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Hearing on O'Hare crash next month

By William Braden

A public hearing on the collision of two jetliners at O'Hare Airport will be held here next month, and federal investigators expressed confidence Friday their evidence will establish the cause of the accident.

Nine persons were killed and 15 persons were injured Wednesday night at the fog-blanketed airport when a North Central Airlines DC-9 on a takeoff run crashed and burned after striking a Delta Air Lines Convair 380 that was taxiing across the active runway.

John H. Reed, chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, said:

"Because of the nature of this accident, we will be able to move swiftly into a public-hearing phase of our investigation, which we will convene in Chicago in January.

"In this case, the crew members of both aircraft survived. We have two cockpit voice-recorder tapes, one from each aircraft. The tapes are in the board's laboratory in Washington now, and we have found they are both in good condition.

"We also have the air traffic control tapes from the O'Hare tower, which we have impounded and which also appear to be in good condition. With these three tapes, we can correlate our information precisely — down to tenths of a second. This should take the balance of two to three weeks to do. And when we finish this, we'll move right into the hearing."

Reed's statement was made in Washington and released here by Edward E. Slattery Jr., director of public affairs for the Safety Board.

Slattery is one of a 10-man team that was sent from Washington to investigate the O'Hare accident. Discussing the analysis of the tapes, he said:

"The tower tape is a 24-hour tape carrying literally hundreds of radio transmissions. We have to refine that down to the segments we want — and then correlate those segments with the other two tapes from the aircraft. In doing so, we should be able to calibrate within tenths of seconds in determining the point in time transmissions were made — as well as identifying the people who were speaking and hearing."

Slattery said the flight-data recorders from the two planes also had been sent to Washington "to buttress the information on the tapes." He added: "We're particularly interested in the North Central's recorder, which should tell us the moment of lift-off, how high that plane got off the ground and what speed it was going."

Slattery made a comparison with the safety board in-

vestigation into the United Air Lines crash that killed 45 persons southeast of Midway Airport on Dec. 8.

"In that case," he said, "we had a dead crew and damage to both the flight-data recorder and the cockpit voice recorder."

The two engines from the Dec. 8 wreck were shipped to San Francisco for a "tear-down" analysis.

"The analysis was done under our impound," said Slattery, "and we finished it Thursday. The men are now preparing their evidence for a hearing. No date has been set for the United hearing, but I can guarantee it won't be before February at the earliest. Usually a public hearing commences about three months after an accident — so you can see how fast we're moving on the O'Hare accident."

Meanwhile, investigators continued to focus attention Friday on the fact that the Delta plane after landing at O'Hare was given ground-control taxi instructions that required it to cross runway 27 Left — on which the North Central plane was taking off.

A key question remaining to be answered was whether the Delta pilot had been given permission to cross the runway at the time he attempted to do so — 6:01 p.m. — or whether he had been told to hold short of the intersection on his way to a holding apron.

Reports that a possible defect in the O'Hare ground radar system may have contributed to the accident were largely discounted Friday by a Federal Aviation Administration spokesman, Neal Callahan.

"That really was blown out of context," he said. "I was explaining to a reporter how radar works, and how it sometimes doesn't see anything. And he must have misinterpreted what I said to the point of suggesting the O'Hare radar was inoperative or ineffective Wednesday night. And that just wasn't the case. Of course, all parts of the airport system are being checked out, including the radar, but there is no indication there was anything defective there."

Callahan also re-emphasized that the temporary removal from duty of two O'Hare tower personnel was a routine, standard procedure.

"It's really incorrect to say these men have been suspended," said Callahan. "They're still on the payroll. They've just been removed from their assigned duty until the people conducting the investigation have finished with them. They're not suspended — just removed from the boards. Which is the same thing that happened in the case of the Midway crash. Strictly routine."