

Area pilots ponder plane crash; fog a possible factor

Pilots say visibility is key, but it can come and go quickly

by **Bob Bridge**

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BEDFORD - Area pilots say the Monroe County Airport is a safe facility, but fog may have been a deadly factor in the Cessna 206 crash that killed five IU music school students Thursday.

The musicians were returning from a trip to West Lafayette. The single-engine plane crashed in a wooded area south of the airport. Visibility may have been less than a mile at the time, according to the National Weather Service.

While investigators say it could take more than a year to determine the exact cause of the crash, weather was likely a contributing factor.

The airport has a fully automated weather broadcast system capable of providing weather conditions, and officials reported the runway lights were activated in preparation for a landing.

"One of the biggest fears for anyone operating a vehicle of any type is a loss of vision," said Jared Bond, a pilot and sophomore at Purdue University.

"Whether you are in a car or an airplane, being able to see is critical to the safety of the trip.

"When driving it is easy to simply hit the brakes and slow down or even pull over if fog impairs your vision," he explained. "But in an airplane it is much tougher.

"You can't simply pull over. This pilot was attempting to land ... and was probably very close to the ground when she encountered the fog.

"Things happen very quickly when flying. It would have been very easy to get disoriented and not have time to recover," Bond said.

Fog can appear suddenly in southern Indiana.

"In the valleys and creeks we have around southern Indiana, it is very easy to run into unexpected fog or mist and become disoriented very quickly, especially around this time of year," he said.

Veteran aviator Dean Spencer, a graduate of Purdue, has made the flight to West Lafayette and back many times.

"Basically, Bloomington to Lafayette is a straight-line flight," he said. "It's pretty much over an uncongested, mostly rural area.

"I'm sure the pilot had the navigational tools to tell her if she was on course and how far it was to her destination. There's really no problem until it's time to descend.

"When you get close to the decision height, you either see the airport lights or you don't. If you don't, you pull back and call it a missed approach.

"But I don't want to second guess the pilot. She could have seen the runway, then encountered the fog during those final hundred feet.

"But we don't know what happened," he emphasized. "She may have done everything right. We don't know what caused the crash."

Ray T. Snapp, a Bedford pilot familiar with the airport, said fog can be insidious. "One minute it's perfectly clear, the next it isn't," he explained. "Whenever I encounter fog, I turn around and head for somewhere that doesn't have fog.

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Federal Aviation Administration officials Daniel Keen, left, and James Muroski examine the wreckage of a small plane that killed five people in Bloomington Friday. Darron Cummings | Associated Press

"Actually, Bloomington is a wonderful outlet. I've gone there many times when I couldn't get in here at Bedford. It's a nice airport, a safe airport."

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