



Pilot's condition improves after weekend Vancouver Island crash; Small plane slammed into the ground in front of horrified onlookers

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NANAIMO -- The condition of a 71-year-old pilot seriously injured when his small plane slammed into the ground at the Nanaimo Airport on Saturday afternoon was upgraded Monday morning to stable. He continues to receive treatment at Victoria General Hospital.

Dr. Bill Phipps, an experienced pilot from Campbell River, was performing his aerial acrobatic routine in the Wings and Wheels air show sponsored by the Nanaimo Flying Club before approximately 1,000 spectators.

The noisy crowd hushed instantly when Phipps' plane lost altitude and crashed just east of the tarmac.

"It was a super hubbub while he was in the air and then just shocked silence after he hit," said Aaron Hamilton, a photographer who managed to snap a photo of Phipps' plane the instant before it crashed.

John DeVries described the manoeuvre Phipps had attempted as a quarter barrel roll before he had to correct his path and try to regain control.

"His right wing clipped the ground and he did a cartwheel. There was just dust and no explosion, smoke or fire."

First on the scene were golfers from the adjacent Cottonwood Golf Course, who were at first mistaken by some of the crowd to be Phipps himself emerging from the wreck. The golfers rushed to help the fallen pilot. Minutes later, fire crews at the scene arrived and began to cut Phipps from the cockpit of his homemade biplane Steen Skybolt aircraft.

Cranberry Fire Department chief Ron Gueulette reported that Phipps had been stabilized and conscious at the scene.

"He was conscious and talking to us during the rescue, but he was on the low- end of the consciousness scale."

The crash occurred at approximately 2:05 p.m. and a B.C. Ambulance chopper lifted off, carrying Phipps, at approximately 2:45 p.m. and headed to Vancouver General Hospital at first, but was redirected to Victoria in mid-flight.

Phipps suffered "significant facial and internal injuries," Nanaimo RCMP communications officer Const. Gary O'Brien said. "He was doing a number of rolls and loops. He got to a point where he was proceeding into another demonstration and for whatever reason he lost power."

No one else was hurt. "It was a low elevation acrobat and a well-experienced pilot. It wasn't a high elevation," said airport president and CEO Mike Hooper.

"Air shows are designed to ensure a buffer between the acrobatics of the aircraft and the folks watching below. There was a 1,000-foot buffer between the crowd to where the acrobatics display was going on and he went down on the other side of the runway."

The airport was closed to traffic for more than two hours to allow for an assessment of the scene.

"It was pretty traumatic. Everybody has filed out and the airport is virtually empty ? except for medical staff," O'Brien said shortly after the accident.

The reason for Phipps' crash is still under investigation, but photos and video have surfaced showing the dramatic sequence of events that led up to the crash.

A flight safety instructor had turned his gaze moments before Phipps's plane came dangerously close to the ground.

"I didn't see it, but I do recall being surprised by how much altitude he had lost already this early in his routine," said pilot Sigmund Sort of Qualicum Beach. "By the time I looked back he hit the ground. It's likely that he stalled and his wings lost lift."

Sort acknowledged Phipps' skill in the cockpit. He is highly experienced and had built the plane that bore his name in the call sign, C-FIPS.

"He affectionately called his plane Rag Bags," Sort said. "It's a kit plane made of white fabric and a wooden frame."

The Nanaimo Flying Club cancelled the rest of the weekend's performances out of respect for Phipps and would not comment until the ongoing investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board is completed.

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