

Doomed Jet Crewman Said Only, 'I'm Sorry'

By Joel Weisman 2/28/73
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CHICAGO, Feb. 27—The last words on a cockpit recorder on a United Air Lines plane bound from Washington that crashed here Dec. 8 were: "I'm sorry," a federal investigator testified today.

William L. Lamb, air safety inspector for the National Transportation Safety Board, told of the last words, possibly uttered by the co-pilot. Hearings on the crash in which 45 persons died opened here today.

Earlier, investigators had said final words on recording devices indicated that the crew of the Boeing 737 was acknowledging tower instructions to "left turn 180 degrees."

Investigators now speculate that the words "I'm sorry" may have been an apology for the crew's inability to follow the instruction fully, relayed from the tower of Midway airport. The crash occurred about 1 1/4 miles south of the airport in a residential neighborhood in Chicago's southwest side.

Lamb also revealed for the first time that a warning device which alerts cockpit crews when an aircraft is approaching stall speeds was operating for at least "18 seconds" before the crash.

He said the "stick shaker," a device that vibrates the control wheel and sounds a buzzer alarm, was working before the crash. The buzzer alarm, Lamb explained, cuts in when an aircraft slows to a speed of 7 per cent more than is needed to fly.

Lamb also said that the craft's landing gear was up and the engines were working properly.

Two witnesses to the crash, however, differed on whether the plane was making any noise immediately before the crash.

"It was deadly quiet," recalled Louis Stalec, who lives about a block from the crash site. "It appeared as if the plane was gliding."

But Thomas J. O'Brien, who also lives a few hundred feet from the crash site, said he heard an increase in engine noise before the plane turned sharply and crashed.

Corroborating his story was a surviving passenger, Martin E. Anderson of South Holland, Ill., who said, "When the plane broke through the clouds we were extremely low. But, as soon as we broke through, the pilot revved up the engines."

This resulted in lifting "the nose of the plane up a little, but the tail of the plane hit a house and everything went black," he recalled. "It seemed like we were at a stall angle."

Anderson was one of 16 who survived the fiery crash. Among those killed were Chicago Congressman George W. Collins, a Democrat, and Michelle Clark, a CBS correspondent. The flight had a total of 60 aboard, 55 passengers and five crew members.