

Missoula crash victim: 'Great Christian young man'

Saturday, September 6, 2008

By KATIE OYAN Associated Press

HELENA - The 25-year-old Missoula man who died this week in an air tanker crash in Nevada was a "super guy" who loved aviation and moved to Montana to pursue his dream, friends and family members said Thursday.

Zach VanderGriend, an airplane mechanic, was one of three men aboard the Lockheed P2V-7 that went down

shortly after taking off from Reno-Stead Airport on a firefighting mission. Also killed in the crash Monday were pilot Calvin Gene Wahlstrom, 61, of Hunstville, Utah, and co-pilot Greg "Gonzo" Gonsioroski, 41, of Baker.

The plane was owned by Neptune Aviation Services Inc. of Missoula.

VanderGriend was a "great Christian young man who lived his faith every day," said his father, Steve VanderGriend of Gig Harbor, Wash. He became interested in flying as a child and developed a passion for it, earning his private pilot's license at age 17.

VanderGriend studied at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and Moody Aviation in Spokane before graduating from Grace University in Omaha, Neb.

He started looking for jobs and found one at Neptune. He moved to Missoula in late May.

"The first time he came in contact with Neptune, he knew without a shadow of a doubt that's where he wanted to be," Steve VanderGriend said. "He was passionate about it. He loved the people he worked with and the good that he was doing in the world through fighting fires."

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