FOUR INJURED

Louisiana Plane Smashes Into Apartment Building

MIDLAND, Texas (AP) — The wing of a plane ferrying prisoners to Louisiana slammed into an apartment building Friday moments after takeoff and sent the aircraft cartwheeling into a parking lot where it burst into flames, injuring five people and setting the complex ablaze, a witness said.

All four people aboard the Louisiana-owned twin-engine Beechcraft and one apartment resident were treated for burns at Midland Memorial Hospital. Three were transferred to Lubbock General Hospital in Lubbock, 160 miles away, authorities said.

"The airplane's left wing hit the northeast corner of the apartment complex ... it knocked half the wing off and the airplane cartwheeled once or twice over the apartment complex into a parking lot. ... Then it exploded," said eyewitness Andy Connell, a reporter for Midland radio station KYXX.

He said the fire spread to the Warwick Apartments, burning all 12 units in one building of the complex that has 300 to 400 apartments.

Connell said one passenger, badly burned and dressed only in a tattered T-shirt and his underwear, walked to the apartment manager's office begging bystanders to help his friend.

Cry For Help

"Can somebody please help my friend? He is burning and could die. Is he in there? Is he burning? Is he still alive? Is my friend still alive?" Connell quoted the unidentified passenger as saying.

Connell said another unidentified eyewitness told him a man rolled out of the aircraft after it crashed, but the heat of the fire kept residents from rushing to the aide of the passengers.

"Three guys were fighting trying to get out of the plane. You could see flames on their clothes," said Bob Aldrich, 37, of Midland, a former Army medic who witnessed the crash.

Authorities said the heat of the fire caused six cars and a pickup in the parking lot to explode.

"The plane hit the roof, bottom out from what I saw, and glanced off the building into the parking lot. His engines were cutting out," said Aldrich.

"We heard a swoosh. After it hit, pieces of the plane were flying through the air," said Jeff Clark, 22, who said he was in the apartment building with another maintenance man when the plane crashed.

Belly Down

"It came belly down into the parking lot and slid into a bunch of cars. The plane was on fire and then it blew up. Then the cars started blowing up. We ducked back inside and hauled ... out another exit," said Clark.

Department of Public Safety spokesman Jimmy Rhoads said the pilot, Alex Sheets, 56, of Baton Rouge, was transferred to Lubbock with burns over 50 percent of his body.

Ken Hornsby, 42, a law officer from Baton Rouge, and apartment complex resident Randy Sellers, 20, who was in critical condition with burns over 70 percent of his body, also were transferred to Lubbock, said Midland Memorial Hospital spokeswoman Arlene Strickland.