

The Historian

Preserving Today for Tomorrow

Volume 4 Number 6

November — December 2010

1967 — 5 Die as Jets Collide Over Leisure World

This article is the seventh in a series adapted from the transcripts of the Historical Society's first archivist, Marjorie F. Jones. Additional information was taken from five Historical Society Journals published between 1980 and 1982, *Fulfilling Retirement Dreams*, published by the Historical Society in 1989 and numerous issues of the 1967 *Leisure World News*, *The Orange County Register* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

Throughout the years of contention between the Marine Corps and the Rossmoor Corporation developer of Leisure World, the Marines remained good neighbors and friendly collaborators with the residents. The only accident within the community involved two Marine Corps Skyhawk jet bombers flying in from Floyd Bennett Field, New York, on the fog-shrouded Sunday, January 22, 1967.

The two attack bombers were part of a 10-plane Skyhawk jet bomber squadron destined for El Toro

and a two-week reserve training program. The pilots, on the last leg of the flight from Bennett Field, were approaching the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station for touchdown when the collision occurred. Six of the planes had landed safely ahead of the two that crashed and the remaining two were held at Kirkland Air Force Base in New Mexico after the disaster.

Bad Weather Impedes Landing

The pilots were unfamiliar with the area and one plane's radio was malfunctioning. There was heavy



Residents bring up fire hose in an effort to battle flames after two Navy jets crashed into Leisure World on Sunday, January 22, 1967. One of the pilots and four residents died as a result of the crash. See Maps on Page 11.

Courtesy Los Angeles Times

See Air Tragedy Page 2

MUSINGS

Honoree of Month

Congratulations to **Loretta Ann Sheppard**, our Laguna Woods honoree for October 2010 and **David Rabinov**, our honoree for November. **Las Palmas** and **The Regency**, both part of **Vintage Senior Living**, fund the Honoree of the Month program.



Bob Ring

Inga Futtrup is the photographer at **Images by Dwayne** who so expertly captures the images of our honorees. We are grateful to the **Laguna Woods Video Club**, whose members videotape the ceremony.

Membership Renewal

Your tax deductible membership renewal application is printed on page 6. In order to conserve resources, we have printed the **Society's Membership Roster** on pages 5 and 8. If I have omitted your name, please drop me a note and I will include it in our January issue.

Volunteers

During the last six months the society has been busy training our volunteers so that they can help convert our archives into electronic documents. To date we have converted documents which contain the equivalent of 73,000,000,000 characters. This represents less than 5% of our collections. We estimate that this effort has taken the equivalent of two people working full-time for one year.

If you would like to perform data entry, or scan documents using our copy machine, or proofread documents, or collect information from local newspapers or the Internet, please call Trish Cassidy at the Society, 206-0150.

We are grateful for the assistance on the Library of Congress' Veteran History Project we have recently received from **Nina Brice, Marsha Mass, the American Legion Post 257 and the Jewish War Veterans**.

Seasons Greetings

Allow me to be one of the first to wish you and your family a joyous holiday season.

Bob Ring

Air Tragedy



A manor on the second floor of 272 Avenida Sevilla took the brunt of the impact.

Courtesy Orange County Register

rain and the pilots were trying to get below the thick clouds so they could make their final approach and land at the Marine base. Accounts from witnesses confirmed the theory that the planes were flying wingtip-to-wingtip as one pilot attempted to guide the companion plane to the landing strip. The two planes collided, spewed fire and metal on Leisure World, and crashed, hitting buildings 272 and 281.

One plane tore through the roof of building 272, a two-story, eight-unit Majorca/Casa Blanca off Avenida Sevilla. It hurtled down through the roof of manor N and exploded inside manors A and B on the first floor.

The other plane smashed through the side of the adjacent building 281, a two-story, eight-unit Cadiz on Avenida Carmel. Both buildings broke into flames as fiery fuel spewed over a 300-foot area. Shock waves from the twin crashes broke nearby windows and sent scores of frightened residents pouring into the streets. Only one wall of building 281 was left standing.

Witnesses remember hearing the sound of low-flying planes and then a loud, metallic impact. Within seconds, they recall, the twisted metal plummeted to earth and parts of the planes and embers flew on impact. Flames engulfed the wreckage immediately and created a "burning wall," lighting up nearby manors "like arc lights," recalled T.A. Cowen, 281-P Carmel, who witnessed the crash.



