

CHICAGO FLASHBACK

Breaking history since 1847



QUENTIN DODD/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Smoke hangs over debris of the American Airlines DC-10 that crashed on May 25, 1979, shortly after takeoff from O'Hare International Airport. All aboard and two on the ground died.

The crash of Flight 191

As the 40th anniversary nears, a look back at the disaster — and its positive legacy on aviation safety

America's deadliest airplane crash — the 9/11 attacks are in a separate terrorism category — occurred 40 years ago this Memorial Day weekend. A quarter-century later, in 2004, a Tribune editorial reconstructed what had occurred at O'Hare International Airport in 1979 — and explained how the terrible accident made subsequent air travel safer. This is a lightly updated version of that editorial, "The crash of Flight 191."

Friday, May 25, 1979. The long Memorial Day weekend beckoned. The sky was luminous, the spring air blessedly warm. O'Hare International Airport teemed with travelers. At 3:02 p.m., air traffic controllers cleared a silver American Airlines DC-10 for takeoff to chase the sun's path. With 258 passengers and a crew of 13, Flight 191 was bound for Los Angeles.

The plane lumbered down runway 32-R. Halfway through the 2 miles of concrete, the jet nosed upward. As it did, the engine beneath its left wing came loose. It pivoted up and over the front and top of the wing, then slammed to the runway.

The three flight officers, who between them had 46,000 hours of experience, didn't see what had happened. All they knew was that one of their three mighty engines had lost power.

Paradoxically, Flight 191 continued to climb, gasping to perhaps 300 feet. Electrical failure robbed Capt. Walter Lux of his instruments. Co-pilot James Dillard fought to stabilize the craft. But Flight 191 — plane and payload totaled 379,000 pounds — lunged out of control, rolling 112 degrees to the left. Its 165-foot wingspan tipped oddly vertical. Its nose pointed 21 degrees down.

In O'Hare's tower, a controller reacted: "Look at this! Look at this!" he burred. "Equipment — I need equipment! He blew an engine!" Catching his breath, the controller threw a lifeline: "All right, American 191 heavy — do you want to come back and to what runway?"

Chicago Tribune
Saturday, May 25, 1979

Worst U.S. crash; 272 die at O'Hare



There was rain of fire falling

Full reports on O'Hare air disaster

It went up in flame, swish, just like napalm

Flight 191 still ranks as the deadliest accident in the U.S. aviation history. The very fact that it

Flight 191 ended 4,600 feet beyond the runway, near the Touhy Mobile Home Park in Des Plaines. The plane hit 300 feet from Abe Marmel, 75, who was tending his vegetable garden. "I heard a loud explosion," he told a Tribune reporter. "By the time I looked up, there was a rain of fire falling down on me." Chicago police Officer Michael Delany watched from afar: "It went up in flame, swish, just like napalm." Burning debris sprayed for half a mile. All aboard were incinerated, as were two people on the ground. The Rev. Ward Morrison,

an Elk Grove Village priest who tried to bless bodies strewn about a field, found them too hot to touch. Total death toll: 273.

From the tower, the controller could see why American 191 heavy hadn't answered. The plane's voice recorder, pulled from the blackened wreckage, would establish that during the DC-10's 31-second flight, only one word was uttered audibly in its cockpit: "Damn."

Flight 191 still ranks as the deadliest accident in the U.S. aviation history. The very fact that it

occurred, awful as it was, may well be the primary reason it has never been eclipsed.

Chicagoans perennially revisit haunting scenes from television footage of that day — firefighters trudging across scorched earth, small flags marking locations of body parts, black smoke rising from the plane's skeletal fuselage.

Extraordinary detective work debunked initial theories about the disaster and eventually pinpointed its true cause. The lessons of Flight 191 were so crucial, so unexpected, that to this day they help make aviation safer. From that tragedy came important reforms.

Federal investigators quickly ruled out terrorism, weather, interference from other planes and the most common factor in air disasters: pilot error. They suspected the culprit was the aircraft itself. Flight 191 was the fourth fatal DC-10 crash since the plane's introduction in 1971. Here there were two damning clues: a broken bolt and a fractured flange, both from the pylon, or mount, that had connected the rogue engine to the wing. The Federal Aviation Administration ordered all airlines to inspect similar parts in the 138 DC-10s flown by U.S. carriers.

Within days, two United mechanics, Larry Schluter and Ernie Gliotti, found metal dust on an engine mount of a United DC-10. "We removed the access panels and found cracks so big you could trip over them," Gliotti told a reporter. "Rivets were broken, fasteners were sheared. It gives you a funny feeling in the pit of your stomach to see the extent of that damage." The FAA then grounded all DC-10s, tossing air travel into chaos for 36 days. Consumer advocate Ralph Nader condemned the McDonnell Douglas jumbo jet as the winged equivalent of the accident-prone Chevrolet Corvair.

