

Engine failure blamed in crash

The first report from an official inquiry into a June 12 crash into a Davis Islands house suggests no pilot error.

By REBECCA CATALANELLO, Times Staff Writer

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TAMPA - Both engines failed and a propeller malfunctioned before the plane crashed through a fence and into a Davis Islands house and became engulfed in flames.

That's what the co-pilot told a witness to the June 12 crash as he emerged from the wreckage, according to a preliminary report from the National Transportation Safety Board.

The 12:35 p.m. crash at Peter O. Knight Airport killed pilot Steve Huisman, 41, of Bradenton, and hospitalized co-pilot Sean Launder, 25.

Launder, of Sarasota, is listed in good condition at Tampa General Hospital. A hospital spokeswoman said he has declined media interviews.

Dean Jorgensen, a pilot and a friend and former co-worker of Huisman's, said as soon as he received news of the crash on that stormy Monday, he was certain something had to have gone terribly wrong with the plane mechanically, and that it was not a pilot error.

Huisman, a husband and father of four, had a reputation for being a stickler when it came to plane maintenance and operation.

"I had no problem flying an airplane he's been working on," Jorgensen said.

The report is the first to be issued in what is expected to be a five- to 12-month investigation into the crash.

Rick Roof, flight operations manager for Dynamic Aviation, the Bridgewater, Va., company that owned the plane, said Wednesday that he's not placing too much value on the preliminary report.

"A large portion of it ends up being disproved (by the time the final report is issued)," Roof said.

The Beechcraft King Air 90, a 1967 model plane, received a complete overhaul about two months before the accident, said Jorgensen, who works part-time for Dynamic. The renovation included new parts and new paint, he said.

According to board's findings, the plane departed Sarasota/Bradenton International Airport at 11:30 a.m. The pilots were on a mission for the U.S. Agriculture Department to release sterilized Mediterranean fruit flies as part of a plan to limit the fly population, but because there was no flight plan filed for the flight, it wasn't clear where they'd flown before the crash.

A witness, who the board said has pilot credentials, told investigators the co-pilot said one engine failed, then the other. Launder and Huisman were able to restart one of the engines, but a propeller malfunctioned, which could have made the plane impossible to control.

"I kind of feel like from what happened, there must have been a lot they were trying to deal with," Jorgensen said.

The same witness that talked to Launder also told investigators that the landing gear remained retracted as the aircraft collided with a fence, crashed through trees and into the home of Tom and Cynthia Tate. The board's account doesn't identify the witness. This initial single-page report mainly serves to document that the accident happened, safety board spokesman Ted Lopatkiewicz said.

Investigators will issue another, more detailed report, in about five to six months. And about two to three months after that, a final report will include a probable cause finding.

"We want to know what happened all the way through," Roof said.

Jorgensen said that in a small way, the emerging details help deal with the loss of a close friend.

"You like to know why, and you want to know that he didn't mess up," Jorgensen said.

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