



Former Atherton Shire Mayor Jim Chapman. PICTURE: BRENDAN RADKE

TABLELAND

Former Far North mayor has strong memories of one of the region's most horrific plane disasters

Tom Snowdon, The Cairns Post
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THE phone rang almost the moment Jim Chapman walked through the front door.

Outside, rain lashed the windows. Wind whipped the branches of the trees.

"I was told the plane was missing," the former Atherton mayor recalled. "I hadn't even put my suitcase down when the phone rang."

What unfolded next would go down as one of the worst plane disasters in Far North Queensland history, after 11 people died when their Cessna 500 executive jet crashed into Mt Emerald, about 15km south of Mareeba, on May 11, 1990.

Among the dead were nine councillors from the Far Northern region, who were returning to Mareeba airport on the chartered flight after attending a local government meeting in Airlie Beach.

It was only fate that kept Jim, now 85, from dying that night.

"My daughter was having complications with her first child in Brisbane, so I decided to drive down in case I needed to keep travelling south after the conference," Jim said.

"As it turned out, her condition improved. I was blessed. There's no doubt about it because I should have been on that plane but I wasn't."

Among those who lost their lives were Cairns Mayor Keith Goodwin and Alderman Rose Blank. Eacham lost two councillors, Joe Newman and Hec Wallace. Herberton lost shire chairman Harry Rankine, shire clerk Elwyn Phillips and Councillor Graham Luxton. Meanwhile, Douglas Shire lost Councillor Bruno Riedweg. Atherton lost Councillor Ivan Wilkinson.

Sister Nadia Del Popolo and pilot Stan Lindgren were also killed in the crash.

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“The (Black Hawk) pilot made an announcement that the wreckage had been found,” Jim said.
 “Then he explained to some of us how bad it was. I’ll never forget that moment.”

The scene still plays on Jim’s mind, especially in May, the anniversary of the crash.

