

AUGUST 2, 1999

People

we

John F.
Kennedy Jr.
1960-1999

CHARMED LIFE, TRAGIC DEATH

Carolyn Bessette
Kennedy
1966-1999



AOL Keyword: People



At dusk on July 19, the flag was lowered to half-staff outside the Kennedy compound in Hyannisport.

Lost in the Night

Leading lives that had seemed touched by magic, John Kennedy Jr. and his wife, Carolyn, die in a plane crash, and a nation recoils in grief

the tragedy

Awaiting further news of the crash search on July 19, a stoic Ethel Kennedy heads home in Hyannisport after going sailing with (from left) daughter-in-law Mary, son Douglas, Father Michael Kennedy, a cousin, son Max and his wife, Vicki.



RICK FRIEDMAN/BLACK STAR

On July 20, Massachusetts State Police divers begin a day of searching for the wreckage of JFK Jr.'s plane in the waters west of Martha's Vineyard.

On a business trip to Toronto five days before his death, John F. Kennedy Jr. was hobbling around on a left ankle broken in a recent paragliding accident. His crutches scarcely slowed him down. Keith Stein, 35, the Toronto businessman who had helped broker a meeting with a potential investor in Kennedy's *George* magazine, marveled at his guest's energy and fascination with the people and things around him. "He was sticking his head out the car window all the time," says

Stein, "curious about everything." When it was time to leave, Kennedy, who had flown in on his private plane from Martha's Vineyard, Mass., with a flight instructor, talked about his love of flying. He lamented that on the trip back to New York he wouldn't have a chance to fly at night, which he especially enjoyed because of the navigation challenges.

Kennedy always exhibited a healthy skepticism about the mythology surrounding his family, yet with his natural passion, daring and style, he effortlessly seemed to embody it. When the single-engine Piper Saratoga that he was piloting plunged into the waters off Martha's Vineyard on the night of July 16, killing Kennedy, 38, his wife, Carolyn Bessette Kennedy, 33, and her sister Lauren Bessette, 34, it seemed impossible that life lived so vibrantly could so suddenly end. Across the nation, indeed around the world, stricken citizens anxiously monitored the deluge of television, radio and print coverage of the tragedy. On vacation in the Italian Alps, Pope John Paul II sent word he was saying a prayer for the families.

Kennedy had been flying to Martha's Vineyard—about six miles off the coast of Cape Cod—nearly every weekend this summer, staying with Carolyn at the 375-acre estate near Gay Head that he had inherited with his sister Car-



MIKE SEGAL/REUTERS

RICK FRIEDMAN/BLACK STAR



Their wedding postponed, Rory Kennedy and Mark Bailey pace a Hyannisport dock.

oline Kennedy Schlossberg after their mother Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's death in 1994. Around the island, John, especially, was a familiar figure, often Rollerblading or riding his bike along the narrow roads or cruising in his beloved vintage Pontiac GTO convertible. About three years ago he had bought his first aircraft, a two-cylinder ultralight, essentially a seat with propeller and wings attached, that startled his neighbors. "They didn't know what it was," says Brenda Hayden, manager of the Broken

saturday, they had driven to the scruffy Lampost bar in nearby Oak Bluffs for a round of margaritas with friends. When it came time to settle the bill, the friends paid. Then, Bessette did something that their waitress that night, Meredith Katz, 20, a student at Tulane University, will always remember. She discreetly took Katz aside to make sure the tip was enough. Just to make sure, Bessette gave Katz another \$15 or \$20, saying, "I know how expensive rents are here on the island."



RON FREEMAN

Arrow Sandwich Company in Gay Head, where John frequently stopped for juice or water when exercising. "It made this weird noise, like a flying lawn mower. But he really seemed excited about it, because he was always in it."

Kennedy and Bessette had earned a reputation for graciousness during their stays on the Vineyard. The weekend before the crash the couple had stopped by the Wharf, a no-frills seafood restaurant in Edgartown. Around midnight Sat-

On July 20, JFK Jr.'s sister Caroline and her husband, Edwin Schlossberg, return to their summer home in Sagaponack, N.Y., after a somber morning bike ride a day after their 13th wedding anniversary.

