

National Guard Jet Crashes Into Apartments, Killing 2

Special to The New York Times

FRESNO, Calif., Dec. 14 — A jet approaching the Fresno airport after taking part in military war games crashed into a residential street about two miles away shortly before noon today, destroying an apartment complex and spreading fuel and fire.

The pilot and co-pilot, both civilians, were killed and about 20 people on the ground were injured. Witnesses said the plane, a Learjet contracted to the California Air National Guard base in Fresno, was in a low approach to the airport when it crashed onto the street, destroying everything in its wake.

"It was a 30-foot wall of flame coming down the street," said Clinton Howe, a 52-year-old electrical

contractor whose business is at the end of the street.

The injured included a woman in a car who had burns over 60 percent of her body. Other people suffered sprained backs, broken legs and fractures and smoke inhalation, said Laurel Flemming, a spokeswoman for American Ambulance of Fresno, who was at the scene shortly after the crash.

The fire department paramedics and the police reached the scene 10 minutes after the crash, finding the whole street ablaze.

Only one engine in the plane's tail section survived the impact of the crash. A blue girl's bicycle lay near the tail section. The owner has not been found.

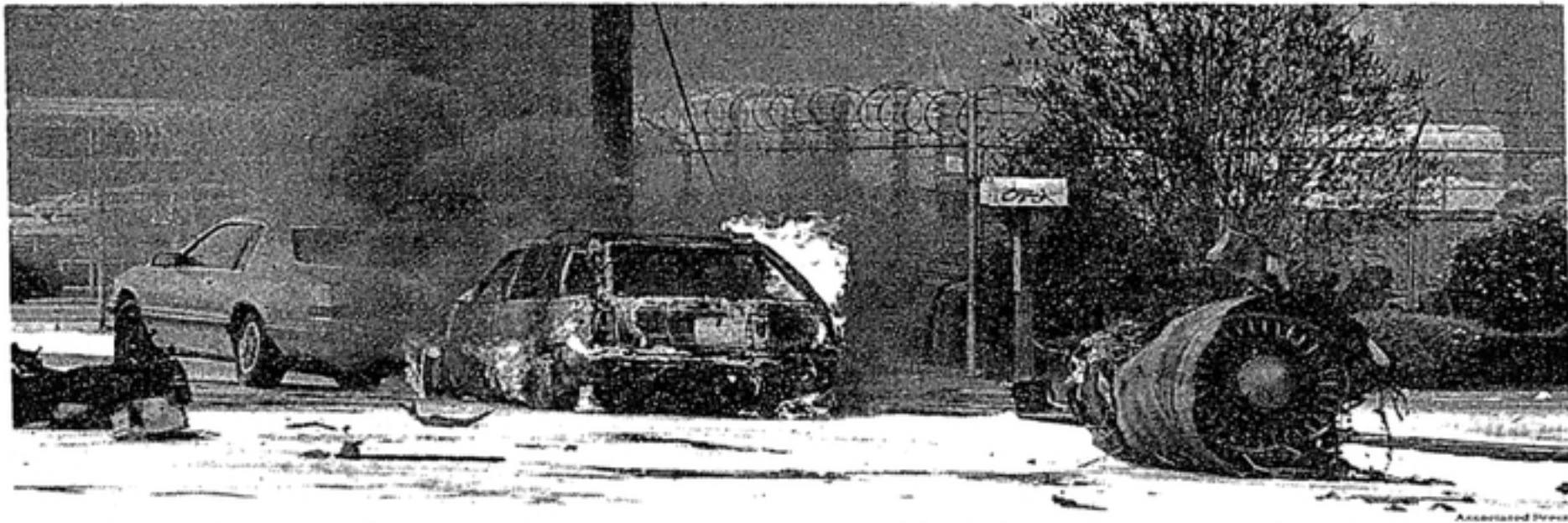
One apartment building was destroyed by a large piece of wreckage. A chunk had been taken out of another apartment to the east, and a kitchen table hung precariously out of the gaping hole.

"It was awful," said Ramona Herrera, a 44-year-old housewife who lives half a block from the crash site. "Flames were everywhere. A sea of nothing but flames, ladies and people hollering and screaming looking for family members."

Ed Winchester, the Fresno chief of police, said that the crash had destroyed a half-mile strip of road and that it appeared that the pilot had taken extraordinary measures to avoid hitting a nearby school.

The plane was on a training mission in the Mojave Desert and was returning to the airport when it crashed.

The crash left a large hole in the



An Air National Guard jet approaching an airport crashed into an apartment building in Fresno, Calif., yesterday. Wreckage littered a road.



The New York Times

A Lear jet being used in war games crashed in Fresno, Calif.

18-unit apartment house, in a run-down neighborhood. Burned cars littered the street.

Ms. Flemming said at least 15 people had been taken to local hospitals, including one in critical condition.

One witness, David Flores, said he had seen a man in a blue uniform flying through the air. Mr. Flores said he and a friend had crawled through the rubble only to find that the man was dead.

Lieut. Col. James A. Arthur of the Air National Guard said the plane had been acting as a decoy in the maneuvers, which take place almost daily, Colonel Arthur said.

The plane, a small executive jet, was owned by Phoenix Air, which is based in Georgia, he said.

The crash and fire destroyed 12 of

the apartment building's 18 units and at least 10 cars on a nearby street, Capt. Bob Waterston of the Fire Department said.

Captain Waterston said it appeared that one of the plane's engines was on fire when it crashed. He called the pilot a hero. "I think that's what we will find here," he said.

Loren Russell, 36, a laborer who lives near the apartment, said he heard a number of pops. "I thought it was a gas fire at first. A woman came screaming, 'My baby's in there!' and there was fire everywhere."

He said some of the building's residents threw possessions from the windows and climbed through them to escape. His son Joseph, 16, said that after the crash the whole area "looked like a disaster." He

said people were "dropping babies out of the sky."

Dave Desroches was in his parked van more than a block from the apartments when he saw the plane's right wing strike a street light pole, turning the jet around. The Associated Press reported. Then, the left wing hit the street, he said. Mr. Desroches said he then heard a boom and saw "a huge fireball" that stopped inches from his van.

"If we had left a minute earlier, we would have been incinerated," Mr. Desroches was quoted by The A.P. as saying. "I know he was trying damn hard not to hit any houses. That's why he landed in the middle of the street."

All available emergency units were called out in this central California city of 400,000, including fire-

fighters who battled a fire and some explosions.

Power was out in part of southeast Fresno, and parents were asked to pick up their children from at least two elementary schools, The A.P. reported.

In October 1987, an A-7D Corsair crashed into a Ramada Inn near the Indianapolis International Airport after the pilot lost control of the plane and ejected. Ten people were killed, nine of them hotel employees.

The plane crashed into hotel just above the lobby and exploded.

In February 1992, a Kentucky Air National Guard plane banked too sharply during a training flight and stalled, plowing into a motel and restaurant in Evansville, Ind. Five crew members and 11 people on the ground were killed.