Flames engulfed the wreckage and created a burning wall, lighting up nearby manors like arc lights. Photo by Harry Kennawell



Capt. Powell's parachute snagged on the roof of building 281 leaving him dangling a few feet above the ground. Bus driver Gary White, among the first to arrive at the crash scene, saw him and cut him from the harness and attempted to assist him. Powell died the next day.

Courtesy LA Times - AP Wirephoto (above) and O.C. Register (left)



Fate of the Pilots

Both pilots ejected from the planes. Captain James H. Powell parachuted nearly 400 feet to the ground only to have his chute snag on the second floor of building 281, the building across the sidewalk from building 272. This left him dangling helplessly a few feet from the ground. The winds caught the chute's folds, whipping him about, and smashing his head into the structure.

Gary Paul White, 28, a Leisure World tour bus driver was one of the first to arrive at the scene of the crash. He found the jet pilot snagged in his parachute.

In the moments following the devastating collision, the dying pilot was concerned about those he might have hurt or killed. Captain Powell asked White, "Did I clear the building? Did I miss the houses?"

"Then he passed out, stopped breathing, so I gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and a little bit of heart massage. I put my jacket over him to keep him warm until a marine helicopter came for him."

White flew in the helicopter with Captain Powell to the El Toro Marine Base hospital, then to



Gary White
Courtesy L.W. News



A resident kneels to help a man lying beside a manor adjacent to building 272, burning in the background.

Courtesy L.A. Times - A.P. Wirephoto



Firemen toil at 'cooling down' nearby buildings.

Courtesy O.C. Register

the Camp Pendleton medical facility, where he died from multiple, severe injuries.

The other pilot, Captain Frank Gambelli of Boonton, N.J., landed in the mud in the open space adjacent to the east end of building 272. He was treated for shock and minor bruises and later released from the hospital at the El Toro Marine base.

Neighbors Rescue Survivors

Nearby residents rushed to the site to help. Willard H. Van Dyke and Henry L. Hefele of 286-C and 287-B Carmel ran to the scene. They found Mrs. Anita M. Brown in the kitchen of her manor in building 281 barely conscious. Aided by other volunteers, they tore a door from its frame as a makeshift stretcher and removed her from the building. She was taken from the scene by ambulance.

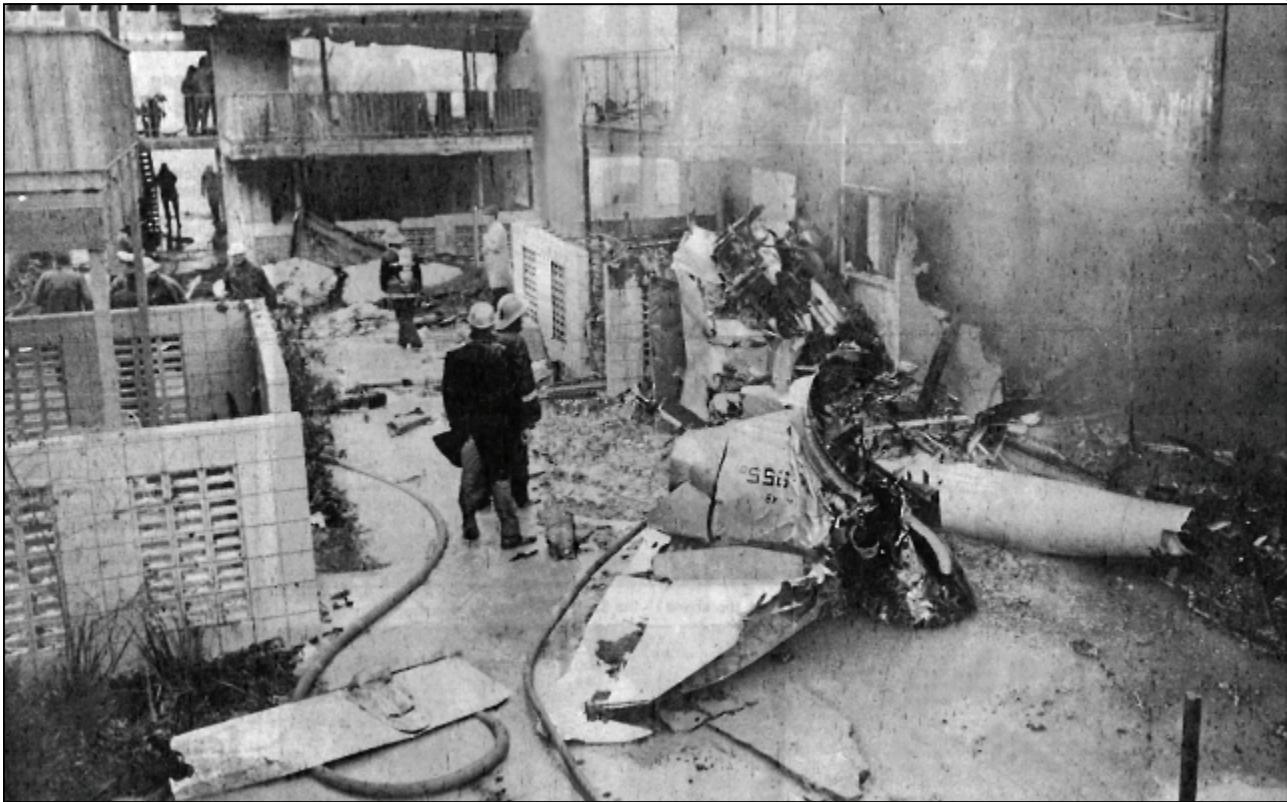
"The flames were close, but we didn't think of the flames, at the time," Van Dyke said. "We knew we had to get her out immediately."

