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Plane crashes at show

By **JAMES B. KELLEHER** and **MARK RIGHTMIRE**

The Orange County Register

FULLERTON – A sightseeing plane that operated out of the municipal airport here slammed into the ground seconds after an erratic takeoff Saturday, injuring four people and narrowly missing dozens more.

Fullerton police said the pilot and a mechanic - both 46-year-old Brea residents - were making a post-maintenance flight check and that no passengers were on board the Bushmaster 2000.



STRUGGLING: Air-show spectators flee as a replica sightseeing airplane veers off the runway Saturday during an exhibition at Fullerton Municipal Airport.
Mark Rightmire, The Orange County Register

Hundreds of people attending a two-day air show at Fullerton Municipal Airport watched with growing horror as the plane, a replica of an old Ford Tri-Motor flown by commercial airlines in the late 1920s and 1930s, veered off the runway as it took off to the west around 1:15 p.m.

Eyewitnesses said the plane turned sharply to the south before it even left the ground, then it took off, banked hard to the left, and barely missed dozens of spectators and the airport's five-story control tower.

The plane then slammed nose-first into the 3900 block of Commonwealth Avenue, its left wing sheared off by the hood of a passing car. It cartwheeled and came to rest just 50 feet from the home of Charles Johnson, where four children were playing in the back yard.

"It shook the walls," Johnson said. "I thought it hit us."

The force of the crash obliterated the plane's nose, three engines and cockpit. The pilot - still strapped into his seat - was ejected and came to rest face-down underneath the plane's wing, beside a burning engine.

Several passersby pulled the pilot to safety, while Johnson ran to the back of the plane, pulled a door open about eight inches and confirmed there were no passengers aboard the plane, which is operated by Tri-Motor Air Tours of Fullerton.

Calls to Richard R. Fuchs, owner of Tri-Motor Air Tours according to public records, were not returned Saturday.

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"It was remarkable," said Richard Casperson, a roofing contractor who was driving directly behind the silver Hyundai Elantra that was clipped by the doomed plane.

"I saw at least six people run over to this burning wreck to help out," he said. "It was selfless courage."

The pilot and his passenger were in critical but stable condition at UCI Medical Center, where they were said to be communicating with doctors. The two passengers in the passing car, both from Buena Park, were treated at St. Jude for minor injuries and released. Police did not release their names.

The crash is likely to revive the debate over the safety of Fullerton Municipal Airport. The facility, opened in 1928, is the county's only municipal airport and the only one devoted solely to general aviation.

In recent years, more than a dozen planes have crashed or made emergency landings at the airport, which is surrounded by homes and businesses. The most spectacular was in 1995, when a plane crashed into a nearby apartment building, killing one person.

Residents have circulated petitions demanding that pilots using the airport stop flying over houses. But airport officials defend the facility's safety record and insist that existing rules require pilots to follow major streets, such as Commonwealth Avenue, and climb to 800 feet before they make any turns over homes.

Martha England, who lives in the neighborhood and witnessed the crash Saturday, said she heard the plane's engines stutter and then die shortly before the plane slammed into the ground.

She said the sound was one she was all too familiar with. "There are so many times," she said, "that I have heard airplanes struggling in the air."

At the time of the crash Saturday, winds were blowing less than 10 mph out of the southwest, the National Weather Service said.

The National Transportation Safety Board will investigate the crash.

Retired pilot Adam Huber of Tustin was sitting in the airport lounge when he saw the plane take off and make a hard left toward the tower.

"We thought, 'That's not usual.' He lost lift as he went over the tower, and my friend sitting next to me said, 'He's going to crash.'"

The plane, tail number N750RW, was a fixture at the airport, many people said, often parked in a corner near Dale and Commonwealth avenues.

Ford Tri-Motors were the first planes used on transcontinental passenger flights, in 1929 by a precursor to American Airlines, and they are common sights at air shows.

More than one eyewitness credited the pilot for veering his struggling craft away from spectators.

"It didn't sound right, didn't look right," said Bob Writer, a 66-year-old commercially rated pilot from Villa Park who watched the crash.

"It could have been a hell of a lot worse."

Anthony Sinopoli, a 35-year-old flying enthusiast who saw the plane come down, agreed.

"The pilot was awesome. He did anything he could to keep it away from people. I pray for him."

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