

Midway tower heard of crash in phone call

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By Dennis Sodomka

Midway Airport's assistant tower chief didn't learn of last December's jetliner crash

near the Airport until a radio station telephoned him.

Jack Margotta testified at a National Transportation Safety

Board hearing Thursday that he spent more than four minutes trying to learn the fate of the plane after the tower lost

contact with it.

Forty-five persons were killed Dec. 8 when the United Air Lines plane crashed about 1½ miles from Midway.

"Having no contact with the plane and not seeing its target (on a radar screen) gives you a funny feeling," Margotta said.

MARGOTTA TOLD how he tried numerous times after losing radio contact with the plane to find out if O'Hare Airport, which assists landing airplanes with a sophisticated radar system, still could locate the plane, United 553. The first conversation came seconds after he lost contact.

MIDWAY: "You got United 553 okay?"

O'HARE: "No. I'm not talking to him."

MIDWAY: "You're not talking to him?"

O'HARE: "Negative."

MIDWAY: "You talking to him?"

O'HARE: "Negative. He's disappeared off the scope."

MIDWAY: "Ya, me too."

Margotta continued trying to establish radio contact with the United plane and other aircraft in the area. About two minutes after Margotta lost contact, he again called O'Hare.

MIDWAY: "Did you ever hear from United 553?"

O'HARE: "Negative."

MIDWAY: "Oh, beautiful."

MIDWAY (about 15 seconds later): "It looks like United 553 went down."

Margotta said he first heard for certain about the crash when he was called by a local radio station.

Margotta spent almost all of Thursday morning on the witness stand as airline attorneys questioned him in detail to determine whether air controllers mishandled the landing.

MARGOTTA SAID he had delayed waving off the United plane while he tried to determine whether a smaller plane immediately before it could be diverted to another landing strip.

Meanwhile, a Federal Aviation Administration study introduced as evidence during the hearings suggests that emergency oxygen supply bottles kept at the front of the



Jack Margotta

plane may have contributed to the intensity of the fire after the crash. Forty of the deaths were blamed on smoke inhalation and burns rather than impact injuries.

The study recommended that the bottles be moved to the rear of other planes.