Church Members and Clergy Help

F.E. Payne, Jr., 363-O Castilla, recalled a similar experience in the rescue operations. He heard the "hissing sound, and two loud whump, whumps," as he sat in the Methodist Church on Moulton Parkway. He looked out and saw "all this smoke and flame" and ran to the site where he saw an injured man in a burning building. He rushed inside to remove him from the searing flames.

Similar reactions were recounted throughout the community, as residents, volunteers and professional

Continued on Page 8

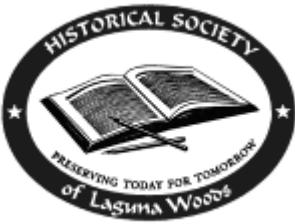


Firemen sift through debris. Four residents and one pilot were killed, and three other residents were hospitalized. Fiery fuel spewed over a 300-foot area and plane debris crashed into two buildings.

Courtesy O.C. Register Photo by Clay Miller

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Historical Society
of Laguna Woods
P.O. Box 2220
Laguna Woods, CA 92654
949-206-0150

The Historical Society of Laguna Woods is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and sharing the history of Laguna Woods. We are the official Historian for Laguna Woods.

Some of the many worthwhile activities the Society participates in are:

- Library of Congress Veterans Registry Program
- Record oral histories from our residents
- Maintain a vast repository of historical material
- Honoree of the Month Program
- Diorama of the City

As a member, you will receive our bi-monthly newsletter which focuses on the history of our community.

Our Historical Society is a 501(c)(3), tax exempt charitable corporation – #FJ95-3213797. Your support will make it possible to continue these programs, as well as many other special projects, events, and activities.

Please use the Membership Application form below and mail it along with your check.

FOR YOUR RECORDS:

Historical Society Membership for 2011

Date: / /

My Check # :

Amount: \$

----- Clip & Mail -----

Yes! I / we want to support the Historical Society of Laguna Woods in 2011.

Please fill out contact information as you would like it to appear in our Membership Roster. Also, indicate membership category selection by placing a 1 and/or 2 on the appropriate line.

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Name 1 _____	_____ \$300.00 – Patron
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If you have questions please call 206-0150. Thank you.***

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fire fighters fought the inferno and choking black smoke to rescue individuals and save property.

The Rev. Otto E. Sporrer, who had just completed the final blessing of the Mass at St. Nicholas Catholic Church, drove to the scene of the crash after one of his parishioners, Gracian Bidart, stepped into the sacristy to tell him a plane had crashed in Leisure World.

"The volunteer firemen from El Toro were the first men on the scene," Sporrer recalled. "They laid down two hose lines by me, and only one man was available to man the line."

Father Sporrer, a Navy chaplain for 23 years, stepped into a role for which he had been trained in the service, and joined the firefighters. With soaked cassock—he hadn't had time to change after the service—he helped fight the fires.

