

United Airlines jet landed after losing primary flight instruments

None of the 100 passengers or five crew members aboard Flight 497 was seriously injured when the plane landed at about 7:20 a.m., 13 minutes after taking off. But the aircraft reportedly blew a tire, causing the plane to veer off the left side of the runway.

Passengers exited using the emergency slides. Some received minor cuts and scrapes.

The Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board are investigating.

"It's too early to really talk about what happened or why it happened," FAA spokesman Lynn Lunsford said. "Both flight crews and air traffic controllers spend a great deal of time training to handle emergencies like this."

Co-pilot Ronald Lee Young told an Associated Press reporter that the plane landed on backup systems with minimal steering and braking ability, after losing all electronics. "When things go wrong, there's always a system ... we can go back to," he said.

Passengers said they gave the crew a round of applause after the plane touched down. "What he did was amazing," said Hope Burns, 48, of San Francisco. The Airbus a320 left Louis Armstrong Airport about 7:07 a.m., taking off toward the south, airport spokeswoman Michelle Wilcut said. Within minutes, one of the pilots radioed Armstrong's traffic controllers requesting a vector back to the airport because of a "smoke issue with the airplane," according to an audio recording of the radio traffic provided by the website LiveATC.net. Safety Board officials said the crew received a smoke warning at about 4,000 feet.

A short time later, the pilot, by now circling back northward, declared an emergency and asked controllers to "roll equipment for a landing." On the ground, airport crews were trying to clear construction vehicles that had been performing shoulder work on the east-west runway, the longer of the two main landing strips.

As air traffic controllers guided the plane back to the airport, the pilot reported the loss of the jet's instruments and requested more precise directions using radar location.

The plane, which was carrying 32,400 pounds of fuel, eventually landed in a southerly direction on the north-south runway, because the construction vehicles could not clear the other strip in time, Wilcut said. During the landing, the pilot reportedly lost anti-skid braking and steering in the nose wheel, causing it to veer into the grass, the Safety Board said.

The aircraft came to a stop about 2,000 feet from the southern end of the 7,000-foot runway.

The passengers were bused to the Hilton Hotel across Airline Drive. They spent the rest of the morning there recovering and recounting their brief trip, while waiting to be reunited with their luggage.

Passengers reported an unusual amount of turbulence during the short time they were in the air.

Dani Marano, 22, and Peter Maroni, 23, of Queensland, Australia, were headed to San Francisco, then to Reno, Nev., after spending a week of vacation in New Orleans. From his seat near the back of the plane, Maroni noticed at takeoff that something seemed odd.

"It didn't feel right. The plane was waving about in the wind," he said. The interior lighting went dark minutes after they were off the ground. Hope Burns, an elementary school social worker, was headed home to San Francisco with her son, Neil Pützer, 13. He was seated in the first class section while she was in an emergency exit row in coach.

As she dozed off, Burns said an announcement about the in-flight movie was abruptly cut off mid-sentence. She thought nothing of that or the turbulence. But her son, seated a few feet from the attendant, said he realized the electrical power had gone out and thought something was wrong. He said he neither smelled nor saw any smoke from the cockpit.

As the plane made its way over Lake Pontchartrain, Maroni and Marano said they noticed the aircraft no longer seemed to be ascending, despite the laboring engines.

"It didn't want to go any higher," Marano said.

"I was looking around," Maroni said, "and everybody was looking out of the window. We were way too low for what we should have been at that point." The turbulence continued as the plane turned back toward the New Orleans airport. Burns, Marano and Maroni said the crew did not announce an emergency to passengers.

"I was thinking, 'It's cool. We landed OK.' And then the tire popped and we veered off the runway," Marano said. Flight attendants opened the doors at the front of the plane, extended the emergency slides and ordered passengers off the aircraft, yelling, "Leave everything. Get out."

The two slides at the rear of the plane were opened later, said Maroni, who scraped his knee while exiting.
Burns said her first concern was her son. The two were reunited as soon as she was on the ground.

