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A witness captured the moment the World War II era plane crashed into the crowd at the popular air show / Supplied

A WORLD War II era fighter plane has plunged into a crowd at a popular annual air show in the US, reportedly killing 3 and injuring 56 spectators, in a horrific scene of bodies and wreckage.

The P51 Mustang, named the *Galloping Ghost*, plummeted to the ground at 4.20pm local time as stunned spectators at the event at Reno-Stead airport looked on in disbelief. After hitting the ground the plane shattered into pieces, sending shrapnel into the crowd.



The crash sent shrapnel into the crowd, killing three and injury more than 50. Picture: AP



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A witness at the airshow caught the horrific crash on video:
(Warning Graphic footage)

The plane, piloted by 74-year-old Jimmy Leeward, spiralled out of control without warning and appeared to disintegrate upon impact. Bloodied bodies were spread across the area as people tended to the victims and ambulances rushed to the scene.

Authorities were investigating the cause, but an official with the event said there were indications that mechanical problems were to blame.

Maureen Higgins of Alabama, who has been coming to the air races for 16 years, said the pilot was on his third lap when he lost

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She was sitting about 30m away from the crash and watched in horror as the man in front of her started bleeding after debris hit him in the head.

"I saw body parts and gore like you wouldn't believe it. I'm talking an arm, a leg," Higgins said.

"The alive people were missing body parts. I am not kidding you. It was gore. Unbelievable gore."

The pilot of the P51 Mustang, 80-year-old Jimmy Leeward from Florida, was the first identified fatality in the crash.

Renown Regional Medical Center spokeswoman Kathy Carter confirmed that two others died, but did not provide their identities.

Stephanie Kruse, a spokeswoman for the Regional Emergency Medical Service Authority, said emergency crews took a total of 56 injury victims to three hospitals. She said they also observed a number of people being transported by private vehicle, which they are not including in their count.

Kruse said of the total 56, at the time of transport, 15 were considered in critical condition, 13 were in serious condition with potentially life-threatening injuries, and 28 were non-serious or non-life threatening.

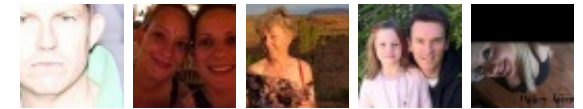
"This is a very large incident, probably one of the largest this community has seen in decades," Kruse said.

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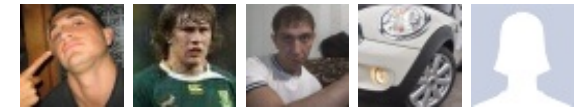
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"The community is pulling together to try to deal with the scope of it. The hospitals have certainly geared up and staffed up to deal with it."

Problem with the aircraft

Race spokesman Mike Draper said Leeward appeared to have "lost control of the aircraft", though details on why that happened weren't immediately known.

Houghton said at a news conference hours after the crash that there appeared to be a "problem with the aircraft that caused it to go out of control". He did not elaborate.

He said the rest of the races have been cancelled as the National Transport Safety Board (NTSB) investigates.

KRNV-TV weatherman Jeff Martinez, who was just outside the air race grounds at the time, said the plane veered to the right and then "it just augered straight into the ground".

"You saw pieces and parts going everywhere," he said. "Everyone is in disbelief."

Tim Linville, 48, of Reno, said the pilot appeared to lose partial control of the plane when he veered off course and flew over the bleachers where Linville was sitting with his two daughters.

"I told the girls to run and the pilot pulled the plane straight up, but he couldn't do anything else with it," Linville said. "That's when it nosedived right into the box seats."

Linville said after the plane went straight up, it barrel rolled and inverted downward, crashing into an area where at least 20 people



were sitting.

"If he wouldn't have pulled up, he would have taken out the entire bleacher section," and hurt thousands of people, Linville said.

Linville said the plane smashed into the ground and shattered like an enormous water balloon, sending shrapnel and debris into the crowd.

Since 1964 there have been 19 fatalities at the Air Races, now in their 48th year, the Gazette-Journal reported.

Disasters linked to aviation shows

- On July 27, 2002, 77 people were killed and hundreds were hospitalised when a Ukrainian military jet flew into the crowd and exploded at an air show at the Sknyliv air base in Ukraine.

The pilots survived the crash by ejecting out of the aircraft. A total of 543 people were injured during the event, which is considered one of the worst air show disasters in history.

- On August 28, 1988, 70 people were killed during an air show crash at the US air base in Ramstein, Germany, when an Italian flying squadron crashed into the crowd. The disaster also left hundreds of the 350,000 spectators that day severely injured.

The accident occurred when three jets from an Italian stunt-flying team collided, sending a jet engulfed in flames into the crowd. The three pilots were among the dead, along with four Americans. At least 450 people were injured.

- On September 24, 1972, a vintage war jet that was leaving an air show crashed into a Sacramento ice cream parlor, killing 23

people, including 12 children. The Korean War-era fighter had been participating in an air show at the Sacramento Executive Airport. The pilot lost control on a takeoff, hit a car and crashed into Farrell's Ice Cream Parlour.

-On September 15, 1951, 20 people, including 13 children, were killed and 50 were injured when a single-engine plane crashed into a crowd at an air show in Colorado. *The Denver Post* reported the plane hooked a wing during a maneuver and flew into a crowd of more than 1,000 people. The pilot, from Lowry Air Force Base, was among those killed.

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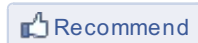

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