

# The Dahlonega Nugget

*'The Gold of the News'*  
thedahloneganugget.com

## NEWS

### Officials take to the skies in simulated crash search

By Matt Aiken

Published:

Wednesday, March 23, 2011 10:25 AM EDT

"I love it when a plan comes together," said Lt. Ross Statham of the U.S. Civil Air Patrol as he summed up the multi-agency search and rescue operation that filled the woods of western Lumpkin County earlier this month.

That plan involved an extensive search for the shell of a grounded single-engine Cessna which came to rest in the brush near Winding Stair Gap.

Though the crash site might have looked authentic from above, the plane actually arrived in the remote area by trailer.

"You know why we liked Winding Stair Gap?" said Statham with a laugh. "Because it's a pain in the butt to get there."

This was all part of the drill, a Dahlonega Squadron Civil Air Patrol (CAP) organized exercise meant to sharpen the rescue skills and communication know-how of surrounding agencies in case of an actual emergency.

As in most small aircraft wrecks, CAP pilots were given precious little info to go on.

"According to the exercise the plane was to have taken off from a place in Florida," said Statham. "They were headed to the midwest and disappeared and they suspected that they were somewhere in western Lumpkin County."

The pilots of two CAP planes performed what's called a line search of the wooded region and wound up finding the smoking plane within 45 minutes.

"We used a smudge pot to simulate a hot engine," Statham said.

But this was just the beginning.

"We were not responsible for the crash or the aid of the victims," said Statham. "Our responsibilities are that we work for the local agencies."

One of those agencies was the Lumpkin County Fire Department, which was stationed in the area while the overhead search continued.

"We were deployed to stage at various locations in the mountains," said Deputy Fire Chief Robbie Hughey. "And then we were told by their command where they were located and we moved to the crash site."

Then as the dazed "victims" of the crash wandered off into the woods, Dawson County's search dog team was called to the scene to sniff out the trail of the wounded.

One of the play-acting survivors was actually found more than half a mile from the site.

Print Page



---Searching for a Cessna---Lt. Brad Prater of the Civil Air Patrol steadies a trailer-bound Cessna as it's hidden in a wooded area of western Lumpkin County.

Last year just such a search was conducted over the mountainous areas of the county when a couple disappeared while flying from Florida to Brasstown Bald. The remains of their helicopter were spotted by CAP pilots three days later.

This U.S. Air Force Auxiliary affiliated group performs about 95 percent of all overhead search and rescue missions in the area, said Statham, which makes the recent drill all the more imperative.

"What we were testing was not so much the ability to find the victim but we were really testing how we work together," said Statham. "How are you gonna do that when you're out in the woods and you can't get cell phone coverage? This is why we had the exercise."

Hughey agreed.

"It's absolutely necessary," he said. "It's not just for aircraft either. If we have lost people up there which happens all the time, we know we've got a great resource with them."

Copyright © 2011 - The Dahlonge Nugget

[\[«\] Return to Home](#) | [\[x\] Close Window](#)