

100 MOMENTS

FLIGHT 232

By Larry Sauer (1989-2006)

On that fateful day of July 19, 1989, SA's Mike Morris, Larry Mullen, and I were at the Woodbury County Sheriff's Office waiting for word from SA Dan Moser who had gone to E. St. Louis, IL to arrest William Simpson Edwards for the kidnapping and murder of thirteen-year-old Cheryl Holman, a front-page story but for 232. United Airlines Flight 232 was a regularly scheduled flight departing from Denver Stapleton International Airport at 2:09 PM with a stop in Chicago and then was to continue to Philadelphia.

The NTSB, in their accident report, listed the weather as an "estimated ceiling of 4,000 feet with broken clouds and 15 miles visibility. The temperature was 80o F, and winds were 360 degrees at 14 knots. There were towering cumulus clouds in all quadrants".

Onboard were eleven crew members (three in the cockpit and eight in the cabin) and 285 passengers. The departure from Denver was uneventful. The cruise plan called for a cruising speed of about 615 mph at an altitude of 37,000 feet. The aircraft was a McDonnell Douglas DC-10, registration #N1819U. It was equipped with two wing engines and a tail engine.

The cockpit crew was comprised of Captain Al Haynes, First Officer William Records and Second



Officer Dudley Dvorak. The fourth person in the cockpit that day who was originally a passenger until the emergency occurred was Captain Dennis E. Fitch, a Training Check Airman with United.

Just after 3:15 PM, the "flight crew heard a loud bang or explosion followed by vibration and shuddering of the airframe." After checking the panel instruments in



the cockpit, the crew "determined that the number two aft (tail-mounted) engine had failed."

Captain Haynes called for emergency shut-down procedures for the damaged engine. As the second officer was completing the checklist, he observed that there was no hydraulic pressure. The aircraft

had lost all hydraulics and the pilots had no way to control the aircraft except to use engine thrust from one side to the other with the two remaining wing engines. At 3:20 PM, the flight crew contacted the Minneapolis Air Traffic Control tower requesting emergency assistance. After some discussion and different landing location options, it was decided that the aircraft would attempt a landing at the Sioux Gateway Airport in Sioux City.

Sometime before 4:00 PM, still at the sheriff's office, we heard police radio traffic about an airliner that was having mechanical problems. As we listened, it became apparent the airliner was in serious trouble and needed to land. Initially, there was discussion on where the plane would land and whether it could even make it to an airport. U.S. Highway 20 became a possible runway for the DC-10. As we listened, time passing quickly, we learned that 232 was going to land at Sioux City.



When it was apparent the plane was going to land at Sioux City, we proceeded to the airport to give whatever assistance we could. Not having the proper radio channels to hear the progress, SA Mullen recalls, "So I didn't know exactly what was happening until I caught sight of the plane. From my perspective, it appeared to be headed directly over my house. Scary, since my family was home, but also curious since I had never seen a plane approach the airport from that direction. I relaxed as I saw the plane clear my house and then I-29, and it looked like it was going to make it and land safely. Wrong again! I lost sight of the plane as I drove under an overpass. The next thing I saw was a ball of flame and black smoke."

It was 4:00 PM and flight 232 had touched down on runway 22 heading in a west/southwesterly direction. An investigation later revealed that as the plane touched down the right-wing dipped striking

the runway just before the right landing gear struck. A large crater was left on the runway from the landing gear. This caused the plane to roll to an inverted position and it began to cartwheel continuing in a west/southwesterly direction. The DC-10 was destroyed by impact and fire as it careened down the runway and grassy area beside the runway.

First responders who arrived at the scene viewed an unbelievable disaster. The path taken by the obliterated aircraft was strewn with bodies (some still buckled in seats and some not), luggage, aircraft parts (internal and external), children's toys, and other personal items belonging to crew and passengers. Rescue workers encountered ambulatory passengers leaving the wreckage, some exiting from a cornfield that was west of the wreckage path.

After rescue operations were completed a command post for post-event activities was set up in one of the airport buildings. A meeting was conducted by Iowa State Medical Examiner Dr. Thomas Bennett. Discussion centered on body and debris location documentation, photographs, body identification, body recovery and storage, autopsies, final body disposition, and other issues. It was decided that no bodies would be removed from the crash site on the 19th due to preparation for recovery and the late hour.



The following section of this report was taken from a report completed by Robert Monserrate and Dennis Chapman entitled: The Crash of United Flight 232: The Use of Forensic Personnel in the Collection and Identification of the Victims, the Psychological Aftermath, and Recommendations. This is not the entire report written by Robert and Dennis but contains the information about the morgue operation.

On July 20, a coordinate baseline method of measuring was used on the main and crossing runways to establish victim location. Spray paint was used to mark the runways at 30-foot intervals. Three collection teams were formed. Each team had a pathologist, a scribe, a photographer, a measurer, two body handlers and a tagger. Tags, paint, or stakes were used to mark bodies, body bags and body location. Photographs were taken of the victims, with their assigned numbers, where they were found. After the victims were removed from the crash site, they were placed in refrigerator trucks which were located outside the morgue. In a period of four hours, 54 bodies were removed. Another team was now set up to recover bodies from the fuselage of the plane. The bulk of the fuselage came to rest inverted in a cornfield. Because of this, body removal was delayed until the structure could be stabilized. Two cranes were connected to the remaining landing gear to lift the plane while railroad ties were stacked to support the wings. The 47 bodies located in the fuselage were tagged, photographed in position, and then removed. Some of the victims were still strapped into their seats. Because of tight quarters and a partially collapsed cabin, it was necessary to cut out and remove those seats from the plane before the victims could be removed from their seats. This process took 5 hours.

A temporary morgue was set up in an Iowa Air National Guard hangar. Room dividers were used to form six separate areas: a reviewing area where each body was photographed along with clothing, jewelry, and any physical characteristics to aid in identification; an X-ray area for full-body X-rays; the FBI fingerprint area that examined 111 victims with 33 identified; a dental area where 17 dentists examined 111 victims with 101 identified; an autopsy area that had 16 people working at four tables; and an embalming area that had about 30 people working six tables. The autopsies determined the cause of death for 35 victims to be from smoke inhalation and 76 from head, neck, and chest injuries. The autopsies were completed in two days with all victims identified five days after the crash.

Fatalities - 112 (1 Crew, 111 Passengers)

Injuries - 171 (46 Serious, 125 Minor)

Not Injured - 13

Although this crash was a disaster of mass proportions and many precious lives were, lost it is still a miracle that 184 survived. The response by

Siouxland first responders that fateful day surely saved lives.

Having been a part of this horrendous undertaking of processing such an immense scene, I think that I can speak for all DPS/DCI personnel involved that it could not have been completed any better anywhere in the world. I am proud to have worked with every one of my co-workers.

On January 29, 1990, the DPS personnel listed below were recipients of the Governor's State Top Achievement Recognition (STAR) award.

Thanks to Dennis Chapman, Robert Monserrate, Larry Mullen, and Dan Moser for jogging my



- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------|
| Dr. Thomas Bennett, M.E. | Jerry Brown |
| Dennis Chapman | Tim Day |
| Ron Forrest | Robbert Harvey |
| Julie Hamilton | Jerry Hetrick |
| Deborah Hewitt | John Kilgore |
| Roy Lubkeman | Robert Monserrate |
| Mike Morris | Dan Moser |
| Larry Mullen | Victor Murillo |
| Thomas Randolph | Larry Sauer |
| Tim Shannon | Donald Shreffler |
| Wright Smith | Sandy Stoltenow |
| Frank Tarasi | |