

The Citizen

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Local men escape air disaster

CALLED OFF PLANE

FOUR GLOUCESTERSHIRE and England rugby stars were booked on the Turkish Airlines DC-10 which crashed yesterday near Paris, killing all 346 people on board. But a last minute change of plan, when some of the England team had already taken their seats on the doomed jet, saved their lives.

Rugby Union officials decided that the team should return home together. The players were called off the plane, others took their seats, and as the monster jet flew out, they boarded a Pakistani Airlines plane which brought them safely home. The quartet was England and Gloucestershire skipper John Pullin, England selector and Gloucester fruiterer Peter Ford, Gloucester prop Mike Burton, and club colleague John Watkins.

Between 300 and 400 people from North Gloucestershire were in Paris for the France v England Rugby match.

Mr. Burton said today that several of the team and their wives actually got on the plane, but were called off when Air Commodore Bob Weighill, secretary of the RU, and Lt.-Col. Dennis Morgan, his administrative secretary, made the fortunate decision that they should stay in one party and return on a later flight.

Mr. Burton said: "We were really lucky. Although we heard there had been an accident involving a plane it only came home to us how bad it had been when we landed in London. We thought that the plane had gone off the end of the runway. We didn't know just how disastrous the crash had been."

Mr. Ford said that because of the British Airways dispute people were being "switched about like yo-yos" to get on flights out of Paris before the crash. "I'm just grateful we were on the Pakistani plane," he said.

Other Gloucester Rugby players also got back safely. Among them were Gloucester policemen, Richard Jardine and John Fidler, who had stayed on after playing for British Police against French Police, so that they could see the England game.