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REPORT OF THE CIVIL AERONAUTICS BOARD  
on the  
Investigation of a Ground Collision  
Between Military and Civilian Aircraft

An accident which occurred at the Detroit City Airport, Detroit, Michigan, about 4:20 p.m. on November 20, 1943, resulted in fatal injury to William Ellsworth O'Brien and serious burns to William Jennings when a B-17F Army bomber, piloted by Lt. Paul O'Bagy, overshot the runway and collided with two privately-owned aircraft which were parked near the airport boundary fence. O'Bagy, age 25, was an Army flight instructor stationed at Hobbs Field, New Mexico. O'Brien, age 28, held a commercial pilot certificate with a single-engine land, 0-80 h.p. rating. He was employed by Pennsylvania-Central Airlines as a copilot and was helping the Floyd Foren Flyers, Inc., fly passengers on his day off. Jennings was a ticket agent for the same employer, selling short passenger rides. He was not a certificated airman. The plane occupied by O'Brien and Jennings was a Stinson 10, NC 27794. The other civilian aircraft, parked alongside the Stinson, was a Piper J5A, NC 41158. Both civilian aircraft, owned by the Floyd Foren Flyers, Inc., were destroyed by impact and fire. The Army B-17 received major damage.

Shortly before 4:20 p.m. Pilot O'Bagy contacted the Detroit City Airport tower for landing instructions and was requested to use Runway No. 7. He made a normal approach into an east-northeast wind of about 7 m.p.h. and contacted his wheels approximately one-third of the way down the No. 7 runway, which is 4125 feet long. According to the pilot, after about two-thirds of the runway had been used and additional brake pressure was applied, the brakes became ineffective. When slightly over three-fourths of the available runway had been used the tailwheel was unlocked and power was applied to the two right engines. After a slight pause, due to loading up, the engine responded and the aircraft started to turn to the left. When it had turned approximately 90° the right wing struck the airport boundary fence. The bomber continued turning to the left, striking the Stinson and the Piper which were parked parallel to the fence about 100 feet north of the end of the runway. The two commercial aircraft were demolished by the bomber's propellers and the Piper was dragged underneath the fuselage of the B-17 until it stopped rolling, having completed a 360° turn to the left from its original heading. The fuel tanks of the Stinson and Piper were ruptured and gasoline which sprayed over a large area was immediately ignited. O'Brien and Jennings, who were sitting in the Stinson, were unable to get out of the aircraft and reach a safe distance before being overtaken by the B-17. O'Brien received instant fatal injury. Jennings succeeded in getting out of the path of the bomber, but was caught in the area of the fire and received serious burns.

When confronted with the emergency, the pilot had two alternatives - either to use the emergency brake or unlock the tailwheel and turn. The latter, he believed, would not be difficult, as the speed of the airplane had been reduced to around 25 m.p.h., so he ordered the tailwheel unlocked and opened the throttle to the two right engines to groundloop to the left.

The fact that the engines had loaded up and failed to respond immediately delayed the turn sufficiently to allow the bomber to continue down the runway farther than expected and by the time the engines did respond, the two civilian aircraft were within the radius of the bomber's turn. It appears that the pilot used sound judgment in turning to the left, as the visitors parking lot lay ahead and a DC3 was at the loading ramp near the Administration Building to the right.

The probable cause of this accident was the bomber pilot's poor judgment in landing too far down the runway to bring the plane to a stop before overrunning the field.

BY THE BOARD

/s/ Fred L. Toombs  
Secretary