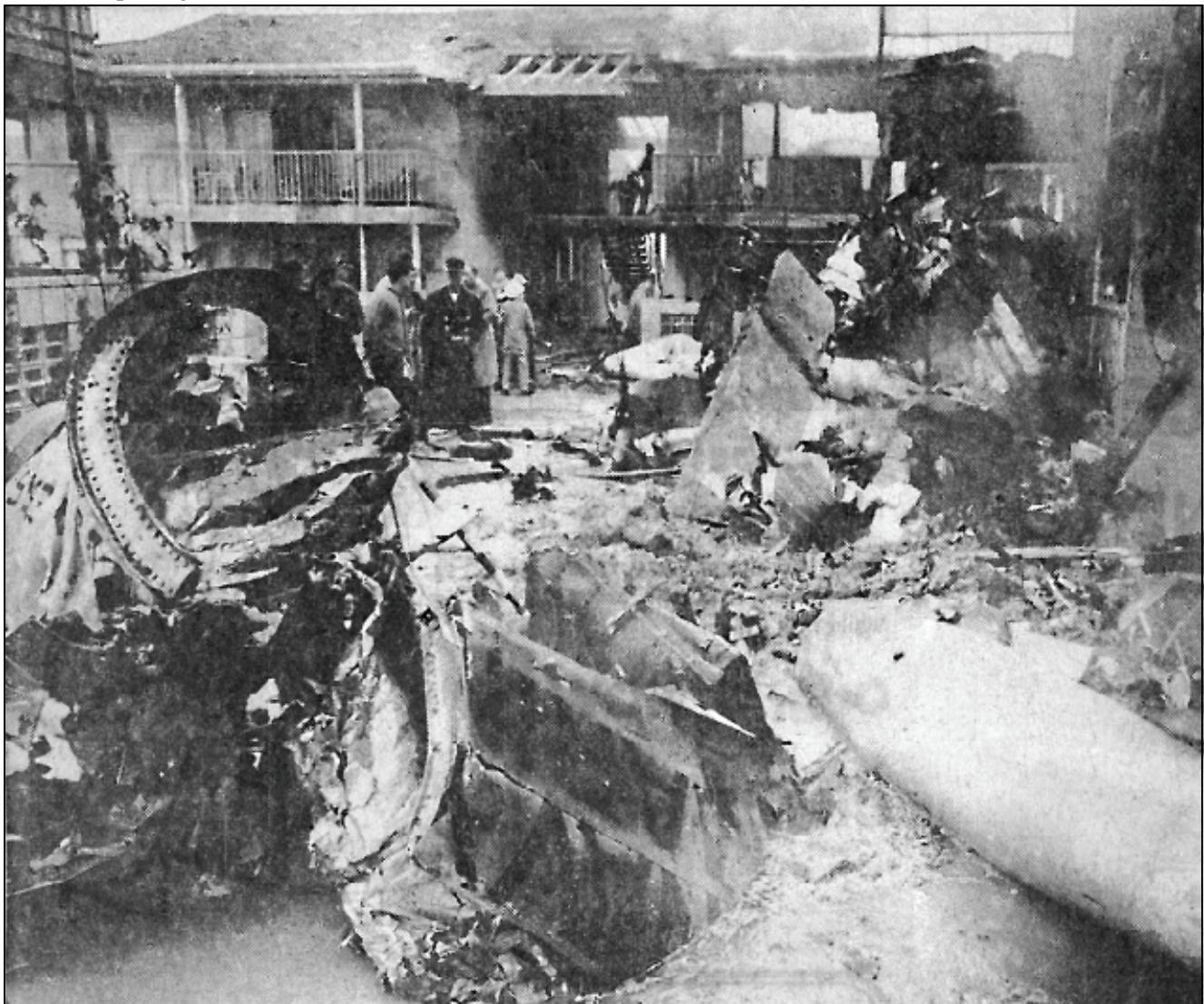
Heroic Efforts

Amid a shout from his wife to "stay back," Jona (Jack) Taylor, 271-D Sevilla, rushed out of their apartment after watching the two Marine jet bombers explode into building 272. Running toward the blazing downstairs to Unit A, he reached Mrs. Gladys Lauderbach and started pulling her out. Captain Charles Donaldson, a Marine who had just arrived on the scene, saw Taylor and helped him bring the woman to safety.