United Airlines was making accommodations for the passengers, spokesman Mike Trevino said. They had the options of flying out later in the day or rebooking on a Tuesday morning flight.

Burns and her son said they would more than likely head home as soon as possible. Their time spent in New Orleans was fun, she said, but "nothing as exciting as this."

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TRANSCRIPT OF AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER, PILOT CONVERSATION

UA 497: Clear for takeoff runway 19, thank for you very much.

UA 497: We need to vector back to the airport, we got a smoke issue with the airplane.

N.O. Approach: Turn right 030 (degrees) and maintain 4,000 (feet.)

UA 497: 030 4,000. And we'd like the longest runway please.

N.O. Approach: There are men and equipment on the runway - they're going to try to get them off now. Descend at pilot's discretion. Maintain 2,000.

UA 497: We are declaring an emergency and please roll equipment for our landing please.

N.O. Approach: We are unable for (runway) 10, can you take (runway) 19?

UA 497: ..no..

N.O. Approach: Roger, we are clearing the runway now.

Airport operations: How much time do we have?

New Orleans Tower: I'd say they are about 11 miles to the west.

Airport operations: Tower, we can start trying to pull them off, but I don't think we will get them all off in time.

N.O. Approach: United 497, Say souls on board and fuel remaining.

UA 497: 106 souls on board, fuel remaining 32,400 pounds.

N.O. Approach: They are still trying to get all the vehicles off the runway and 19 is still available if you like....

New Orleans Tower: ... working as fast as they can (unintelligible) There is a bunch of equipment on there they're trying to get off now.

UA 497: You need to clear it for us.

New Orleans Tower: I understand, sir. We're getting them off as fast as we can.

N.O. Approach: Turn right heading 140, main 2,000cleared ILS runway 10 approach.

New Orleans Tower: Can you verify the vehicles are exiting?

Airport operations: We are attempting to get the vehicles off right now, I'm removing the cones also.

New Orleans Tower: OK, cause I haven't seen any of the vehicles move and the aircraft is ten to the northwest and they have to have runway 100.

N.O. Approach: United 497, Turn right heading 180.
UA 497: um.... We only have one... um ... (Alarms sounding in background.)
N.O. Approach: United 497 say again sir?
New Orleans Tower: We need three minutes to get the runway clear.
UA 497: (alarms blaring) We've lost all our instruments right now and we're going to need (directions)
N.O. Approach: United turn left heading, 20 degrees left
N.O. Approach: Just continue left turn, I'll tell you when to stop.
UA 497: (unintelligible) What vector are we from the airport?
N.O. Approach: Right now sir you are on the 330 degree heading from the airport. Northwest of the airport for runway 19er. If you continue on this present heading you'll set up on the shoreline for 19.
UA 497: Shoreline for 19.
N.O. Approach: I can set u up there or I can vector you, what'd you need?
UA 497: That's fine.
N.O. Approach: (unintelligible...)You got the water, right?
UA 497: Yeah, we got the water and we're going to stop here about 600 feet.
N.O. Approach: Roger that. The airport's currently at your 1 o'clock and five miles.
UA 497: 1 o'clock and five miles roger.
New Orleans Tower to fire crews: Fox-6, next arrival runway 19er is our aircraft. And the aircraft is approximately 3 miles northwest runway 19er.
N.O. Approach: If you start your right turn now I can set you up on final.
UA 497: Start turn on final.
New Orleans Tower to fire crews: The aircraft is over the shoreline around two miles out. You do have permission to proceed on to the runway after he lands.
N.O. Approach: Make a right turn. The airport is off to yoru right side,
N.O. Approach: 497, clear to land 19er. You'll be able to make it sir? Winds 180 at 16, gusts to 20, Clear to land. Runway 19er.
New Orleans Tower to fire trucks: Fox-5, this is our aircraft touvh ing down bow.
New Orleans Tower: Follow the aircraft down the runway.
New Orleans Tower: We're going to need runway 10 operational. Runway 19er is fouled at this time.
Fox-5: The aircraft is off the runway.
http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2011/04/united_airlines_jet_landed_aft.html