

Silent Heroes of the Cold War National Memorial

The Silent Heroes of the Cold War National Memorial honors thousands of individuals who worked covertly for the United States government to ensure America's ongoing freedom during the Cold War. Many of these paid the ultimate price with their very lives, including 14 people on a fatal United States Air Force (USAF) flight that crashed on Charleston Peak in 1955. The fate of the plane and crew might still be a mystery today had it not been for the Boy Scout leader who in 1998 began a long and difficult journey to uncover the truth about the crash at the top of the mountain.

That America emerged victorious from the Cold War was due largely in part to those who worked in secret. Without their contributions, the Cold War could very well have had a different ending."

—Silent Heroes of the Cold War
Chairman Steve Ririe

On November 17, 1955, at 7:25 a.m., USAF military aircraft 9068 departed from Burbank, California, with a crew, engineers, scientists, and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) personnel on a routine flight bound for Watertown, Nevada, now known as Area 51. At 8:40 a.m. the aircraft was reported missing.

Due to the super-secret nature of the work being conducted by the 14 men aboard the doomed flight, their fate remained classified for over 40 years following the crash. Also classified as top-secret was the account of those who risked their lives when they braved subzero temperatures at 11,500 feet in elevation during rescue and recovery operations on Charleston Peak.

Family and friends endured years of uncertainty following the disappearance of their loved ones—their grief lacking a true sense of closure—until Las Vegas resident and Boy Scout leader Steve Ririe succeeded in uncovering the story behind the wreckage that littered the mountain slope near the Charleston Peak summit—debris that he had seen often during decades of hiking on Mt. Charleston.

Ririe's two-year investigation involved seeking records from the USAF, National Archives, and the CIA. Eventually he found the official accident report that the CIA had declassified, released, and sent to Maxwell Air Force Base in September 1998, ironically the same month and year that Ririe had first felt compelled to research the crash. Marian Kennedy, a Las Vegas resident with a talent for finding people, helped locate the 14 families who finally learned the circumstances surrounding their loved ones' deaths. Learning the truth surfaced painful memories but offered opportunities for closure.

The families' appreciation and the encouragement of State Senator Ray Rawson drove Ririe's resolve to envision and spearhead building a memorial—not only for the 14 lost when USAF 9068 crashed but also for unknown numbers of silent heroes and their loved ones involved in similarly painful outcomes during the Cold War.

The Nevada legislature approved SJR9 asking the U.S. Congress to recognize the crash site of USAF 9068 as a Cold War-protected area and to establish a memorial. Senator Harry Reid spearheaded the effort by submitting a bill to protect the nation's Cold War sites and create the Silent Heroes of the Cold War National Memorial.

The memorial project has been underway for 15 years. The Silent Heroes of the Cold War National Memorial, located on the SMVG campus, was completed in 2015. In addition to being the first national Cold War memorial on National Forest System land, it is the only national memorial to the Cold War-era of its kind and the first in the state of Nevada.