After his visit to Toronto the following Monday, the rest of Kennedy's week was, typically, filled with work and play. On Tuesday evening he dropped by an ad agency party in downtown Manhattan, but stayed only half an hour. He apologized to his host that he was afraid of re-injuring his ankle on the slippery floor. Two days later, he had lunch at the posh San Domenico restaurant, where he said hi to Diane Sawyer, and reportedly worked out for two hours at a Manhattan gym, broken ankle and all. That night he took in a Yankees game with three friends.

Friday morning, Kennedy kept a doctor's appointment at Lenox Hill Hospital, which may have been for a checkup on his ankle. Around 6 p.m. he headed for Essex County Airport in northern New Jersey, where he would meet Carolyn and Lauren to fly to Massachusetts. The plan was to deliver Lauren to Martha's Vineyard, then continue on with a short hop to Hyannis, on the Cape. John and Carolyn would be attending the wedding of his cousin Rory Kennedy, 30, a documentary filmmaker who is Bobby and Ethel's youngest child, to Mark Bailey, 30, a writer who also works in film.

It is not entirely clear how Carolyn felt about her husband's piloting. According to some reports, she had been known to drive between New York and Massachusetts rather than fly with him. Jackie biographer C. David Heymann says John told him in the week before the crash, "Nobody likes flying with me, including my wife. . . . I'm no Charles Lindbergh." Last year he told *USA Today*, "The only person I've been able to get to go up with me—who looks forward to it as much as I do—is my wife."

In any case, Kennedy and his passengers arrived at the New Jersey airport on Friday behind schedule, delayed by heavy traffic out of New York City. Kennedy, after buying a banana and a bottle of water for a snack at a local gas-station store, pulled into the airport in a white convertible around 8 p.m., dressed casually in a white tank top and still limping; Carolyn, wearing a black summer suit, came by means of a car service shortly afterward. (It is unclear when Lauren, an investment banker, arrived.) Kennedy had switched his base of operations to Essex airport from nearby Teterboro airport, which has a celebrity clientele including Harrison Ford, Bill Cosby and John Travolta, because he preferred the laid-back atmosphere. "He was just one of the guys," says Larry Lorenzo, owner of the Caldwell Flight Academy. "He'd hang out like everybody else and talk about flying."

Kennedy immediately started getting his Piper

Saratoga II ready for takeoff. He was proud of the six-seater plane, which he had recently bought secondhand for an estimated \$300,000. He took off from runway 22 at 8:38, just after sunset, and headed northeast. At the time, an oppressive heat wave had left skies so hazy that one pilot at Essex airport had scrubbed his own plans to fly to the Vineyard. Kennedy, who had logged about 300 hours aloft, was authorized to pilot a plane only under visual flight rules, meaning that visibility had to be greater than three miles so he would not have to rely on instruments. That evening, visibility was somewhere between four and five miles—above the visual flight rules minimum but hardly ideal flying conditions. Lorenzo believes Kennedy had logged more than half of the roughly 50 hours of flight time he needed to achieve his instrument rating, which would have allowed him to fly in bad weather, relying on gauges in the plane to navigate and maneuver.

Kennedy may or may not have been pushing the envelope when he took off so late on a nearly moonless night for a flight over water, where the horizon disappears and even a highly skilled pilot may have difficulty judging a plane's direction and altitude. He certainly had the kind of confidence that borders on daring. He enjoyed paragliding, ocean kayaking and ice climbing, and during a recent visit to Rapid City, S.Dak., he had even sought permission (unsuccessfully) to rappel down the face of Mount Rushmore. But around the Essex airport he was known as a prudent flier. Charter pilot Ethan Bagg says Kennedy often had him fly him to Martha's Vineyard when weather conditions were iffy. "He was smart enough to know his limitations," says Bagg.

On Friday night, Kennedy apparently took the usual route to the Vineyard, hugging the Connecticut coastline at 5,600 feet before heading out in the vicinity of Block Island to cross 40 miles of ocean to his destination. He did not contact any of the control towers along the way to get weather updates, and at 9:39 a blip on the radar screen, later determined to be Kennedy's plane, began to lose altitude quickly,



Days before the accident, John told an acquaintance that he and Carolyn (with sister Lauren Besette, left, recently in New York City) might leave Manhattan when they had children.

