

At Least 3 Killed as Plane Crashes on Fresno Street : Accident: Learjet has engine trouble while returning to airport. It slams into apartment complex, creating grim scene of destruction.

By MARK ARAX

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TIMES STAFF WRITER

FRESNO — A private jet on a military training mission over Central California crashed on a Fresno street and careened into a crowded apartment complex Wednesday, spewing gas and flames in a two-block-long path of destruction that claimed at least three lives and injured at least 15.

Rescue workers scouring the scene found body parts, scorched metal and 20 burned-out cars in a poor section of southeast Fresno. They continued to search for more fatalities.

The confirmed dead were the civilian flight crew, who a source said came from Klamath Falls, Ore., and a person on the ground. Their names were not immediately released.

Fresno Fire Capt. Bob Waterston said the search for additional possible victims was continuing. The plane, piloted by two civilians and belonging to a Georgia-based company, Phoenix Air, had finished chasing an F-16 fighter during a war game shortly before noon. The plane was returning to the Fresno airport when the crew radioed the tower about engine trouble, according to a company spokesman.

The pilot apparently attempted to land on Olive Avenue about two miles southwest of the airport, and witnesses said the crew tried to wave off cars and pedestrians. The twin-engine Learjet skidded along the wide street, mowing down power poles and electrical wires before crashing into the two-story apartment building and exploding in a fireball.

Mike Brandon said he was baby-sitting when he heard a monstrous vibration and then what sounded like a sonic boom. "The entire street was on fire," Brandon said. "The ground was black and there were pools of fire everywhere."

Brandon ran out of his house and down the block and saw Arlinda Henderson on the second floor of the apartment complex, surrounded by flames and screaming for help. Brandon walked her to safety and ran back to rescue Henderson's boyfriend, Dallas Magner, who had been injured in a recent car crash and could not walk.

"The thunder knocked me out of my chair and threw me on the floor," said Magner, 54.

"Everyone was screaming. Fire everywhere. If not for (Brandon), I wouldn't have made it out alive."

The plane was fast approaching Clinton Howe's electrical contracting business. "All I could see was one solid flame 30 feet high coming toward me. 'If it keeps coming we're in trouble,' I said."

It stopped. For the next three minutes, more than a dozen empty cars parked along the plane's path exploded in flames.

Firefighters needed 45 minutes to put out the fires. Federal Aviation Administration investigators and military men in fatigues and black berets were on the scene, and Fresno's mayor and Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) arrived to view the scene.

A large section of the aircraft was left in the middle of the street. Yellow blankets marked body parts and sensitive aircraft parts. Flame retardant foam was everywhere.

"There's no sign of the fuselage or anything," Capt. Waterston said. "It all got destroyed in the fire. What a time of the year for such a tragedy."

He said a mile-long section of the residential, commercial and industrial neighborhood would be evacuated for at least a day.

Two buildings in the 102-unit apartment complex, with its "Now Renting" banners still intact, were destroyed or badly damaged.

Authorities said the search for more victims would focus on a dozen or more apartments ravaged by fire.

The two pilots, both in their 30s, flew training missions for the Air National Guard on the West Coast. "They have been doing this for a long time, and they're both very good," a source said, "but I don't know . . . how often they practiced emergency situations."