LAPIERRE PLANE WAS LEVEL, BOTH ENGINES RUNNING, BEFORE CRASH

News / Personalities

The aircraft that crashed with former Quebec MP and beloved television personality Jean Lapierre was flying level with both engines running when it hit the ground, a preliminary investigation shows, contradicting eyewitness testimony that the plane was in a steep bank when it crashed.

André Turenne, a technical investigator with the Transportation Safety Board, said the hilly terrain of the Magdalen Islands must have made perspective tricky for witnesses. “The only things level around there are the houses,” Mr. Turenne said.

He cautioned that the agency still has much work to do before reaching a conclusion on the cause of the crash.

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The small, twin-engine Mitsubishi MU-2B crashed in bad weather Tuesday, killing Mr. Lapierre and the six other passengers and crew.

While the aircraft had no flight recorder, pilot and owner Pascal Gosselin had installed a GPS unit that had voice-recording capability.

However, the unit was not designed to survive a crash, Mr. Turenne said. Investigators have decided to transport the heavily damaged instrument panel to Montreal before attempting to remove it.

The Mitsubishi aircraft is reputed to be tricky to fly. After a spate of accidents – 13 in two years – the company added special recurrent training for pilots. Mr. Gosselin completed the training last year and was due for an annual refresher this weekend.

Visibility at the time was four kilometres and the cloud ceiling was 61 metres. While the minimum ceiling for landing was 120 metres, the aircraft had been cleared for an instrument landing by Moncton air traffic control, which handles flights to the Magdalen Islands. The airport would have been closed if weather was impossible, which means the final decision remained in the pilot's hands – not an unusual situation for winter flying in Canada.

The plane crashed a few metres above sea level, two kilometres away from the runway threshold and it was no longer aligned with the runway. Mr. Turenne noted the plane came to a rest 91 metres from where it first touched the ground and most of the pieces remained in a compact area, suggesting the aircraft was not going very fast when it crashed, but that it fell precipitously.

Mr. Turenne said the examination of any subsequent communications about the weather would begin when his team returns to Ottawa this weekend.

Mr. Lapierre's wife, Nicole Beaulieu, his sister Martine Lapierre and brothers Marc and Louis Lapierre also died, as did co-pilot Fabrice Laboure.

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