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8 survive crash of plane; snow slows rescuers

DURANGO, Colo. (AP) — Survivors of a commuter airplane crash that killed nine people managed a "superhuman feat" by walking 1 1/2 miles through darkness, tangled brush and waist-deep snow, authorities said Wednesday.

The only survivor with boots on, 39-year-old Peter Schauer of Booneville, Mo., made his way to a farmhouse and summoned help after Tuesday night's Continental Express crash.

Six others also made their way out, while an eighth survivor was rescued from the crash site.

"Under normal conditions, nobody could walk through this," La Plata sheriff's Sgt. Dan Bender said. "But the survivors were not under normal conditions. Adrenalin, shock, whatever — they did a superhuman feat."

The crash, which occurred in thick brushland 10 miles east of this southwestern Colorado city, demolished the plane's nose, but spared passengers seated in the rear.

Officials said the plane, en route from Denver, went down minutes after flight controllers cleared it to land at 7:05 p.m. at La Plata County Airport, about five miles from the crash site.

Wednesday from his hospital room at Mercy Medical Center in Durango, Schauer said, "I said, 'I'm going to get help,' and I was gone. Nobody could keep up with me."

He said he climbed to the top of a hill and used lights in the distance to guide him.

"I would count 50 steps and then rest," he said. "I was hurt and it was exhausting. The snow was up to my waist, and I'm over six feet. At times I hit some gullies and the snow went up to my shoulders."

Behind Schauer were six other passengers, one a 23-month-old girl, who made their way to a highway.

Thelma Tate, 79, answered a knock at her door about a half-hour after the plane went down to find Schauer limping and shivering outside.

"I thought maybe he had been in a bad car wreck," Tate said.

Sheriff Bill Gardner said it took them more than an hour to reach the crash site, guided by Schauer's footprints.

Some traveled on skis carrying flashlights and battery-powered headlamps. Snow tractors and a bulldozer were used to cut a trail through the scrub oak and brush along the rolling hills and hummocks.

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Authorities say teens killed 86-year-old man to obtain jar of pennies

AUSTIN, Minn. (AP) — Neighbors of an 86-year-old man who police say was killed by two teen-agers for a jar of pennies shake their heads in disbelief when they talk about the victim and the two 16-year-olds.

"You feel it's going to happen in Chicago or New York; now it's next door," said Jane Felten, a secretary at St. Augustine Roman Catholic Church, where both the victim, Michael L. Fink, and the suspects attended services.

"They murdered this man for a jarful of pennies," Carol Kuettnier, executive director of the Mower County Senior Center, where Fink was a frequent visitor, said.

Police arrested the teen-agers, whose names have not been released because they are juveniles, on Monday, three days after a neighbor found Fink's home on fire. Authorities believe the young men set fire to the house after the robbery to disguise the crime, Police Chief Donald Hoffman said.

The Rev. Charles Collins, of LeRoy, has known both youths since his days as an assistant pastor at St. Augustine from 1981-86. He now teaches next door at Pacelli High School, the parochial school that the teen-agers attended.

"One was in constant trouble," Collins said. "Some even pinned his early problems on the fact he was super-bright. The other one, everybody was just stunned. He was never a discipline problem."

The Rev. Charles Quinn, who has been pastor at St. Augustine for

eight years, said, "There's a sense of community shame in that we are one family and that this could have happened."

Quinn said he saw Fink, a widower with three children, at Mass a few times every week.

"He was this tall, gangly man who shuffled along," he said. "I think people would think he was crotchety because he was tone deaf and wouldn't answer."

That image belied Fink's true nature, Quinn said.

"He was a gentle man," he said.

As for the teen-agers' families, the priest described them as "very fine people and, I am sure, traumatized by the whole thing."

Each youth has been charged in juvenile court with two counts of first-degree murder, one count of aggravated robbery and one count of arson, Mower County Attorney Nancy Evans said. They are to be transferred from the Mower County Jail to a juvenile detention center in Red Wing pending further court proceedings.

The two were arrested Monday afternoon when their parents took them in to be interviewed by authorities.

The pennies and a hunting knife, which authorities say was used to stab Fink, were found during a search of the boys' homes.

An autopsy showed that Fink, who had multiple stab wounds and his throat cut, died of a stab wound to the heart.

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Federal safety agency blames drugs, alcohol for Amtrak collision

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal safety agency on Wednesday blamed impairment from drugs and the failure to require automatic braking devices on freight trains for the collision of an Amtrak passenger train and a string of freight locomotives a year ago.

The crash near Chase, Md., outside Baltimore, was the worst in Amtrak's history, killing 16 people and injuring 175. The accident also refocused attention on drug use in the railroad industry.

The National Transportation Safety Board concluded after a year-long investigation that the probable cause of the crash was the impairment of Conrail engineer Ricky Gates from marijuana and possibly alcohol.

Gates and his brakeman, Edward Cromwell, were the only people aboard the three Conrail locomotives when they passed two slow-down signals and a stop signal and screeched into the path of the Amtrak train, which was traveling at 125 mph.

The NTSB said the effects of the drug use by Gates and Cromwell caused them not to notice warning signals both inside the locomotive cab and over the tracks until it was too late to make a safe stop.

Investigators said the Conrail locomotives never went slower than 60 mph before Gates frantically applied the emergency brakes in the last seconds. Had the available warnings been heeded, Gates could have halted with more than 2,000 feet to spare, the report said.

While the focus of the NTSB investigation has been drug use by the two Conrail employees, the safety board also took Amtrak and the Federal Railroad Administration to task for not requiring that all freight trains operating in the busy Northeast corridor be equipped with backup automatic braking devices.

That brought a sharp response from FRA Administrator John Riley. He acknowledged that federal agencies "mishandled" the automatic train braking issue over the past decade but maintained that the NTSB is as much at fault as anybody.

The safety board "ought to be candid enough to add itself to the agencies that mishandled this issue."

There's enough blame to go around," Riley said.

While the NTSB called for automatic braking equipment on freight trains after an accident in 1978 it withdrew the recommendation four years later and influenced the actions of other federal officials, he argued.

Since the Amtrak accident, Riley's agency has directed all trains in the Northeast corridor to have the automatic braking equipment.

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