

'Like napalm': A scene they won't forget

By Harlan Draeger

First, a disabled airliner, out of control and "cartwheeling like a toy airplane."

Then the roar of an explosion and huge sheets of flame "just like napalm."

And then an eerie, smoke-filled crash scene of scattered wreckage, bodies and parts of bodies where "they didn't need paramedics."

Hundreds of people in the O'Hare Airport area caught glimpses of the rapidly unfolding tragedy. Each had a story. None is likely to forget.

There was Michael Laughlin, 24, a private pilot from Toronto who watched from the airport terminal as the DC-10 went down.

"About 15 seconds after takeoff, the plane's left engine either flew or fell off, followed by what appeared to be steel or white smoke," he said.

"The plane banked sharply to the left until it was approximately at a 90-degree angle to the runway. It continued to bank until it was perpendicular to the runway.

"It turned away from the runway, nose down. Then it hit and exploded on impact."

Laughlin said thick flames shot 200 feet into the air.

"I DON'T THINK IT" ever got more than 600 feet off the ground," he said. "The engine just came off and fluttered to the ground."

George Bliss, 30, of Schaumburg, was driving west on Touhy Av. when he saw the low-flying plane struggling to stay aloft.

"There was this cartwheeling effect, much like a toy airplane," he recalled. "It was an incredible sight to see."

Bliss said he could not hear any engine noise from the disabled jet before the crash:

"There was none of that loud, searing jet noise. It was just like it wasn't there."

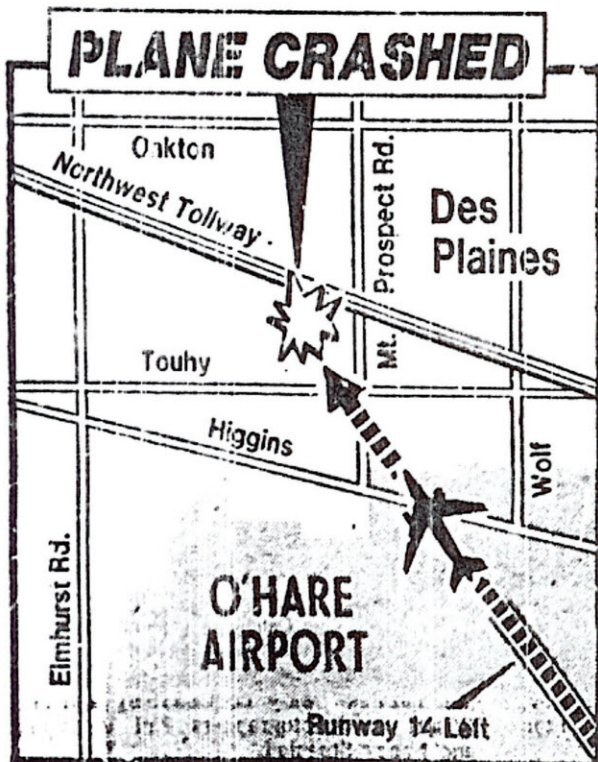
Barbara Mueller, manager of the Oasis Trailer Park at 500 N. Elmhurst Rd., was sitting at her desk in the office when she heard a whining, grumbling sound. Looking out the window, she saw a tragedy in the making:

"You could see the plane above the trees. It was wavering from side to side. The wings were dipping up and down. It looked like the pilot was trying to regain control. It would tilt one way and then another. Then the plane went down behind the trees. Then there was a large explosion and a lot of flames and black smoke. This all happened in a couple of seconds."

Ken Teklela, 23, was getting the gasoline tank of his car filled at a Shell service station at Elmhurst and Touhy when he looked up.

"THE AMERICAN AIRLINES jet was coming toward him, close to the ground.

"I thought it would crash and might hit near me," he said.



AT CRASH SCENE, Mayor Byrne views the wreckage. She vowed assistance to families of the crash

"I was mesmerized. I freaked out."

But the disabled plane, trailing vapor from the left wing, passed over him before it crashed.

Teklela described what happened:

"The plane rolled over so the wings were perpendicular to the ground. The tip of the left wing was about 40 feet from the ground. Then it just went down in a slow arc."

Teklela, an employee of the Duncan Travel Service, at 300 E. Touhy, said he heard "a kind of pop" that was not very loud.

"Then there was a mushroom cloud," he said. "It was like napalm, but water than high. It spread out for a few seconds. Then there was just black smoke. The whole area filled with black smoke."

The plane crashed in a grassy area that once served as a small airport and now is used by Chicago police for canine training.

Chicago Patrol Officer Michael Delany was sitting in his squad car, rather "bored," he said later, during a dog-training exercise when he saw the plane come toward him.

"WE SEE AND HEAR planes taking off from O'Hare every day, but this one was different," he said. "It was coming down."

Delany said that as the plane dropped, its left wing dug a deep rut in the ground and the plane collapsed, bursting into flames.

Delany said the pilot was struggling to right the aircraft until "there was a loud pop, and his other engine went dead. That's when he lost it. Then the whole area went into a sheet of flame."

"I ran over toward the plane. I wanted to see if I could hear anyone calling for help. But I spent two years in Vietnam, and I just knew there were going to be no survivors. It was just like napalm. As soon as it hit, it went up."

Pieces of the plane slammed into mobile homes in a nearby

victims and to airline and aviation officials. (Sun-Times Photo by Carmen Reporto)

O'Hare shut down briefly

The crash of the American Airlines DC-10 shut down operations at O'Hare Airport for a short time Friday, but flights resumed quickly on runways not affected by the accident, the Federal Aviation Administration said.

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