

# Pilot blamed for crash

By Frank Brennan

Pilot error has been blamed as the probable cause of a United Air Lines 737 crash in a South Side residential area near Midway Airport last Dec. 8 in which 45 persons were killed.

There was no evidence of foul play, reported the National Safety Transportation Board Thursday.

The board concluded that the crash probably was caused by the "captain's failure to exercise positive flight management" during an instrument approach for landing, thus permitting his jetliner to stall and fall on bungalows in the 3700 block of W. 70th Pl.

The 737, with 55 passengers and a crew of 6, was en route from Washington, D.C. to Chicago and Omaha when it went down about 1.5 miles from the airport.

Among the passengers killed were Rep. George W. Collins (D-Ill.); Michele Clark, a CBS correspondent, and Mrs. Dorothy Hunt, wife of convicted Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt.

**THE CRY OF** foul play and sabotage was raised after the crash by Sherman Skolnick, a legal researcher who charged the plane was sabotaged as part of the Watergate cover-up.

Skolnick had charged the plane's electrical system had been tampered with as part of a government conspiracy to cover up Watergate details. These details included, according to Skolnick, the fact that Mrs. Hunt was carrying \$10,000 in \$100 bills, which were found in her belongings and traceable to the Watergate scandal.

However, at a special hearing convened by the board last June, Skolnick was unable to produce any evidence linking airline employes or the government to foul play and sabo-

tage in connection with the crash.

An official of United Air Lines, declining to comment on the probable cause of the accident, however, said the airline "strongly concurs with the board's finding that no evidence of sabotage or foul play was found.

Charles F. McErlean, UAL executive vice president and chief operating officer, said UAL would not comment otherwise on the report because of pending litigation brought on behalf of the crash victims and their families.

**AUTOPSY REPORTS** had showed some of the bodies found in the burned wreckage contained high level of cyanide, triggering rumors that the crew might have been poisoned.

But the board found no evidence of any medical conditions that would have incapacitated the crew and said the cyanide was due to smoke inhalation. It explained that it was not unusual to find such

traces of cyanide due to poisonous smoke produced by the burning of certain types of materials used in cabin furnishings, including plastic fixtures.

Investigators also found the aircraft, its engines, flight controls and all systems, except the flight data recorder which failed 14 minutes before the crash, to be airworthy at the time of the accident.

**THE CRASH** occurred as the 737 was given a missed-approach clearance by the Midway control tower because it was too close behind a propeller plane. In attempting to abort the landing and swing up for another go-round and approach, the crew apparently left the plane's spoilers extended. Spoilers are panels on upper wing surfaces raised during a landing to spoil aerodynamic lift and thus help speed descent.

Also, the board said, there was a later-than-usual landing checklist ordered by the captain, which resulted in a breakdown of safeguards, such

## killing 45

as the first officer calling out altitude and airspeed.

Approaching stall conditions, the plane's stall warning device was activated 21 seconds before the crash. The board found the captain applied full

power for a level-off that would have been sufficient if the spoilers had not been extended. But, at that point, the board said, it probably was too late for a recovery even "with full thrust developing."