

The Denver Post / John Leyba

Englewood pilot John Zayac taxis his 1944 military airplane on South Colorado Boulevard prior to takeoff Saturday afternoon. Engine trouble forced Zayac to make an emergency landing on the road Saturday morning.

Pilot makes forced landing on road

Vintage plane stops safely on S. Colorado Boulevard after losing engine power

By Karen Rouse
Denver Post Staff Writer

HIGHLANDS RANCH — A local pilot who was flying to Reno, Nev., for a national air competition became an instant celebrity Saturday morning after making a smooth emergency landing on South Colorado Boulevard.

For several hours, passing motorists and neighbors, some of whom were retired from the military, scrambled to catch a glimpse of the silver and blue SNJ-5 military plane perched at the side of the road. By 4 p.m., some 200 people had flocked to the area.

The hoopla centered around Englewood pilot John Zayac.

Zayac, 41, was uninjured, and except for a cracked piston that mechanics hustled to repair Saturday afternoon, the 1944 North American military trainer plane was in good shape, too.

"These special appearances are tough," Zayac said after his unexpected landing.

The pilot left Centennial Airport in Arapahoe County at 6:45 a.m. Saturday for the National Championship Air Races and Air Show in Reno.

He got as far as Golden when the aircraft started to get "shaky." He immediately contacted Denver International Airport to declare an emergency, and



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Zayac, 41, stands by his plane, a World War II-era North American SNJ-5. The plane was headed to an air show in Reno, Nev., when it had engine problems.

was directed back to Centennial.

Shortly after, the engine stopped. Zayac scanned the ground for a safe landing spot — away from the rooftops — and came to a halt on Colorado Boulevard, between County Line Road and C-470.

Zayac said fear didn't strike him until after the landing.

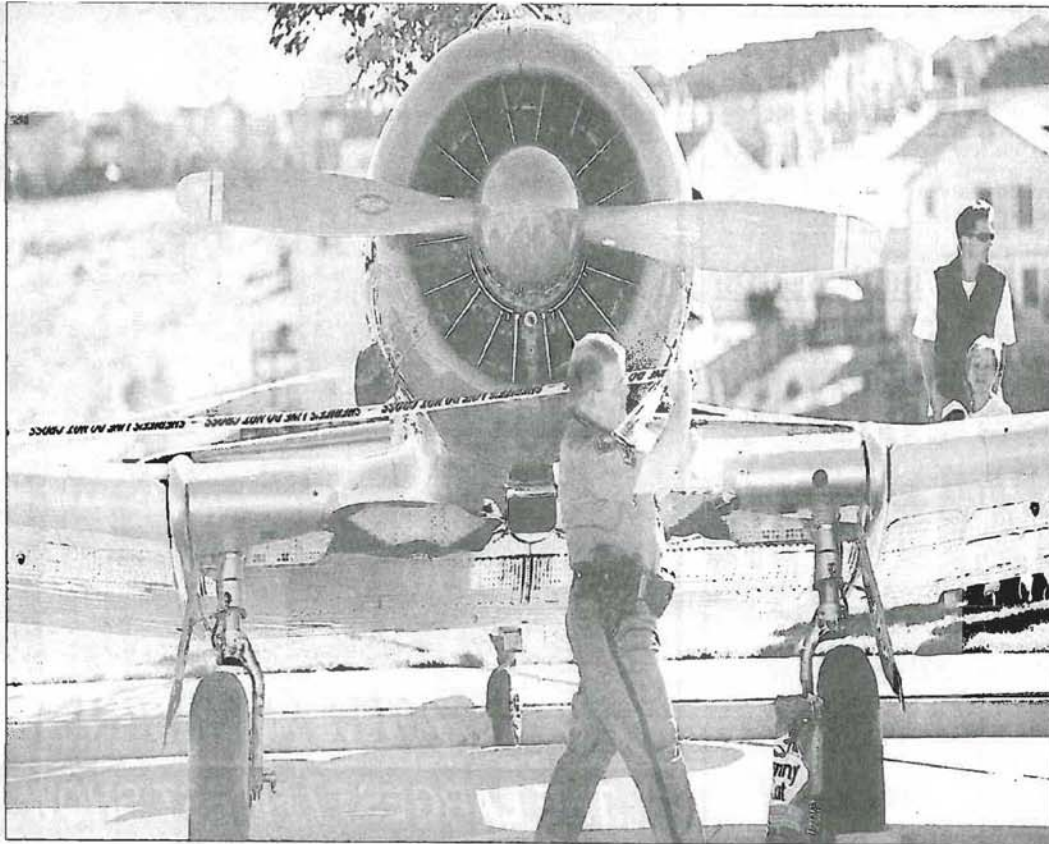
"I was so busy looking for a landing

spot, I didn't realize how nervous I was until after I got out," he said. "Then your knees start shaking."

Highlands Ranch resident Val Villanueva was jogging just as Zayac began to have problems.

"He was in trouble," Villanueva recalled. "The engine was sputtering and he

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Douglas County Sheriff's Sgt. David Parker strings tape around the World War II-era military plane that made a forced landing on South Colorado Boulevard Saturday morning. Neither the pilot, John Zayac of Englewood, nor anyone on the ground was injured. The plane was repaired and took off again Saturday afternoon.

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started banking." Other witnesses said they saw oil streaming from the aircraft.

Matthew Sternberger, 14, was awakened by what "sounded like a big gun," he said. He ran to his window and "saw this plane about 50 feet off the ground."

"I thought I was dreaming when I saw it smoking," he said.

Imagine what the driver of a red pickup must have thought when he caught a glimpse of Zayac and the Navy plane in his rear-view mirror.

Zayac, who touched down behind the pickup at about 7:15 a.m., said he saw the driver's eyes in the rear view mirror "and they were really big."

Zayac was unshaken, but the incident rekindled thoughts of Joseph Gunnels, a fellow pilot and friend who died a week ago today when his aircraft, also a 1944 SNJ-5, crashed in an empty field during a Steamboat Springs air show.

Gunnels, like Zayac, was a member of Air Power West, a group of about 125 aviation enthusiasts based at Centennial Airport.

A Federal Aviation Administration spokeswoman said it appears Gunnels may have lost control. Steamboat Springs pilot Lynn David White was also killed in the accident.

"I did think about him as the motor stopped," Zayac said, adding that Gunnels was an excellent pilot. "He was one of the mentors of the group."

While Air Power West mechanics repaired the aircraft, passersby posed for pictures and a good-natured Zayac recounted his tale.

At about 4:45 p.m., after his plane had been fixed, Zayac got back inside the cockpit, revved up his engine and took off for Centennial Airport.

"The neighborhood has been great," Zayac said. "But I'd like to do this at an airport next time."

Unexpected detour

Pilot John Zayac landed his small plane on South Colorado Boulevard after experiencing a mechanical problem. He took off along the road at 4:45 p.m.



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