

Midway crash probe opens

By Dennis Sodomka

Two stewardesses who survived the Dec. 8 crash of a United Air Lines jet near Midway Airport remember the plane's descent as a "settling . . . or a drifting downwards."

All three stewardesses who survived the crash that killed 45 persons said they felt a "series of tremors" before the crash. After the tremors, the survivors said, they remember a few seconds of silence, broken only by a strange, hissing sound.

The statements of the stewardesses and of 14 passengers were prepared for presentation before National Transportation Safety Board hearings, which opened Tuesday in the Sheraton-O'Hare Motor Hotel in Rosemont.

ONE OF THE surviving passengers told of the "sinking feeling" he experienced as the Boeing 737 jet stalled in midair and fell into a row of bungalows at W. 70th Pl. and S. Hamlin.

After that, the survivors remember the flames. Marguerite McCausland, the stewardess in the forward cabin, was

pinned in her seat until other survivors freed her after the impact.

"I felt the fire on my back and on my right arm," she said.

In a preliminary investigation of the crash, federal officials have been unable to determine its cause.

IN ITS HEARINGS, the NTSB will concentrate on possible causes as well as trying to figure out why some passengers lived while so many others died.

The lead-off witnesses Tuesday were three persons who

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observed the crash from the ground.

One of them, William J. Simonini, 53, of 140 W. Wood, Palatine, was in a parking lot at W. 73d St. and S. Kedzie when the plane passed over just before it crashed.

Simonini, a former B-24 pilot who holds a private pilot's license, testified that he heard a "crackling, deafening roar" as the plane passed over him. He

said he had never heard a similar crackling noise like that.

Simonini also said he saw the plane's nose go upward and that he then saw "black smoke coming out of both engines."

PRELIMINARY investigations of the crash have indicated that the pilot was ordered to turn around and make another approach to Midway because a small plane was in line to land in front of him.

The pilot, Wendell L. Whitehouse, who died in the crash, acknowledged the turnaround order and applied power to the engines. The plane then stalled and fell to the ground.

Among the persons who died in the crash of the Washington-to-Chicago flight were Rep. George W. Collins (D-Ill.) and Michele Clark, a former Chicagoan and a correspondent for CBS News in Washington.