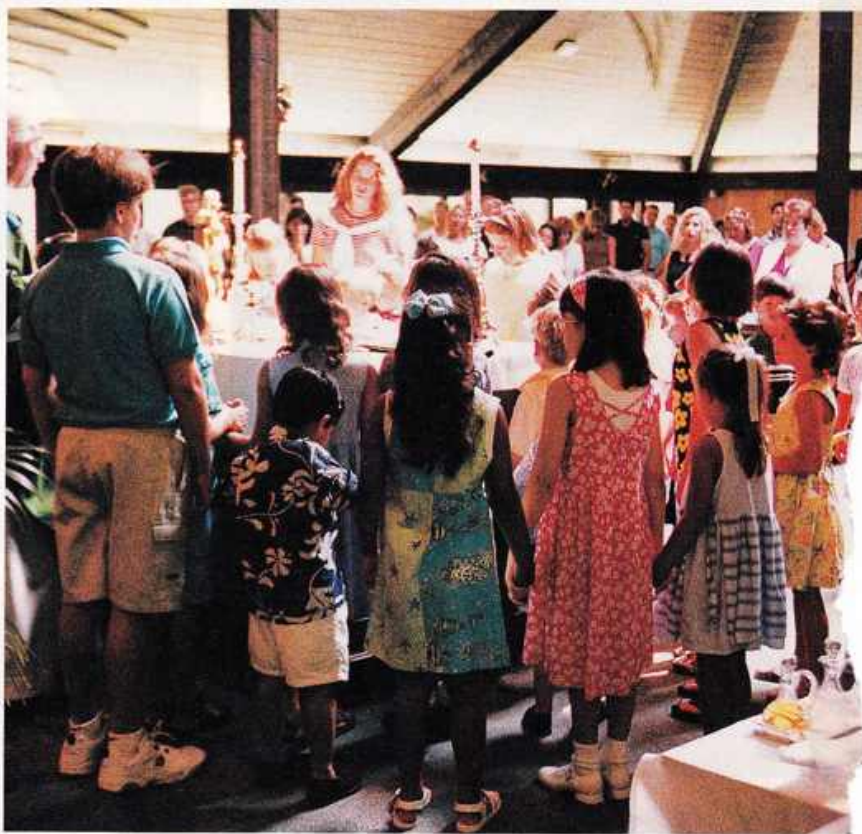
"He has lost a son," says columnist Mike Barnicle of Ted Kennedy (taking nephew John Jr. and his wife, Carolyn, for a sail on Thanksgiving weekend 1997 in Hyannisport).

the tragedy

at a point just 18 miles from the Martha's Vineyard airport. In the space of 14 seconds before going off the radar, the craft dropped from 2,600 feet to 1,100 feet, descending at more than 5,000 feet per minute—at least eight times faster than a single engine plane would normally come down for a landing. In those last seconds, experts say, the wind would be roaring past the cockpit, leaving no doubt that the plane was in trouble. The point of impact was believed to be only about seven miles from the Gay Head beaches John had known for years.

Meanwhile, at the Kennedy compound in Hyannisport, the rehearsal dinner for Rory's wedding was already under way. "They were having a great time," says one family friend. "They made a quilt for Rory and Mark, and everyone made a square with a footprint or handprint or something representing them." John and Carolyn were due on Martha's Vineyard sometime after 9. When the plane failed to arrive, a couple who had come to meet Lauren Bessette voiced concern to an airport employee, Adam Budd. At 10:05, Budd, 21, phoned the Federal Aviation Administration in Bridgeport, Conn., and asked if the plane could be traced, but no action was taken. (The FAA later said the caller hadn't made it clear that the plane was overdue and released a transcript that seemed to confirm that.) When midnight came and went, a Kennedy family friend in Hyannisport phoned the Coast Guard. First, other airfields were contacted to see if the plane had diverted there. By 8 o'clock Saturday morning, dozens of aircraft and ships were deployed from ports and airfields all along the coast to begin the search.

