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Congress looking at 'Watergate crash'

Investigators for a Congressional subcommittee are beginning to look seriously into the possibility that the plane crash which killed Mrs. E. Howard Hunt last year was the result of sabotage.

The investigation into a possible sabotage of United Air Lines Flight 553 is being conducted quietly by the House Government Activities Subcommittee, chaired by Congressman Jack Brooks of Texas. A subcommittee spokesman said that the investigation was being triggered, in great part, by what he called "the highly unusual activity of the FBI immediately following the crash."

The subcommittee, which is responsible for the safety of airplanes, had been assured originally by the National Transportation Safety Board that very few, if any, FBI agents had participated in the crash investigation. According to Transportation Safety Board Chairman John Reed, fewer than a half a dozen FBI agents assisted Safety Board personnel in investigating possible causes of the crash.

In the meantime, a Chicago private investigator, Sherman Skolnick, insisted that dozens of plainclothes federal agents arrived at the crash site within moments after the crash. Skolnick claimed that the agents had been alerted ahead of time that something involving Ms. Hunt was going to happen, and were on the scene to take charge.

In a startling turn-about, following Skolnick's charges, the FBI admitted that approximately 50 FBI agents converged on the crash site and the airport where the plane was to land within minutes of the crash. What has surprised the Congressional subcommittee is a subsequent admission by the National Transportation Safety Board that this is the only instance in US air disaster history when FBI agents, in such numbers, have suddenly arrived at an air crash site. Even more puzzling, admitted the Safety Board, was the fact that the FBI entered the case, interviewed witnesses and survivors and reviewed tapes in the airport control tower, without telling the Safety Board what the FBI was up to. The Safety Board told the

Congressional hearing that always — except in the case of crash 553 last December — the FBI has awaited a request from the Safety Board before entering crash cases.

As a result of the unusual manner of handling the crash investigation, the government activities subcommittee has obtained complete transcripts of all hearings held by the Safety Board into the causes of the crash of Flight 553. In addition, committee investigators have met privately with investigator Skolnick and have obtained all of his alleged evidence and documents which, he says, indicate that sabotage was involved.

Skolnick, who is a kind of muckraking private investigator, has charged that at least 10 people aboard Flight 553, including Ms. Hunt, were directly or indirectly involved in the Watergate scandal. He charges that the plane was deliberately sabotaged, that the pilot was probably poisoned, and that high government officials have since been involved in a cover-up. He points to the fact that White House aide Egil Krogh left the White House the day after the crash to work for the National Transportation Safety Board; that another aide, Alexander Butterfield, left the White House nine days later to head up the Federal Aviation Administration; and that a third aide, Dwight Chapin, later went to work for United Air Lines and represented the company during the crash hearings.

A Congressional subcommittee is, for the first time, apparently taking some of Skolnick's charges seriously.

— Zodiac