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Federal Midway crash hearings set Feb. 27

By William Hines

Sun-Times Bureau

WASHINGTON — The National Transportation Safety Board will start public hearings Feb. 27 in Chicago into the cause of a United Air Lines 737 jet crash that took 45 lives near Midway Airport on Dec. 8.

The announcement was made as an NTSB panel under board member Louis M. Thayer neared the end of a 10-day hearing on another fatal Chicago accident, a runway collision

between North Central and Delta jets that killed 10 persons at O'Hare Airport on Dec. 20.

No cause has yet been officially pinpointed for the O'Hare accident, but testimony adduced here in the last three days and in six days of hearings earlier in Chicago strongly pointed to these two factors:

(1) Ambiguity of language in tower-to-airplane chatter which resulted in the Delta plane being taxied into the path of the departing North Central plane when the ground

controller thought he was sending the Delta jet to another part of the field.

(2) Faulty in-cabin emergency equipment and possibly improper evacuation procedures in the disabled North Central plane after it crash-landed on Runway 27-Left.

Those two factors combined with dangerous chemicals generated by a fire that broke out in the North Central plane after the collision. Deadly levels of cyanide and carbon monoxide were found in blood samples taken from nine of the 10 bodies in the plane.

No one was killed and only two passengers were hurt in the Delta plane.

In announcing plans for the Feb. 27 inquiry into the United crash, NTSB reviewed in a seven-page document the facts so far established. Most of the information contained in the interim report is already known.

The accident, which occurred about 1 3/4 miles southeast of Midway's Runway 31-L, killed 43 on the plane and on the ground. In addition, 13 persons on the plane and two on the ground were injured. Only four persons on the plane escaped unhurt.

The report stated that the United plane, which was following a small private plane into Midway, was directed at 2:27 p.m. to "execute a missed approach" and come around again for a second landing attempt after climbing back to 2,000 feet altitude. The jet started to make a left turn.

According to the report, eyewitnesses said the plane's nose, already elevated as though in a climb, started to go higher and at the same time noise from the engines increased. The plane meanwhile settled toward the earth "until it finally struck houses along the flight path," the report said.

Survivors of the crash included some who, in the report's words, "stated that the aircraft began to shake or shudder when the power was applied but that the aircraft continued to settle into the houses."

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