Michael Marx, a metallurgist for the National Transportation Safety Board, sensed a rush to

judgment. His suspenseful autopsy of Flight 191 found that the fault lay not with the DC-10 but with a maintenance procedure used by American and other airlines. Rather than first removing the engine and then the pylon from the wing, as McDonnell Douglas suggested, mechanics at American's maintenance hub in Tulsa had, to save time, removed and reinstalled the engine and pylon as a single unit. That led to a crack inside the pylon. Two months of subsequent flights stressed the fracture until, on May 25, the pylon disintegrated.

The NTSB's final report cited that procedure, as well as a vulnerability in the DC-10's hydraulic system, as precursors of Flight 191's fatal nosedive.

American paid a fine and recovered. McDonnell Douglas never fully did, and eventually was folded into one of its rivals, Boeing. Survivors of the victims live with the pain to this day. As a widow told producers of a 2004 documentary: "It never hurts less. It just hurts less often."

The crash of Flight 191 taught the aviation industry that as aircraft grew more complex, maintenance procedures demanded as much scrutiny as engineering design or pilot training.

It's impossible to say how many other disasters have been averted because the industry took that lesson to heart.

Investigative journalist Peter Greenberg, co-executive producer of the documentary, summed up its theme: The most important story in an air tragedy is the why. "It's not that a plane crashes," he says. "These things do happen — thankfully not that often. But why did it happen, and what do we learn from that, and how do we apply those lessons?"

Flight 191 carried 271 men, women and children to premature deaths. How many deaths it has prevented is a surely chilling number that none of us who fly in airliners can ever know.

A 'happy morning' with Dad gives way to crushing loss

BY ELLEN GEMME

Charleston Chew candy bars make me cry. And, strange as it may sound, the memorial for the victims of the crash of American Airlines Flight 191 is the place where I'll finally be able to help my kids understand why.

On May 25, 1979, my dad was up early to pack for a business trip. I was up early to help him. I had just turned 8 years old, and my slumber party was planned for that night. This special morning with Dad, a break from the normal school-day routine, was one of my birthday presents. It was a happy morning. I remember Dad's brown hard-shelled suitcase on the bed. I remember running back and forth to the bathroom to collect things he asked for. I remember he was out of shaving cream and something about that made us both laugh. When Dad left to go buy more shaving cream, I went downstairs for breakfast.

He found me as I was walking to school. He pulled the car over and handed me a Charleston Chew, its long glossy yellow wrapper shiny in the morning sun. Don't eat it until after lunch, he said.

After school, Mom and I were beginning party preparations when a neighbor called with news of a big plane crash at O'Hare International Airport. The TV went on, the phone started ringing. It was just Mom, a neighbor and me in the kitchen when she got the news. She was standing at the yellow phone attached to the wall. When whoever was on the other end of the line confirmed Dad's ticket said Flight 191, Mom fell onto her knees, hugging the phone and wailing. That sound, of her hitting the floor with the full force of her body, her knees crunching into the ground, has never left me.

Dad did not have a funeral. It was a memorial Mass. No funeral without a body, the priest said. It

made me feel like Dad had done something wrong. I felt so alone, confused and oddly ashamed. There was no understanding of my grief, trauma or even sadness. For years after the crash, if the subject of Dad came up, I was told my problem was I couldn't get over it.

In 1979, there was no mechanism for victims' loved ones to come together, grieve or support one another. There was no group memorial, no candlelight vigil, no sharing of our loss. There was no internet or online group chat room. There was no support for traumatized children, spouses, loved ones. Families of the victims were left in isolation, without any way to contact one another, without a common place to meet or share the loss. That isolation only intensified the grief.

Thirty years after the crash, a class of sixth-graders from Decatur Classical School decided to use their civics project to lobby for

a Flight 191 memorial. It took them two years — the memorial for the 273 victims of American Airlines Flight 191 was dedicated in Des Plaines in October 2011. Until that day I had never met anyone outside of my family who lost someone in the crash. It turns out I wasn't the only person who "couldn't get over it." Thirty-two years after the crash, about 1,000 people attended the memorial dedication.

The memorial for American Airlines Flight 191 is the place where I will tell my children what happened to their grandfather. We will not have to look at old newspaper clippings or attempt to visit the crash site. Instead we will sit in a flower-filled park and rub our hands over my dad's name, etched in a stone in the memorial wall. The memorial is the place where my children will begin to understand why I hug them too tightly, why I say "I love you" more times in a day than is prob-



ELLEN GEMME PHOTO

Francis Gemme poses with his family for his daughter Ellen's first communion in May 1979. Soon he would die in the crash of Flight 191.

ably normal and why the sight of a Charleston Chew candy bar always makes me cry.

Ellen Gemme is a nurse and writer in Pennsylvania. Her father, Francis Gemme, was a passenger on American Airlines Flight 191 who died in the 1979 crash. Her family lived in Winnetka at the time.