

Crash pilot hailed for avoiding crowd

By KATRINA IFFLAND

Eyewitnesses have labelled as a hero the pilot of 1955 war plane that skimmed over a crowded Narrabundah oval yesterday afternoon before ploughing into a nearby paddock, igniting on impact and killing the 48-year-old pilot and his sole passenger.

It is believed both men were from the Canberra area.

The accident occurred about 4.14pm when a Russian-made MiG 15 UTI jet, that only minutes before had taken part in a warplane air show at Canberra Airport, experienced mechanical problems over the oval.

Hundreds of horrified on-lookers — most playing competition sport — watched as the jet flew low over the oval, skimmed a row of trees, before ploughing into a vacant paddock adjacent the suburb's motor-bike track, bringing power lines down with it.

The jet ignited on impact, resulting in a 500m fireball which spread quickly through the long grass before being contained by firefighters.

From the positioning of scattered debris, police believe the cockpit of the plane continued to slide through a second row of pine trees before coming to rest about 100m from the main crash site, only metres away from Hindmarsh Drive.

One body was found behind the second row of trees, while the other was retrieved from an area closer to Hindmarsh Drive.

One eyewitness, 16-year-old Patrick Castle, of Duffy, had been playing basketball at Narrabundah College when he saw the plane coming down towards the oval.

"It was coming down at a high speed before banking left, then it turned upside down, there were flames coming out

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from behind . . . it lost it from there," he said.

Another witness, 14-year-old Correy Simpson, had been walking with a friend through the paddock only metres away from where the plane eventually crashed.

"I heard a noise, I turned around and saw the fireball, I ran," he said.

"I heard my mate saying 'just run'. I could feel the heat from the explosion on my back . . . it nearly knocked me off my feet," he said.

Correy's friend, 18-year-old Mark Scarlett, said yesterday that he heard a noise like a "dead plane" coming down. He warned his friend to run.

Nobody on the ground was seriously hurt — more than 100 people were engaged in sport activities nearby.

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Picture: PETER WELLS

A firefighter at the scene of yesterday's crash.

Pilot of MiG jet is hailed

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Wayne Cook, who had been coaching the Upstarts softball team in its match against Sutherland, said the plane suddenly appeared low over the oval.

"We thought it was part of an air show and doing some trick flying," he said.

"Then we saw it was in trouble. Both teams ducked as it went overhead; it just cleared some trees and crashed on the motor-bike track. We were stunned."

Another eyewitness called the dead pilot a hero.

"There would have been a lot

more people killed if he'd come down on the field," she said.

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The pilot of the jet had contacted Canberra Airport control tower only moments before the crash. He announced that he had some minor

mechanical problems but had not indicated that he would need emergency services.

"They saw him make a steep turn on his final approach, then the crash followed," a spokeswoman for the Civil Aviation Authority said last night.

The reason for the crash will not be known until Bureau of Air Safety investigations are complete. Police expect part of Hindmarsh Drive to remain closed overnight while investigations continued.

Police confirmed yesterday that the plane had been owned by a private operator from Nowra.