

November 13, 1989

Dear EXPRESS enthusiast:

We are sorry to report the loss of N200EX in a crash on October 26th, 1989. Fortunately there were no serious injuries. Gary Mavrovic, company pilot and Jim Cooper, sales manager, had just departed Santa Monica Airport (Los Angeles) after a full day of demonstration flights and were at 2100 feet (TCA floor 2500 ft.) on a clear day headed for the next stop, El Monte airport, also near Los Angeles. Gary was PIC, and about seven or eight miles out noticed that the oil pressure had dropped, so elected to return to Santa Monica to check it out.

Gary immediately contacted the tower and continued to keep the tower informed as they returned. The pressure continued to drop, and about two miles out the engine dramatically lost power and began to shake violently. Gary shut it down for fear of having it tear loose. They had about 1 1/2 miles left on final but couldn't make it to the airport so Gary chose the best he had, a narrow but quiet street with no traffic. Unfortunately, a wheel struck the roof of a poorly placed two story house on the way in, which at the near stall speed he was flying, pretty well ended control of 200EX. The left wing then hit a chimney of an adjacent house, breaking the fuel tank open and dumping fuel on the roof. Continuing on its way, 200EX rolled inverted and crashed nose down into the next yard, destroying a Dodge van with one wing and a brick wall with the other. The impact tore the engine and mount and both wings from the airframe and slid the van forward some four feet. The cabin and tail finished the flip and came to rest upright facing the direction from which it had come.

When all the commotion stopped, Gary and Jim looked at each other simultaneously asking "Are you OK?" Each said "yeah" and "let's get out of here" again simultaneously. They walked across the street and sat on the lawn to collect their wits. The house on which the fuel had been spilled somehow ignited and its occupant came out to ask if there had been a car accident. Gary asked a neighbor if he could use their phone and started making calls. Because the tower had been alerted by Gary, emergency crews were on the scene immediately and the damage was contained as much as possible. Nevertheless, the house that caught fire was seriously damaged. The Express did not catch fire although it was a total loss.

The crash scene looked like a war zone; bricks, airplane parts, demolished shubbery and debris scattered everywhere amongst battered and burning houses and the crushed

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*Express*  
Four place tilt plane  
Composite construction  
200 miles per hour



van. Gary came through unscratched, while Jim had a scalp laceration, a cut on his nose and generally felt beat up. He also had a diagonal bruise across his chest where the safety harness did its job. Jim is 6'5", 230 pounds and probably suffered more than Gary because of his size. No one on the ground was injured.

Jim likened the feel of the crash to being "massaged in a sack." Unlike aluminum, the fiberglass structure did not collapse around the occupants but absorbed energy by first flexing and ultimately delaminating. But not before it had absorbed the majority of the energy from the crash and protected the occupants, which is what it is supposed to do. Had anyone been in the aft seats it appears that they too would have been unharmed. The aft section was intact and likewise not collapsed around the seats.

Gary likened the crash to that of an Indy car—dust, debris and pieces flying everywhere during the crash, but when it's over the driver walks away. Many racing teams such as the Formula One team, McLaren, have in fact gone to all composite structure for its superior crashworthiness.

N200EX had 1005 hard working hours on the Hobbs meter at the end, but she was more than just a prototype or demonstrator to us. She had taken us all over the U.S. in all kinds of weather with style, joy and comfort. Actually, Jim determined that 200EX had been within 300 miles of any point in the U.S.. Every trip in 200EX was eagerly anticipated, for as most of you know, she was a delight to fly. Photo missions, test flights, customer demos, sight-seeing trips; every flight was a treat. We were proud of her performance and she never let us down.

