

Presidential Mission

For his summer vacation in 1996, President Bill Clinton traveled to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. From there, the president was scheduled to fly to New York for a fiftieth birthday party. Whenever the president travels, his Secret Service detail, their equipment, and security vehicles go along. Moving the Secret Service's vehicles from one destination to the next is the mission of the Air Force's Air Mobility Command. Kevin N. Earnest, Clemson Class of 1988, was the pilot of an Air Mobility Command C-130 aircraft supporting the presidential trip.



Earnest was a mechanical engineering major from Kingsport, Tennessee. An Eagle Scout, he had served as student body president of his high school and had earned his pilot's certificate while still a student there. At Clemson, Earnest continued his record of achievement. He was an Air Force ROTC cadet earning the commission of a second lieutenant. He served as president of the Student Alumni Council and was selected for membership in Tiger Brotherhood, Blue Key, and Mortar Board.

By the summer of 1996, Captain Earnest was assigned to Dyess Air Force Base in Abilene, Texas. On Saturday, August 17, Earnest and his crew of seven other Air Force personnel, were dispatched to Jackson Hole Airport to load one of the presidential security vehicles into their C-130 Hercules transport aircraft and deliver it to New York City, the president's next scheduled stop. Jackson Hole's is the only airport located wholly inside a national park. It rests on a plateau near the base of the spectacular Tetons mountain range, the peaks of which rise to heights of more than 13,700 feet.



Earnest's aircraft took off at about 10:45 pm. Approximately three minutes into the flight, fifteen miles southeast of the airport, the C-130 slammed into the side of Sheep Mountain, 1,000 feet below the peak's 11,300-foot summit. The airplane exploded in a fireball seen twenty miles away at Teton Village resort community. Earnest, his crewmates, and a Secret Service agent were killed. Searchers were able to reach the crash site only on foot or by horseback. The force of the impact and resulting explosion demolished the large airplane. The Air Force would subsequently

attribute the accident to the crew's failure "to monitor the aircraft's position and flight path relative to high terrain surrounding the Jackson Hole Airport."

In the fall of 1997, three of Kevin Earnest's friends established the Captain Kevin N. Earnest Leadership Award to be presented annually to a rising Clemson Air Force ROTC senior cadet who demonstrates outstanding leadership in the program and within other student organizations.

Captain Earnest and the other victims of the crash are memorialized on a plaque near Sheep Mountain, Wyoming.

