

NTSB report details eclipse plane crash near Madras

Pilot failed to maintain speed while landing and stalled, safety board says

By KYLE SPURR
EO Media Group

BEND — Witnesses feared the worst moments before a fatal plane crash in August 2017 involving a California man who was on his way to Madras for the total solar eclipse.

Several people watched as the plane banked to the left with its wings perpendicular to the ground like it was in an airshow, but then dove straight down toward a canyon near the Madras Airport, according to statements in a final report released last week by the National Transportation Safety Board.

Flames and a plume of smoke rose from the canyon crash site. The pilot, Mark Rich, 58, of Menlo Park, California, died in the crash. His single-engine Wheeler Express, a plane that he built, was destroyed.

Griffin Deitz, a witness who was rock climbing in the area during the crash, told a safety board investigator the plane was unable to pull out of a dive.

“I saw the plane disap-



Photo contributed by Laura Rich

Laura and Mark Rich pictured on a beach in Southern California. Mark Rich died in a plane crash Aug. 19, 2017 in Madras.

pear behind some rocks that blocked my view of the south side of the canyon,” Deitz said, “and then I saw a massive fireball.”

Several witness statements led the safety board to conclude Rich failed to maintain adequate speed while attempting to land, which caused the plane to stall. He was then unable to pull up from a near-vertical descent at an altitude too low to recover.

The final report detailed the circumstances leading to the fatal crash at 1:52 p.m. Aug. 19, 2017.

Rich made a reservation at

the Madras Airport to arrive at 2 p.m. Aug. 19 and leave Aug. 21, the day of the total solar eclipse. He planned to camp in Madras and participate in Oregon Solarfest, a gathering at the Jefferson County Fairgrounds celebrating the eclipse.

The Madras Airport used a temporary air traffic control service to handle the 412 planes that were scheduled to fly in and out for the eclipse — the most traffic ever at the airport.

Each pilot flying to Madras was following a “Notice to Airmen” that instructed them

on how to safely land during the busy time, according to the safety board report.

Rich, who was flying in from San Carlos, California, was instructed to perform a “Cove Entry,” which had him fly north over the Cove Palisades State Park toward Lake Simtustus Resort, then continue east to the airport.

Rich checked in with air traffic control above the state park and was told to report his position when he was over the resort. Several minutes later, after other traffic departed the airport, the air traffic controller modified Rich’s approach,

sending him to Runway 34.

Rich reported his position, but that was the last contact he made with air traffic control.

“The controller cleared him to land and observed a plume of smoke shortly thereafter,” safety board investigator Zoe Keliher wrote in the final report.

Keliher visited the crash site on a slope of the canyon about 1 mile from the runway. In the final report, she wrote the site had “freshly severed tree limbs adjacent to the main wreckage.”

The plane was destroyed and the cabin was completely consumed by fire, she wrote.

Patty Halstead, who was playing golf near the airport during the crash, told Keliher she saw the plane make its approach to the runway when all of a sudden it began to pull up.

“It continued to pull up as if it were going to make of those loop de loop tricks that planes make when they are in an airshow,” Halstead said. “I remember saying out loud, ‘No, don’t do that. You don’t have room. You are too low to do that.’”

Halstead watched as Rich’s plane went behind a tree line.

“There was a few seconds from the time I lost sight of the plane that I had time to think, ‘OK, no explosion or smoke. He pulled it up,’” Halstead said. “But then I saw the smoke plume to the south of our location.”

The Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office initially reported two people had died in the crash because the reservation at the Madras Airport said two people would be arriving in the plane.

Rich’s family friends said Rich’s daughter, Michelle, had planned to go on the trip but was unable to.

Rich built the Wheeler Express plane in 2002 and would regularly take his family on trips. He reported 612 hours of total flight time, according to the final report.

His wife, Laura Rich, told the safety board her husband got his license to fly 29 years ago and did aerobatic training to know how to come out of dives.

Rich had worked at Google, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and Atheros, a semiconductor manufacturing company, before recently becoming vice president of Connected Fleet for Airbus, his wife said.

Laura Rich described her husband as very calm and brilliant.

