

## Flight 405

Here is something that has always chilled and fascinated me. On the evening of March 3, 1972, if you had been traveling through the dark on the Thruway south of Albany, NY, you might have looked up to notice the lights of an airplane as it made its way north, flying a bit too low through a light fog and a few snowflakes. Mohawk Airlines (soon to become USAir) Flight No. 405 was having trouble on its approach to the Albany Airport. The plane, a 5 year old high-wing Fairchild 227 turbo prop, was in perfect mechanical condition. Later testing would show no abnormalities. But of the 48 souls aboard, 16 had only moments to live.

The crew, evidently reading the gauges wrong, thought there was a problem with one propeller's pitch adjustment and they decided to feather the prop and land on the remaining engine. For some reason, the captain could not get the feathering mechanism to operate. The co-pilot tried to assist him. They were able to stop the engine, but the prop continued to spin, adding drag and increasing the plane's rate of descent. Neither pilot noticed how much.

At one point the Cockpit Voice Recorder microphone heard the captain ask, "Do you see the runway out there?" The copilot answered, "No, not yet," but you wonder if he even looked, busy as he was helping the captain. The NTSB report concluded the captain failed to delegate the feathering problem to the copilot and concentrate on the landing. The co-pilot failed to note the altitude and call it out at regular intervals, as he should have during the approach. The two would have known the plane was low, but neither realized it was 900 feet below where it should have been as the crew busied themselves with the prop mechanism. Amazingly, a minute before impact no one was flying the airplane. At 8:47 and a half, Sandra, a recently married 24 year old flight attendant, told the passengers to get ready to land in a few minutes. But the plane would meet the earth in only seconds, almost four miles short of the runway. The captain and co-pilot would realize their mistake just 3 seconds before their lives ended.

Much too low, Flight 405 continued to descend through the night, rushing forward at almost 200 miles an hour. It swooped down over the Normanskill Golf Club, then above New Scotland Avenue and St. Peter's Hospital, where some of the injured and dying would arrive in less than an hour. As the small urban pond known as Buckingham Lake rose like the moon up from the plane's port side wing tip and the maple branches below began to feel the bite of the churning propellers, Flight 405...a 45,000 pound behemoth of aluminum and steel and gears and cables and wires and grandmas and fathers and Moms and sons and daughters and sweethearts ... with an awful tearing screech and chest-pressing thud, slammed into 50 Edgewood Avenue at Albany, NY.

The plane hit low enough to dig out its own cellar, had one not existed, and the house collapsed on top of the wreckage. Nothing exploded or caught fire. Fuel doesn't readily burn; the vapors do, but an outdoor temperature of 13 degrees Fahrenheit that night minimized any vaporization. The fuel-laden right wing separated from the plane but miraculously remained intact, even though enough aviation fuel leaked out to turn the crash site into a potential inferno. All of the injuries were from the plane's impact. Passengers were catapulted to the front of the plane and into the forward cargo compartment. Such G forces can cause irreparable damage to a body's organs. In some air crashes, victims' hearts have burst out of their chests. Cargo disintegrates. In the case of Flight 405, passengers were hurled forward like human cannon balls, along with their seats, smashing into luggage and freight. Only one of the plane's occupants got out on his own and he didn't remember how. The rest, dead or alive, had to be pried out.

According to the NTSB report, Accident Investigation Report NTSB-AAR-73-08, complete with charts, photos and maps, (ignore the Wiki entry on the web; it is far too forgiving of the pilots) the plane's crash into the very bottom of the house was extremely fortunate for the nearby homes. Frankly, it was incredible no fire erupted and only one house was obliterated in the densely built-up neighborhood. Most of the houses were only twenty five feet apart. Of course, it was miraculous Sandra and 31 of the passengers lived. Likewise, 5 out of 6 in the house survived. The family of four watching "The Partridge Family" on television was spared any serious injuries, even though the parents were blown out through the family room window and landed in a side yard as the plane ripped into an adjacent room. In the tossed up wreckage of the home, their two young sons were found in a closet, just beneath a pool of leaking jet fuel.

A man out walking his dog reported the plane came in over the neighborhood and at the last second dipped its left wing, catching it in the street. The man stood in shock as the plane slammed into the ground, just where the street rises up a small hill to 50 Edgewood Ave. The left wing disintegrated. The fuselage shot through No. 50's living room to the basement and the fuel-laden right wing, still attached to the plane, flopped over on the next lot, No. 54, where a tree stopped it from sliding into the backs of homes on the next street. There was no house at No. 54. Thirty-five years later there is still none. If you look at Google Maps, it is the only empty lot anywhere in the area. Had a home existed at No. 54, it would have been hit broadside with a wing full of aviation fuel.

A graduate student in an upstairs apartment of No. 50 was in the shower when the plane swooped down out of the sky and took his life. His young wife, Hannah, the friend of a woman with whom I worked in Syracuse, was watching television in the next room. She remembered nothing about the moment of impact except for the loudest sound she had heard in her life and the last one she would hear for a while. The world turned upside down and the lights went out and. She found herself in a pile of rubble, ears ringing and hurting terribly, her bathrobe up under her armpits and caught on debris so at first she couldn't stand up. The smell of what she thought was kerosene almost overpowered her.

Suddenly cold in the frigid March air, she decided their house had blown up and she had landed down the block. Hannah threw off a piece of furniture and began to walk home before she realized she was already there. The street was quiet. Deaf from the crash, she couldn't hear anything anyway. She began to look for Peter, her husband. As the moments ticked by, neighbors came out of their homes and soon the street was crawling with police, firemen and even a reporter with a backpack and a microphone down at the end of the block. With the strong stench of aviation fuel permeating the scene, firemen worked frantically to free the survivors and to suppress their own personal terror of an instant immolation had the fuel ignited.

Survivors were rushed to area hospitals. In 1980 I met a man who tirelessly worked through the night to comfort the injured and their relatives and friends who searched the hospitals for their loved ones. He was the pastor of the Reformed Church near St. Peter's Hospital at the time. Bruce and I are old friends today and we sometimes talk about his experience that night and my own from a different time. This story brings inquires from time to time and a passenger on the plane wrote me not long ago looking for the minister who had attended his parents that night as their family shook with the tragedy of

the death of a sibling he had been flying with in the wreckage. I was able to connect the man with Bruce.

Less happy was a reader who wrote to say she was related to the Captain and that he should have been portrayed as a hero. I had to respond that I published only what I read in the NTSB report. I offered to consider an addendum to the story with a paragraph written by her, but she never responded.

Not long ago, I parked my car on Edgewood Avenue, got out and looked around. It's a quiet street just south of Washington Avenue and not far from the University of Albany's campus, where my daughter spent four years in the late 1980's. The demolished house has been replaced. I felt a bit self-conscious, knowing adults seldom walk around anymore on a residential street in the middle of a weekday afternoon.

How strange it was to hear the birds chirp and an airplane pass overhead as if nothing unusual had ever happened in this neighborhood of families and students. I looked around at the well-kept homes and wondered if any of the people living in them today were here on that night in 1972. Had an airliner landed on my street, I would have moved out and never looked back.

I got back in my car and sat for another five minutes. I wanted to pray, or somehow offer condolences ... or something. Probably, I wanted to know this couldn't happen again. But tragedies happen every day, when and where we least expect them. On a bright and sunny afternoon or a sleepy winter evening as the snow falls gently on the neighborhood.

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*There have been two Flight 405 accidents in the United States. In March of 1992, US Air, the successor to Mohawk Airlines, crashed another Flight 405 into Flushing Bay at LaGuardia Airport in New York City. The plane stalled on take off because of wing icing.*

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