Jetliner's final seconds outlined at crash probe

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By William Braden

A United Air Lines 737 that crashed Dec. 8 apparently was well below altitude when it broke out of low clouds ing a descent for landing at Midway.

A burst of engine power failed to the accident, according to testimony at a National Transportation Safety hearing in the Sheraton O'Hare Motor

The crash, which killed 45 persons, curred about 12 seconds after a radio mission from the co-pilot of the Midway trol tower indicated all was normal the jetliner.

Surviving passengers testified that the plane appeared to be making a normal descent until it emerged from clouds over a residential area. At that point, said one passenger, "we could see the shingles on the roofs — we were that close."

When the ground appeared, passengers testified, the aircraft's two Pratt & Whitney engines were throttled up to a power setting normally experienced on takeoff. At virtually the same time, they said, the plane's nose rose to an extremely high altitude and swerved momentarily to the left.

According to the testimony, the plane continued to descend in a nose-high attitude — seemingly with full engine power — until its rear section struck rooftops and the plane hit the ground.

An abnormally high nose position can cause an airplane to stall even with full power. A stall occurs when an aircraft's nose is lifted to a point at which the angle of attack of the wings causes them to lose their lifting power. The aircraft then drops rapidly.

The aircraft, UAL Flight 553 from Washington National Airport to Midway, went down in a residential area about 1½ miles southeast of Midway's Runway 31 Left, killing the 3 crewmen in the cockpit, 40 passengers and 2 persons on the ground. Three stewardesses and 14 passengers survived the crash.

testimony

Midway tow

not maintain

tion behind a

corporate

ahead of it.

a "missed

of 180 degrees

feet.

At 2:27

recorder picked up

er," a rattle that

close to a stall. The

end of the recording.

At 2:27:15 the co-pilot

to execute a "missed

the tower tape recorded "sounds

had unintelligible voice."

12 seconds from the co-

transmission to the impact,

was picked up by the cock-

second offi-

standard

missed approach"

through

Flight 553's final seconds told

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have been taking routine steps for a "missed approach" rather than desperate emergency measures after seeing the ground.

Marvin E. Anderson, assistant research director at the Illinois Institute of Technology Research Institute here, testified that he heard the pilot rev up the engines as soon as the aircraft broke through the clouds. He said that the power was "like on takeoff" and that as soon as it began the aircraft's nose pitched up at an angle "sufficiently great to be a stall angle."

Other testimony showed that the plane broke through the cloud deck at an extremely low altitude.

Documents introduced at the beginning of the hearing show that the captain on Flight 553, Wendell L. Whitehouse, 44, flunked a flight test on a 737 on April 29, 1970, but passed a recheck test on May 13, 1970. He had logged 18,000 hours of flight time, including 2,435 hours in 737s, and had no other unsatisfactory remarks in his training folder.

The co-pilot, Walter O. Coble, 43, had an unsatisfactory proficiency check in a 737 on June 18, 1972, but passed a recheck on June 21.

Legal [illegible] Sportman Stahl] appeared [illegible] hearings, but was not scheduled [illegible]

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