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Golfer Payne Stewart Dies



Runaway Plane Crashes in S.D.; Golfer, at Least Four Others Killed

Emergency vehicles park near the site, lower left, where a Learjet carrying golf champion Payne Stewart and at least four others crashed near Mina, S.D., on Monday, killing everyone aboard. (Dave Weaver/AP Photo/Dave Weaver)

By Geraldine Sealey
ABCNEWS.com

Oct. 25 — A runaway Learjet carrying professional golfer Payne Stewart and possibly five other people crashed today after drifting across the country for hours with no one controlling the aircraft. There were no survivors. Six National Transportation Safety Board investigators performed a cursory inspection of the wreckage Monday night, lighted by generator-powered spotlights. Bob Francis, NTSB vice chairman, said only that the investigators would be back Tuesday morning.

video
ABCNEWS.com reports on the Payne Stewart tragedy.
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The plane went off course while en route from Florida to Texas and crashed into a pasture in the north-central part of South Dakota after flying for four hours apparently on auto pilot.

Stewart was a part owner of the jet, said his mother, Bee Stewart, from Springfield, Mo.

Government officials said the plane may have suffered a rare pressurization failure. When that occurs at high altitudes such as above 30,000 feet, pilots have a short period of time to don an oxygen mask before slipping into unconsciousness.

It was not immediately known whether the people on board were killed in the crash or may have died earlier.

Also killed were Stewart's agents, Robert Fraley

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and Van Ardan, and the two pilots, identified as Michael Kling, 43, and Stephanie Bellegarrigue, 27. The jet was operated by Sunjet Aviation.

Fraley was CEO of Leader Enterprises, a sports management company, and Ardan was president.

Sixth Victim Possible

Late today, there were unconfirmed reports that there may be a sixth victim. Jack Nicklaus said he feared one of his golf course designers, Bruce Borland, 40, also died in the crash. Borland was flying to Texas because he wanted to design a course with Stewart under the Nicklaus Design banner, Nicklaus said.

Borland's wife, Kate, said she contacted the private jet terminal this afternoon and spoke to an employee who had greeted her husband and confirmed he intended to board the flight.

Officials at the crash site said they could not tell exactly how many people had been killed.

Plane Fell Into Field

Eyewitnesses say the plane fell straight down into the field, South Dakota Gov. Bill Janklow told ABCNEWS.com from the crash site about 12 miles west of Aberdeen. No one on the ground was hurt.

Hunters in an adjacent field watched it fall, as did state highway patrol officers who watched the plane with binoculars as it descended from the clear sky from about 20,000 feet, Janklow said. The jet's impact blew a sizable crater in the earth, he said, and left the hole full of debris.

"It's a huge, devastating scene," Janklow said. "You can imagine what it did to the airplane and the human beings on the airplane."

The plane crashed in Mina, S.D. It had taken off from Orlando, Fla., headed for Dallas. (ABCNEWS.com/ Magellan Geographix)

Investigators will find little to work with at the scene, Janklow said.

"Very few pieces of this tragedy are larger than a couple square inches," said Janklow, who was told about the runaway jet about 40 minutes before the crash.

Possible Depressurization

Two F-16 fighter planes had been following the jet looking for signs of distress. Federal officials said it appeared to be flying on auto pilot before the crash.

The Learjet 35 left Orlando this morning at about 9:09 ET and lost radio contact about a half hour later, officials said. It was scheduled to land in Dallas.

The last communication officials had was that the plane was over Gainesville, Fla.

FAA spokesman Paul Turk said the plane had flown as high as 45,000 feet and the crew did not respond to repeated inquiries from air traffic controllers.

“What is the most likely probability here is that this aircraft, which has a very small cabin compared to a commercial jetliner, lost cabin pressure some time during the climb out of Orlando,” said ABCNEWS aviation analyst John Nance.

He said that at altitudes above 30,000 feet, a pilot would have to strap on an oxygen mask quickly or his mind would become so muddled from lack of oxygen — a condition called hypoxia — that he could no longer help himself.

“The time of useful consciousness at 25,000 feet is a fairly sedate 20 to 25 minutes. But the time of useful consciousness at 39,000 feet is six to 12 seconds,” said Nance.

