Plane crash leaves four dead

Poly Royal festivities dampened by tragedy

Special to Mustang Daily

The planes—Cal Poly Poly—will long be remembered—for many reasons, among them a tragedy.

Four persons were killed in the crash of a Waco Cabin biplane, just west of the Cal Poly Poly airport at 1:14 pm Saturday.

Killed were Cal Poly instructor Leo Philbin, 60, San Luis Obispo; Charles Lascia, 40, San Francisco; Steven Garauo, 80, of Anaheim, Trade Air Force Base; and Charles Eugene Jehneon, resident unknown.

Philbin was an aeronautical engineer and a graduate of Cal Poly. He was an instructor at the Poly Royal Flight Preparatory School, an aircraft instructor at Poly Royal Flight School, and a civilian training administrator at the Poly Royal Army Base.

Mike Williams, a journalism student from Cambria, was flying over the scene of the crash just before it happened. He turned to the pilot of the biplane and said, "I've had a camera with me for about six years now, and I've never used it before until this morning."

Philbin, who was flying the biplane, turned his plane to the left, and Williams watched the biplane spin into the ground.

Williams then turned to the pilot of the biplane and said, "I think you're going to have a problem with the plane."

The biplane hit the ground, and the plane burst into flames. Williams turned to the pilot of the biplane and said, "You're going to have a problem with the plane."

Security Chief George Cockrell told the Mustang Daily he was the first to reach the scene with a fire truck. Cockrell said, "The plane burst into flames in seconds after hitting the ground."

When asked about the circumstances leading up to the crash, Cockrell said, "It's still early in the investigation. We're just beginning to piece together the events that led to the crash."

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Philbin joined the Poly Royal faculty in 1948 and served as registrar.

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Too late to help... Fire truck and car of campus security officials reach the site of the plane crash and officers begin to work the bodies. In spite of their efforts, four persons were killed in the crash. Photograph was taken from another plane.

Among those killed in the crash Saturday was Cal Poly instructor Leo Philbin, who joined the staff of this college in 1948. Philbin was a passenger in the plane, which was so badly burned that its number could not be determined for identification.

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Cockriel emphasized there was no airshow at the Poly Royal display, merely a collection of antique and experimental aircraft. Williams said he believed the Waco biplane was stunting, performing a series of spins, until he realized the plane had just taken off and was in an uncontrollable spin.

Cockriel said that as soon as he reached the scene of the crash, he and the other officers from the college security force tried to remove the victims. They were hampered, however, by spectators who had rushed to the scene on foot and by motorcycle.

He also stated that identification of the bodies was so difficult that it was not until nearly five hours after the crash that the victims were able to be identified. At the time, Williams believed the victims had been burned, but a small portion of the right wing left intact. At the time, the victims were unable to find any remaining numbers on the plane to help identify it. However, a photograph taken by Williams before the plane crashed showed a number that ended in the figures thought to be "289." This figure conflicts with that given by the authorities as "N18066."

As the word of the crash spread, crowds began to drift from the airport displays and focus their attention on the end of the runway. Some stood in visible shock, while others whispered rumors they had heard about the crash.

Yes, it was a Poly Royal they would all remember...

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