Both men tried to reenter the building to rescue Leon Lauderbach, but flames forced them to retreat. Lauderbach perished in the fire.



Jack Taylor
Courtesy L.W. News



Parts of the wrecked jets littered the courtyard and sidewalks adjacent to buildings 272 and 281. Courtesy O.C. Register

This was how Mrs. Edwina Taylor described her 64-year-old husband's heroic efforts to save their neighbors. She further explained how her husband continued his rescue attempts, which resulted in severe burns on his hands that required hospitalization.

Taylor Tries to Rescue Mrs. Kenyon

After Taylor's attempt to help the Lauderbachs, she said, "My husband then noticed the carports had caught fire, so he rushed over and was able to move two cars and a golf cart. A policeman then came and they both broke car windows to roll more cars out of the danger area," she said.

"They were afraid the cars would explode," Mrs. Taylor added. She went on to say that her husband heard the cry, "Mrs. Kenyon's in there."

He ran over to building 281 and saw Horatio Kenyon lying on the ground. Simultaneously, the roof of the building collapsed in flames. Huge flames and smoke enveloped the area. He rushed into the smoke, but his clothes caught fire, forcing him back. Taylor was given first-aid treatment by a Leisure World ambulance driver and then was rushed to South Coast Hospital in the same ambulance as Horatio Kenyon.

During a special telephone conversation with Leisure World officials, Congressman James B. Utt, from Orange County, commended Taylor for his heroic actions.

Captain Donaldson's Efforts

Captain Donaldson was a Marine stationed at the MCAS-El Toro. His account began with Sunday morning's usual attendance at church. "As I was coming out of church, some people in front of me shouted that a plane was on fire and going to crash," he recalled.

"I looked up and saw the smoke and flames coming from the plane and saw one parachute. I knew it was going to hit the houses and I started running. There was a tremendous explosion and the air was full of flying debris. Pieces of the aircraft were flying everywhere," Donaldson said.

Rushing to the impact area amid flames, smoke and flying debris, the captain noticed Jack Taylor attempting to remove Gladys Lauderbach, who was badly burned on her face and hands from the charred wreckage in her manor. As they were moving her to safety she screamed that her husband was still inside.

They attempted to reenter the holocaust. A sheet of sheer fire described as a "10 to 12-foot-high wall of solid flame," forced Donaldson and Taylor back out of the manor and prevented them from rescuing Leon Lauderbach.

The captain then fought his way through the flames to the next door unit where he found an elderly couple



Rescue crews, aided by high-powered lamps, worked throughout the night on Sunday, January 22nd, and into Monday morning combing through the debris of Buildings 272 and 281. Personal possessions, where reclaimable, were stored for safekeeping. As daybreak came Monday, the curious gathered around the tragic scene.

Courtesy Leisure World News

apparently panic-stricken and immobile with fear. "Get out of here," Donaldson shouted and ushered the couple to safety outside the burning building.

Turning to lend further assistance, Donaldson heard a man shouting from the top of an adjacent building that his mother was trapped inside. Heeding the plea for aid he jumped to a nearby wall and scaled an iron railing leading to the balcony of the top floor. Entering through a bedroom window, the captain discovered and rescued the woman, who was overcome by smoke.

Mr. and Mrs. Henry Manning, 272-C Avenida Sevilla, were sitting in their living room with guests, Mr. and Mrs. T.T. Ritter, when the jet bombers exploded into the apartments on the southwest side of their building. The quartet knocked out a plate glass window and leaped to safety over a block retaining wall.

With help from the fire department; Marines and their equipment; Sheriff's Department; Highway Patrol; Rossmoor and its workers and equipment and, above all, residents of Leisure World, rescue efforts proceeded quickly. The blaze was under control in an hour and a half. While the loss of five lives is too many, quick action prevented greater losses.

Casualties

Harold and Margaret Berman of 272-B Sevilla, and H.H. Kenyon of 281-D Carmel were the three other residents who perished in the fire.

One of three injured persons taken to South Coast Community Hospital, Mrs. Anita Brown, 59, remained in the intensive care ward following surgery for "penetrating wounds of the abdomen" and other internal injuries for another two weeks. The other two injured, John Taylor and Gladys Lauderbach, underwent surgery for third-degree burns. Their condition was changed from fair to satisfactory 10 days after the crash.