We made a point of giving all of our employees rides in the EXPRESS so they would have a better appreciation of the product they were working on. That of course made the loss all the more personal for everyone at Wheeler Aircraft. Only one person ever got sick in 200EX, an employee who shall remain nameless, but whose reputation is forever tarnished. The rest of us had fun though, like the time I pinned Gary to the overhead with negative G's while he was getting something from the back, or the time we joined up on a flight of Cobra helicopters, or the B-17 on its way to Seattle. And yes, 200EX brought us through a few situations where joy was replaced by fear. Those are the times when one acutely realizes that the wrong decision could have serious consequences. Under that heightened awareness, the strength and ability of the EXPRESS was reassuring and we became really appreciative of the snug, warm security of the cockpit and felt a sort of kinship with the EXPRESS when she delivered us safely through an uncomfortable situation.

We outraced thunder storms from Montana to Florida, dodged dust storms in Nevada and California, endured temperatures of 108 degrees and blowing dust in San Diego, and nearly froze in Idaho before we got the heater installed. 200EX was in New York headed south during hurricane Hugo's passage and she arrived at the Nut Tree Airport just outside San Francisco, 1/2 hour before the earthquake hit and survived both of those disasters intact. After going through so much together and sharing so many delightful hours we feel we have truly lost a friend. But 200EX was faithful to the end when our guys walked away unscathed from an accident the crash investigators said was not survivable.

So why the engine failure? So far the investigation has shown only that a rod bearing spun on its journal causing a lubrication failure and the ultimate breaking of that rod. The



engine had been overhauled some 600 hours previously, and although it had been a troublesome engine, there was nothing to suggest a catastrophic failure.

Some will view this as proof of the unreliability of aircraft engines, and although I'm certainly disgusted with that particular engine, I would still have to point out that total engine failure occurs statistically only once in 100,000 hours of flying. I guess though that I might feel more comfortable with a new engine next time. That engine had some 850 hours on it when we bought it and it never was right. We had it overhauled at about 1050 hours, but it was never smooth, it always had high oil consumption, and in the end, it got us. Continental is configuring a special IO-360 just for the EXPRESS which is going into the next airplane.

I am horribly dismayed to find the crash of the 200EX a national event and to have it used as a reason to ban Experimental aircraft, close airports, or any other of the irrational reactions to aircraft crashes generally and this one specifically. One benefit that may arise from the crash however, is a strong effort on the part of EAA to change the name of the Experimental Category to something more benign, like "Custom Built." In discussing the crash with reporters, many didn't seem to hear much else after the word "Experimental" was mentioned.

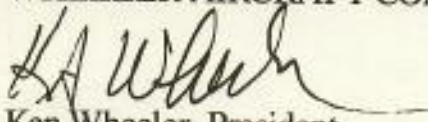
And so, you may ask, what does this crash mean for Wheeler Aircraft? We entered this business with our eyes wide open and prepared ourselves emotionally and otherwise for the eventuality of crashes. We were of course insured, although in this case others may ultimately bear the brunt of the liability.

Response from all quarters has been very positive. Many of you called, faxed, or wrote to express your support for which we thank you. Several orders have come from prospective customers who felt that the design has now passed the ultimate test.

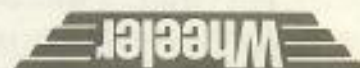
We have now sold nearly 200 airplanes and are running three shifts to keep up with demand. The crash has not affected production or much of anything else for that matter, except of course demo flights. Two more factory-built planes are under construction and we are pushing for completion in early 1990. We have grown to 70+ employees and are continuing to expand our facilities, technology and capabilities. We are in the planning stages for a new 40,000-foot building and have new projects in the hopper to put it to good use. We're healthy, we're here for the long haul, and we're committed to building the finest airplanes in their class. The crash is unfortunate, but it comes with the territory, and we will learn all we can from it.

N200EX strutted her stuff right up to the end, and in so doing demonstrated her strength in a way for which there is no substitute. N200EX is gone, but long live the EXPRESS!

Sincerely,  
WHEELER AIRCRAFT COMPANY

  
Ken Wheeler, President

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