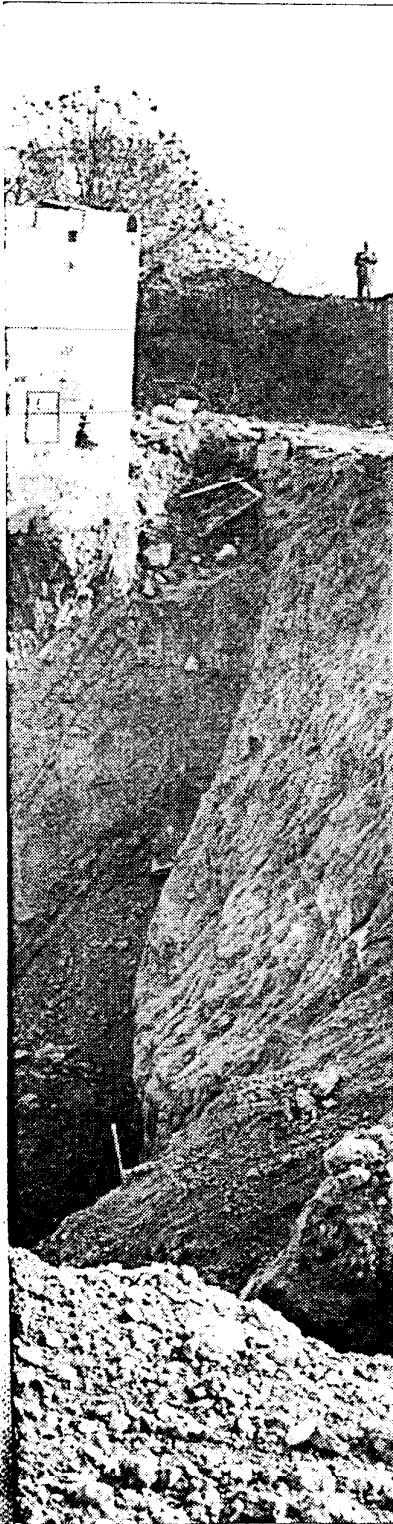


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## Chutists' plane crash linked to engine upkeep

By Ted Gregory

James Baron suffered a wrenching personal tragedy when two of his sons were killed along with 10 others when their plane crashed during a skydiving outing from Baron's Hinckley Parachute Center on Sept. 7.

On Wednesday, that tragedy continued to unfold as a federal report said Baron performed unauthorized installation and maintenance on the plane's faulty engine a few months before its fiery crash into a soybean field near Hinckley, about 50 miles west of Chicago.

While the report did not determine the exact cause of the accident, it suggested that the engine's installation and maintenance may have been factors contributing to the crash.

The preliminary report by the National Transportation Safety Board stated Baron was not legally certified to install the left engine that witnesses said spewed dark smoke just before the crash. The report also said Baron may not have maintained the engine according to government specifications.

According to the report, the engine, produced in 1942, sat virtually unused outdoors at a Florida airport and at an Ohio skydiving club for 17 years before Baron bought it in 1991. With that purchase, Baron should have received maintenance records on the engine that would have indicated the engine was using an inordinate amount of oil, an NTSB official said.

Baron and his attorney were unavailable for comment Wednesday, and relatives declined to discuss the report or the crash.

While an NTSB spokesman cau-

one of the crash victims spoke forcefully about its findings.

"I think it confirms what we have believed all along, that the Hinckley Parachute Center was a slipshod operation," said Chicago attorney G. Grant Dixon III, representing Valerie Steele Holden, the widow of crash victim Glenn Holden.

"Now the world has to find out through the death of 12 innocent people that he was a bad guy and he was running a bad operation," Dixon said.

Carrying 11 skydivers and the pilot, the silver, twin-engine aircraft departed from a grass airstrip about 12:30 p.m. Sept. 7, the report stated. Witnesses interviewed by the NTSB said they saw black smoke trailing the plane's left engine for nearly a mile moments after takeoff toward the north.

The craft reached an elevation of about 400 feet, and its wings were "wavering," the report quoted witnesses as saying. Turning west in an apparent attempt to land in the farm field, the plane's altitude dropped to nearly 50 feet before its left wing dipped, striking the ground about 2 miles west of Hinckley and throwing the plane into cartwheel onto its nose, witnesses told NTSB interviewers.

When the plane exploded in a cloud of smoke and flames, all 12 of its occupants were killed. The craft never reached the altitude of 1,000 feet that generally is believed to allow parachutists to attempt to jump to safety.

At the time of takeoff, the plane had flown three to five flights that day, and the weight it carried was below capacity, the report stated. Weather was not a factor in the