Rebuilding Starts

Despite all the destruction, by April, Rossmoor had all manors rebuilt and all signs of disaster removed. Today one would not know that an engine of one of the planes is buried in the ground near 272 Sevilla.

Leisure World Administrator Robert L. Price commented in the January 26, 1967 edition of the *Leisure World News*: "All in all, what impressed us the most during this period was that there was no panic, nor thought of panic. . . . There was a solid feeling of moral strength in all those who were helping and those who were watching, who could not help but contributed to the effective emergency work which was being done."

Poor Pilot Judgment Bared

A ranking military officer revealed to Dean Fairchild, a staff writer for *The Orange County Register* in 1968, that the primary cause of the jet plane crash was poor judgment on the part of the lead pilot.

The source, who was very close to the subsequent secret investigation of the crashes, said the two-plane Skyhawk jet flight "should have diverted to another base." The lead pilot, Marine Reserve Captain Frank Gambelli was under orders not to comment on the findings uncovered by *The Orange County Register*.

Marine Corps officers maintained a tightlipped silence on this incident for more than a year.

The *Register's* source, whose identity was protected, said several factors were taken into consideration by a special board of inquiry, whose findings were not officially revealed. To begin with, he said the Gambelli-Powell flight from their home base, Bennett Field, was "filled with error and poor judgment."



Rossmoor crews quickly started clearing the debris so they could start rebuilding the damaged buildings and carports.

Historical Society

The planes left Bennett Field for a two week training session at El Toro Marine Corps Air Station. Their last stop was at Kirkland Air Force Base, Albuquerque, N.M. The source said that when they left Kirkland, Gambelli knew of the adverse weather conditions at El Toro—a 900-foot ceiling and rain squalls. He said Gambelli also knew the radio in Powell's aircraft was not set for communications with El Toro's control tower. Consequently,

when Gambelli and Powell arrived at El Toro and started their instrument approach, Powell was "blind" and could feel his way along only insofar as he could see the wing of Gambelli's craft.

The source said that sight contact was lost over Leisure World and the two ships collided, plunging them into the housing area. Another factor, the source contended, was that Powell had only about 10 hours flight time in the jet and should not have been permitted to fly into the weather and landing conditions that existed at El Toro on the fateful day.

Despite the lid clamped on official information, some other information was obtained by the *Register*. Gambelli's commanding officer, Major W. G. Mitchell, Marine Attack Squadron VMA 132, Floyd Bennett Naval Air Station, contended "there was no negligence in the crash, and if a mistake had been made it was still an accident."

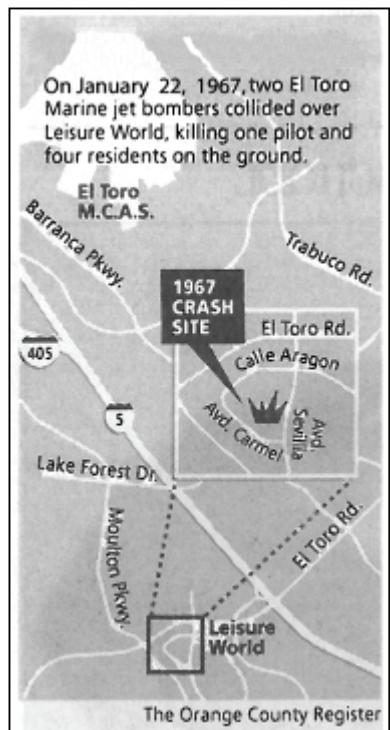


Base Map Courtesy Google © 2010

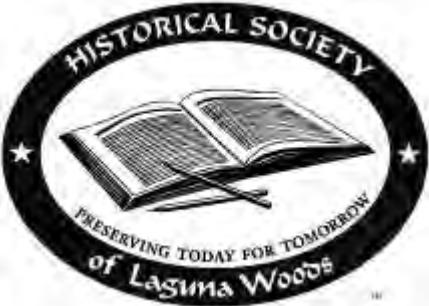


By April, 1967 all of the manors had been rebuilt and most of the physical signs of the disaster had been removed.

Historical Society



The Orange County Register



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Fire Department and military rescue crews frantically searched through the smoldering wreckage searching for survivors of the tragic plane crash on January 22, 1967.

Courtesy Leisure World News

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Society
Membership.
Application
on Page 6**

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Editor — Bob Ring

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