“The fact that this aircraft continued climbing right through their assigned altitude on up to almost 45,000 feet, without any call from the pilots, indicated to me that this crisis occurred some place before 39,000 but most probably above 30,000.”

The Air Force reported the plane had been “porpoising,” its altitude fluctuating between 22,000 and 51,000 feet.

Stewart’s Wife Tried to Call Him

As the Lear 35 eerily raced across a half a dozen states, Stewart’s Australian-born wife Tracey, following the drama on television, tried to reach her husband on his cellular phone, according to her brother.

“She was trying to ring him on his mobile and couldn’t raise him,” Mike Ferguson, a professional golfer, told the Australian Broadcasting Corp. radio. “It’s just really bad for my sister to be watching it on CNN, knowing that it was her husband on board.”

Military Aircraft Tracked Jet

According to an Air Force summary, after contact was initially lost, two F-15s from Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla., were sent to track the Learjet. The F-15s pulled back and two F-16s in the air from Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., moved in to track the aircraft.

After the Learjet reached the Midwest, the Eglin F-16s pulled off and four F-16s and a midair refueling tanker from the Tulsa National Guard followed it.

Eventually, two F-16s from Fargo, N.D., moved in close to look into the windows to see if the pilot was slumped over and to help clear air space. Officials hoped that the F-16s could provide assistance to anyone on board who might have helped land the plane safely.

The pilots drew close and noticed no structural damage but were unable to see into the Learjet because its windows were frosted over, indicating the temperature inside was well below freezing.

The F-16 pilots said they saw the plane, apparently out of fuel, fall to the ground.

A Sad Shock to the Golf World

Stewart, 42, was one of the most recognizable players in golf because of his trademark knickers and tam-o'-shanter. He won 18 tournaments around the world, including three major championships. In June, Stewart won his second U.S. Open over Phil Mickelson with a 15-foot putt, the longest putt to ever decide that championship on the final hole.

Stewart, who lived in Orlando, had been expected in Houston on Tuesday for practice rounds in advance of the Tour Championship, the PGA Tour's final tournament of the year for the top 30 players on its money list.

"It is difficult to express our sense of shock and sadness over the death of Payne Stewart," said PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem in a statement issued from PGA headquarters in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Why Did F-16s Track Jet?

Even before Payne Stewart's involvement made this plane crash a major story, your attention might have been grabbed by the news that Air Force fighter jets pursued the Learjet for hours before it went down.

The Federal Aviation Administration asked the Air Force for help after air-traffic controllers lost contact with the crew of the Learjet near Gainesville, Fla., not long after it left Orlando.

First, a fighter jet from Tyndall, Fla., was diverted from a routine training flight to check out the Learjet. Two F-16s from another Florida base then picked up the chase, later handing it over to two Air National Guard F-16s from Oklahoma, which handed it over to two F-16s from Fargo, North Dakota. Those fighters trailed the Learjet until it went down in South Dakota.

Oklahoma Air National Guard Sgt. Ann Gray told Reuters that crew members from those last two jets "had difficulty seeing anyone moving inside" the Learjet. The plane's windows were obscured by frost, suggesting sub-freezing air inside.

White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said the National Security Council also monitored the doomed flight, fearing the jet might crash in a populated area.

The president could have ordered fighters to shoot down the Learjet to avoid that potential tragedy, but Lockhart said no such recommendation had been made. Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon confirmed that the military never considered shooting down Stewart's plane.

President Clinton told reporters on the White House lawn: "I am very grateful for the work the FAA did, and for the two Air Force pilots, and the others in the Air Force that monitored this plane and made every effort to try to make contact with it."

ABCNEWS aviation analyst John Nance told ABCNEWS.com chat participants this afternoon, "There is no set procedure for the Air Force or Navy to scramble an armed fighter for [that purpose] & simply because it's an unprecedented occurrence."

The unusual scenario revives memories of an eerily similar pursuit and crash nearly 20 years ago. Louisiana State University football coach Bo Rein died in January 1980 when his turboprop jet crashed into the Atlantic, hours after controllers lost contact with it and sent military planes to try to intercept it.

As with the Stewart crash, it was speculated that depressurization caused the deaths of Rein and his pilot, long before their plane ran out of fuel and plunged into the sea off the Virginia coast. But this mystery is not likely ever to be solved, as their bodies were never found.

—Reuters and The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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