

# Concorde crash outside Paris kills at least 113

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Minutes after takeoff on Tuesday afternoon, a Concorde jet crashed killing all on board. The Air France plane had left from Paris's Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport bound for New York and came down in the town of Gonesse, about 5 kilometres from the capital.

The French Interior Ministry report that 100 passengers, all German, and the nine-strong French crew perished in the crash. It is believed that at least four people on the ground have been killed. The French Civil Aviation Authority says the dead passengers included 50 women, 47 men and three children.

German cruise organisers Deilmann had chartered the plane to take a tourist party to meet one of their ships in New York before sailing on to Ecuador.

Eyewitnesses report seeing flames coming from the left engine before the aircraft exploded on impact. The plane would have had full fuel tanks at the start of its flight. "When the plane crashed, there was a huge ball of fire and an enormous plume of black smoke," one said. It would appear that the engine caught fire shortly after takeoff and the pilot may have been struggling to turn the plane around to return and make an emergency landing. One bystander described the sound of the impact as being like an atomic bomb.

The Concorde crashed just metres from one of the busy highways bringing rush-hour traffic away from Paris. Television video showed a mass of tangled wreckage, with fire crews still hosing down the smoking remains two hours after the crash.

Although the plane narrowly missed the Relais Bleu hotel, it completely destroyed the Hotelissimo next door. At the time of this report, three people were also still missing, who are believed to have worked in the devastated hotel building.

The crashed plane was built in May 1975 and had flown over 11,000 hours, but was the first fatal accident involving a Concorde, which went into commercial

service in 1976. An incident involving a burst tyre led to a design modification in 1979. In January this year a British Airways Concorde made two emergency landings in the space of 24 hours, and in October last year a piece of tail fell off in mid-flight. The BBC web site reports that between 1998 and 1999, 130 incidents involving the aircraft were reported to the Civil Aviation Authority, but said this was similar to the record of other commercial planes.

The fatal accident comes just days after British Airways admitted that hairline cracks had been found in the wings of all seven Concorde in its fleet. On Monday British Airways grounded one of its Concorde after finding the cracks had lengthened. In an interview given before the crash, David Learmount of *Flight International* magazine said, "The thing that causes fatigue is not age but usage. Concorde is used only about a quarter or a fifth the amount of other planes."

Former Concorde pilots and other air experts said they did not believe the cracks were the immediate cause of the crash, which they thought could be related to an engine problem.

The first Concorde flew in 1969 and 20 were built between 1975 and 1980. Of these only 13 remain in service, with 7 in the British Airways fleet and 6 belonging to Air France.

The flying life of the plane was recently extended to 2006. "Extending the life of a plane is a common thing these days because of advances in inspection techniques and also the better use of inspection data," commented Malcolm English, editor of *Air International*.

The aircraft, the only commercial supersonic airliner, was developed as an Anglo-French undertaking. The enormous development costs, running into billions of pounds, were eventually written off by the British and French governments.

With a standard return-fare ticket from London to New York of £6,636 (\$10,070), there is a certain commercial pressure to keep the Concorde fleet flying. “Although Concorde makes up just a fraction of British Airway's overall fleet, it does wonders for the company's prestige,” said Learmount. “They get a huge number of prosperous American travellers who will not travel by any other means.”

In the aftermath of the crash the French Transport Minister has ordered the grounding of all other Concorde's in the Air France fleet.



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