

Open Latches Cited in Vietnam Air Crash Fatal to 155

By RICHARD WITKIN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 12—The unlocking of three of 14 latches on a rear-entry ramp caused the crash of a C-5A cargo plane carrying children out of Vietnam in April, the Air Force announced today.

A total of 155 persons were killed, including 98 of the 247 children on board the Lockheed plane, the largest in the world.

The investigating board said that, with the three locks open, the tremendous pressure inside the plane exerted excessive force on the rest of the locks. The ramp they were holding in place broke loose, along with an adjacent pressure door.

These massive metal structures flew rearward as 65,800 cubic feet of air went out the now-open rear of the plane in less than a second. In doing so, they rammed into critical parts of the interior structure severing cables needed to control the plane.

The pilot started a slow descent from the plane's 23,000-foot altitude, heading back to Saigon's Tan Son Nhut Airport. But because of the damage to the controls, he had to crash-land in rice paddies short of the runway. The plane broke up and burned.

C-5A's Under Restrictions

There was speculation that the plane might have been sabotaged, but the crash investigators ruled this out.

The inquiry board made a number of recommendations for modification of the rear-entry locking system, for re-routing some of the vital cables and hydraulic and other lines, and for study of whether more extensive changes were needed.

Meantime, Air Force spokes-

men said that the remaining 77 C-5's in the transport fleet would continue to be flown under restrictions imposed after the April crash.

The plane's rear entryways now must be kept locked, so that all loading and unloading must be done through the nose entries. And passengers have been barred from all C-5A flights for the time being.

The giant plane, nicknamed the Galaxy, has been a focus of controversy since its earliest days, when deficiencies in the wing structures and other problems led to large excess costs. The weakness in the wings threatened to cut the plane's lifetime to half, or even less, of what the design had called for.

Congress is currently considering new appropriations to beef up the wings and thereby prolong the plane's usefulness.

In commenting on the Saigon crash, the inquiry board said that it "could not conclusively determine the reason for the unlocking of the ramp locks because a significant number of parts were not recovered.

Looting Hampered Recovery

The recovery efforts, while highly productive, were hampered by the fact that much debris had fallen into the water (the plane was over the South China Sea when the entryway blew open) and looters at the crash scene had made off with some parts.

The pressure seal at the rear of the plan is made up essentially of two heavy structures which, when in place, form a reverse "L". The same two structures, when deployed downward, form the rampway over which trucks, tanks and

other cargo can normally be loaded aboard the craft.

In the in-flight configuration, the "horizontal" part of the "L" sits at an angle of perhaps 25 degrees above horizontal, and the "vertical" part leans forward.

It is the "horizontal" part that has the 14 locks, seven on each side, to hold the total system in place. The three that came unlocked were the forward three on the right side of the plane.

The inquiry board said in a summary of its report:

"Although the board was not able to pinpoint the exact cause of the failure, it was able to trace the sequence close enough to ensure that subsequent actions will prevent a recurrence. Equally important, it was conclusively determined that there was no structural deficiency involved and that the ramp and pressure door failed only as a result of a dynamic overload."