Friends and family remember Rich as a Renaissance man, who had many interests outside of work, including hiking, traveling and flying his Wheeler Express.

Forecast for Pendleton Area

TODAY

WEDNESDAY

THURSDAY

FRIDAY

SATURDAY

A couple of afternoon showers

Cloudy with a little rain

Cloudy

Cloudy and milder

Cloudy; becoming windier, mild

PENDLETON TEMPERATURE FORECAST									
52° 48°		53° 38°		45° 38°		54° 42°		53° 34°	
HERMISTON TEMPERATURE FORECAST									
48° 45°		57° 40°		49° 40°		50° 38°		53° 33°	

OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.

ALMANAC

PENDLETON through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	38°	32°
Normals	39°	26°
Records	63° (1920)	-12° (1968)

PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.	Trace
Month to date	0.75"
Normal month to date	1.55"
Year to date	12.33"
Last year to date	10.53"
Normal year to date	13.02"

HERMISTON through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	41°	35°
Normals	39°	27°
Records	66° (1949)	-13° (1990)

PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.00"
Month to date	0.13"
Normal month to date	1.41"
Year to date	5.08"
Last year to date	7.87"
Normal year to date	9.88"

WINDS (in mph)

	Today	Wed.
Boardman	SW 6-12	WSW 10-20
Pendleton	S 7-14	WSW 10-20

SUN AND MOON

Sunrise today	7:36 a.m.
Sunset tonight	4:20 p.m.
Moonrise today	11:09 a.m.
Moonset today	10:04 p.m.

First Full Last New

Jan 2

Jan 10

Jan 17

Jan 24

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)

High 86° in Immokalee, Fla. Low -31° in Daniel, Wyo.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY

Shown are noon positions of weather systems and precipitation. Temperature bands are highs for the day.

-10s -0s 0s 10s 20s 30s 40s 50s 60s 70s 80s 90s 100s 110s

showers t-storms rain flurries snow ice cold front warm front stationary front high low

Vandals strike Elgin churches

By DICK MASON
EO Media Group

ELGIN — Vandals rocked two Elgin churches late last week, and the Union County Sheriff’s Office appears to have solved the case.

The sheriff’s office identified and located three Elgin juveniles, ages 9, 10 and 13, as suspects in the case, which involves the vandalism of St. Mary’s Catholic Church and Harvester’s Church of the Nazarene. Sheriff Boyd Rasmussen said the Union County District Attorney’s Office is reviewing the case for criminal charges, which could include trespassing, burglary and criminal mischief.

Deputies Tad Butcher, Morris Capers and Dylan Hamilton worked the case and tracked down the trio.

“The deputies quickly coordinated with one another and got resolution quickly,” Rasmussen said Sunday.

Tips from community members, Rasmussen said, also were key to assisting

the deputies.

“We had tremendous cooperation from the community,” Rasmussen said.

Deputies found evidence in both churches the juveniles unsuccessfully tried to burn some items, the sheriff said.

Father Saji Thomas, pastor of St. Mary’s Catholic Church, 93 S. 12th St., said a laptop was stolen, furniture was overturned everywhere, numerous items including statues and books were tossed to the floor and Christmas decorations were scattered. Thomas said items were cleaned up and put back in order Saturday, allowing mass to be celebrated Sunday.

Thomas said the laptop was recovered by law enforcement officers. Rasmussen said that stolen items were found by deputies but did not identify them.

Thomas said the youths allegedly responsible for the

vandalism should be given the benefit of the doubt because of their ages.

“Forgive them for they do not know what they have done,” said Thomas, who also is pastor of Our Lady of the Valley Catholic Church, La Grande.

At the Harvester’s Church of the Nazarene, 1120 Birch St., the vandals did most of their damage by pouring syrup and punch on the carpet and furniture, said Pastor Lauri Ferring. In addition, paper, books and other items were dumped onto the floor.

The suspects may have crossed the legal line just getting into the building.

“They broke in through a locked door,” Ferring said.

This was the second time in the past three months the church was the target of vandals, Ferring said, and the building sustained similar type of damage each time.

The pastor also credited volunteers with doing an outstanding job of cleaning up the mess quickly, allowing a church service to be conducted Sunday.

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