

First Reno Air Races crash to involve spectators; 3 dead

By Reno Gazette-Journal

10:06pm update: A spectacular air race that drew tens of thousands of spectators Friday transformed into a horrific war scene after a veteran pilot crashed his vintage plane on the tarmac just feet away from VIP box seats, forcing officials to cancel the remaining two days of the event.

Early estimates were that three people, including pilot Jimmy Leeward, 74, of Ocala Fla., died in the crash at the National Championship Air Races. But that number was likely to increase, based on witnesses who described the scene as "carnage." At least 54 were injured, 12 in critical condition.



The plane as it crashed in Reno on Sept. 16. Photo/Ward Hughes courtesy of Reno Gazette-Journal

The National Transportation Safety Board took over the investigation Friday evening. A three-person team was already at the Reno Stead Airport, where the air races take place, in case of a crash. This was the first fatal crash at the Air

Races since 2007, when three pilots during the event. This was the first crash in the event's history to involve spectators.

Witnesses said the pilot appeared to lose control of his P-51 Mustang called the Galloping Ghost due to a mechanical malfunction, and he put it into the ground instead of keeping it on the path into the stands, potentially saving hundreds of lives.

"He was a very experienced, talented and qualified pilot," said Mike Houghton, executive director of the Air Races, which have been in Reno since 1964.

Leeward had been flying since he was 14 and had competed in the air races since 1975. His medical records were up to date and his flying history was clean, Houghton said.

The plane disintegrated on impact, sending shrapnel into the crowd and tearing limbs off bodies, while the blast from the explosion ripped clothes off some spectators, witnesses said.

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