will transport the wreckage to a nearby facility, where investigators can take a



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closer look at the engine and other components of the six-passenger plane, Moats said.

NTSB investigators have yet to interview Sailor Gutzler, but Moats said her eyewitness account is likely to help.

"Having someone that is a witness always helps us in the investigation," she said. "It gives us, kind of, a storyline, and it's helpful in any situation."

There was evidence of a post-impact fire, she said.

### 'Divine intervention'

In the moments after the crash, Sailor Gutzler used her uninjured arm to free herself from the cabin, and White said she considered using a stick and the nearby flames to make a torch, but she couldn't find the right piece of wood.

After setting off into the damp, misty woods, Sailor trudged through ravines and valleys, White said. He attributed her finding Wilkins' house to "divine intervention."

"She absolutely went to probably the nearest house that she could have," he said. "It was ... a considerable feat for her to do that."

White said he was the second

responder to arrive at Wilkins' house. Although Wilkins had told him Sailor was in shock, White said he was struck by how "amazingly calm" and coherent she was.

He said Sailor realized her family likely had died, but she "hoped that they were just sleeping."

Kent Plotner, a family friend of the Gutzler's, released a statement on their behalf on Saturday: "The Gutzler family mourns the loss of Marty, Kim and Piper Gutzler and Sierra Wilder. We are devastated by this loss, but are confident that they rest in God's loving arms. We ask that you respect our privacy at this difficult time. Please pray for us, especially for Sailor Gutzler."

Plotner said family members have set up an online donation fund to benefit Sailor.

The website states donations will "help Sailor obtain the emotional, physical and educational support she will need in the years to come" and showcases photos of the family, including a snapshot of a smiling blue-eyed girl in a bejeweled pink dress, waving at the camera.

White said Sailor was taken to a hospital in Paducah, where she was treated for her injuries and released to family members at about 1:15 a.m. Saturday morning.

### 'The safest and best way'

The plane carrying the Gutzler family and Sierra Wilder, a Piper PA-34, is a relatively standard private commuter plane, said Airport Director Chris Collins, of Mount Vernon Outland Airport.

"You wouldn't use an airplane like this to fly to LA, to go coast-to-coast," he said. "But it's perfectly capable of doing what they were doing."

Collins said he's known Marty Gutzler since the early 1990s, and Gutzler has been flying as long as he can remember.

"Marty just had such a positive attitude, and he never knew a stranger," Collins said. "He was just a fun guy to be around."

Collins hadn't seen Gutzler in about a month, he said, but he knew the family was flying back Friday using an "instrument flight plan," which allows the pilot to be in direct communication with air traffic controllers from take-off to touchdown.

It's the same communication plan used by major airlines, and Collins said it indicates Gutzler was taking safety precautions to protect his family.

He was flying "the safest and best way possible," Collins said.

sarah.graham@thesouthern.com

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