

## Mount Charleston memorial gains support

### Book tells tale of Cold War-era airplane disaster

By KEITH ROGERS  
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#### ON THE WEB

For details on reserving a seat on the tour, contact Lane Swainston at 433-6328 or visit the Web site:  
[coldwarmonument.org](http://coldwarmonument.org)



Propeller blades from a C-54 transport plane that crashed in 1955 lie near the top of Mount Charleston on Aug. 4, 2001, when hikers made their way to the site to recover them for a memorial.

#### Review-Journal

Ten years ago Steve Ririe sat by remnants of a Cold War-era aircraft wreck near the top of Mount Charleston, and wondered how the plane crashed and how family members of the 14 who died in it have endured.

It puzzled him so much that he obtained declassified documents from the government and set out to memorialize the "silent heroes," as he called them, with a monument for visitors to observe the site.

Now, the effort will get a financial boost Saturday with proceeds from a book-signing and one Oct. 25 by author Kyril D. Plaskon.

In 2001, with many of the heroes' family members on hand, Ririe and a team of monument backers hiked to the wreckage site and recovered a damaged propeller from the C-54 transport plane that crashed on Nov. 17, 1955.

From there, Ririe launched a concept for a monument using the rebuilt propeller as a centerpiece.

Bills this year by Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., and Rep. Shelley Berkley, D-Nev., are pending in Congress to build a national memorial based on Ririe's idea.

If constructed on the mountain, it would be symbolic of the scientists and military personnel who were on their way to Area 51 to test the U-2 spy plane when the transport plane impacted the mountain top. It would also serve as an honor to all of America's covert workers, as described by Reid in the book's foreword.

Plaskon's 203-page book, *Silent Heroes of the Cold War Declassified*, published this month by Stephens Press (part of the Stephens Media Group, which owns the Review-Journal) recounts the crash and describes the lives of the men who were on board the plane.

"There are so many people in town who have been up there and seen it. A lot of them have a connection to the plane crash and curiosity," Ririe said about the book's release this week.

"My hope is they'll read the book and get some understanding about these families and share the same urgency I have to build a memorial," Ririe said.

Plaskon profiles the men who were engineers, crew members and escort personnel flying under radio silence from Burbank, Calif., bound for the secret "Watertown" airstrip along Nevada's dry Groom Lake bed, 90 miles north of the Las Vegas Valley. Investigators later determined the pilot, 1st Lt. George M. Pappas, had become disoriented under the conditions and got caught up in snow flurries and a powerful crosswind that pushed the plane into a canyon heading toward Charleston Peak.

Realizing too late that the plane was on a collision course with the mountain, Pappas in the last seconds tried to position the plane to clear the peak. Instead, the aircraft clipped the ridge 50 feet below the crest, skipped about 60 feet, and slid another 20 feet before it came to a rest and partially burned.

The Central Intelligence Agency had a young agent on board, Terence J. O'Donnell, whose job was to provide security for the U-2 project. For decades after the crash, O'Donnell's mother, Grace, never knew the full details of what happened. Several days after the plane crash the CIA sent his body in a sealed casket to New York's Penn Station for a memorial service and burial.

"Little did she know, her son would essentially be taken off the map, entering a netherworld, obscured by secrets, a culture of classified government projects to which even a son's mother is not privy," Plaskon wrote.

"Today, most people who visit that cemetery go to see a very different hero, Babe Ruth. Little do they know the quiet remembrance of another more obscure and dedicated hero, Terence O'Donnell, is right nearby," Plaskon wrote in the book.

Saturday's book-signing fund-raiser will be from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Kyle Canyon ranger station. The Atomic Testing Museum, 755 E. Flamingo Road, will host the Oct. 25 book signing from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. with the propeller on display.

A fund-raiser in the form of a guided tour of the Nevada Test Site will be Dec. 12. A \$200 donation is required that includes a copy of the book, T-shirt and lunch. There are about 40 seats available for U.S. citizens who are 18 or older.

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