Throughout the next morning an air of disbelief hung over the compound. (Sister Caroline and her husband, Ed Schlossberg, on a rafting vacation in Idaho with their three children, had been informed at 4:30 a.m. local time by police that the plane was missing.) At an impromptu mass on Ethel's porch, Joe Kennedy, Bobby's oldest son, exhorted the 50 or so family members and friends who were keeping vigil not to give up hope. The group then ate a light lunch, keeping TV and radios on at all times, waiting for any word. By mid-afternoon, when luggage bearing Lauren Bessette's name was pulled from the Martha's Vineyard surf, the gloom deepened. Yet even then there was a fierce refusal to believe that anything could have happened to John and his companions. "They were saying, 'There's still hope. Never say never,'" recalls a family friend who was inside the compound. All the same, that evening when one of Joe Kennedy's 18-year-old twin sons



Children at St. Michael's Church in Greenwich, Conn., gather around the altar on Sun., July 18, to pray for the souls of John and Carolyn Kennedy and Lauren Bessette.

A nation in mourning made impromptu memorials outside John and Carolyn's New York City apartment in Tribeca (right), on Martha's Vineyard, at Arlington National Cemetery, and at President Kennedy's birthplace in Brookline, Mass.



stopped by Baxter's restaurant in Hyannis to pick up some seafood dinners and was asked how things were going at the compound, he replied sadly, "Oh, it's awful over there."

But by Monday it was clear beyond doubt there would be no survivors. In Hyannisport, the wedding tent was taken down, the flag lowered to half-staff. Speaking for the Kennedy family, John's uncle Ted issued a statement. "We are filled with unspeakable grief and sadness," it began, and went on to express the family's love for its lost son and his wife, its respect and sympathy for the Bessette family, its gratitude to the searchers who had tried so hard to find a miracle. Ted had earlier traveled to the Schlossberg residence in Sagaponack, N.Y., where he tried to ease the grief by playing basketball with Caroline's children. At home in Greenwich, Conn., Ann and Richard Freeman, Carolyn and Lauren's mother and stepfather, along with William Bessette, the girls' father, sent word through a spokesperson: "John and Carolyn were true soulmates. . . . We take solace in the thought that together they will comfort Lauren for eter-



"They had their own special brand of magic," said Sen. Ted Kennedy of the couple (on John's 38th birthday last Nov. 25).

nity." Early on Wednesday, July 21, came word that John Kennedy's body, and parts of his plane, had been found in about 100 feet of water a few miles off Gay Head.

At best it will take months to determine what caused the Kennedy plane to crash, if indeed the causes can ever be determined. National Transportation Safety Board investigators will subject any recovered debris to lengthy analysis before venturing any opinions. One possible explanation was suggested by Dr. Bob Arnot, chief medical corre-

spondent for NBC, who was flying his own private plane past Martha's Vineyard and on to nearby Nantucket Island that same night, about a half-hour ahead of Kennedy. The flight went routinely, says Arnot, until, about three miles off Gay Head, he hit a wall of haze that obscured everything around him. Arnot, a pilot with 5,000 hours of experience, had to fly the rest of the way using his instruments. In such conditions a pilot can easily become disoriented, finding it difficult to tell, literally, which way is up. When that happens, it is all too easy for a flier to slip into a dive from which he cannot pull out. "I haven't been in conditions like that for years," says Arnot. "I have 5,000 hours and I had a problem. At 100 hours of flying [experience] I would have been very worried."

The Monday after the scheduled wedding, Kennedy, who was a quiet supporter of many charitable organizations, had an appointment in New York City with author A.E. Hotchner and actor Paul Newman to make plans for an awards ceremony to honor philanthropic companies. Hotchner had looked forward to the meeting. Kennedy "was always antic and playful," says Hotchner, but he took his responsibilities seriously. In the end, it seems, it was the way he had been raised, the only way he could live. Whatever may have happened on that dark final night, he was a man who, in all his full and adventurous years, rarely lost his bearings in life.

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