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Jet crash probe focuses on flaps

By Dennis Sodomka

The hearing into the cause of a 737 jetliner crash that killed 45 persons near Midway Airport has focused on the plane's wing flaps and why they had been adjusted to the wrong position.

Testimony before the National Transportation Safety Board has disclosed that the United Air Lines jet went down with its throttles wide open, and landing gear fully retracted.

But the wing flaps were set at 37 degrees, only 3 degrees off full flaps, while the UAL flight manual calls for a setting of only 15 degrees, witnesses have testified.

WITNESSES who saw the Dec. 8 plane crash said its nose was very high, and that its tail was down.

Survivors also testified that there was a surge of power from both of the plane's jets and the craft went into an extreme nose-up position just before the crash.

The plane was coming in for a landing when the control tower told the crew to go around for another attempt.

The control tower, just 20 seconds before the crash, told the crew of the 737 to execute a "missed approach" maneuver because another plane was landing ahead of it on Runway 31 Left.

The crew acknowledged the

instructions that called for it to turn left and climb to 2,000 feet.

THE FLIGHT manual for the Boeing 737 calls for full engine thrust, flap setting of 15 degrees, and retracting the landing gear in such a situation.

The cockpit recorder for the final few seconds shows the last exchange:

Second Officer: "Want more flaps?"

Unidentified voice: "Flaps 15 (degrees)."

The sound of the flap lever being operated is heard and then the unidentified voice said "I'm sorry," and the crash immediately occurred.

Flaps can create a momentary lift, but also can cause an offsetting drag that will depress the aircraft's tail.

It is likely that expert witnesses, including aerodynamic engineers, will be called during the hearing, which is in its fourth day at the Sheraton-O'Hare North, at Rosemont.

AT THURSDAY'S hearing, it was disclosed that two of the three crew members had at one time received unsatisfactory proficiency ratings on the operation of 737 aircraft.

Both Capt. Wendell L. Whitehouse and 1st Officer Walter

Coble subsequently took further training and passed the tests that they had failed.

WHEN Whitehouse failed a routine proficiency test on April 29, 1970, the examiner rated him unsatisfactory in 4 of 28 categories, including judgment and landing with one engine out.

The examiner commented: "Landed when should have gone around."

Whitehouse received additional training and passed a similar test May 13, 1970.

Coble failed a proficiency check June 19, 1972. He received training for abnormal and emergency procedures on the 737 and passed the exam two days later.

He failed the first test for poor judgment in connection with abnormal and emergency procedures.

WHITEHOUSE'S supervisor, Capt. Donald Holman, testified at the board hearing that Whitehouse was an excellent pilot.

"I'd say he's about as fine a pilot as I ever saw fly an airplane," said Holman. "His trips were about as smooth as any you'll ever ride on."

Holman also told the hearing board that when Whitehouse failed the proficiency test he was suffering from a urinary problem and received two weeks' medical leave.