

Plane Crash That Killed Mrs. Hunt Laid to Pilot Error

By Ronald Kessler

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The crash of a United Airlines jet carrying Mrs. E. Howard Hunt Jr. last December was caused by the pilot's failure to manage properly the landing at Chicago's Midway Airport, the National Transportation Safety Board said yesterday.

In a 61-page report, the board, which investigates airline crashes, said it had found no evidence of sabotage or foul play.

Sherman H. Skolnick, a Chicago crusader against political corruption, had charged that the crew of the Boeing-737 was poisoned with cyanide before the crash.

Skolnick's charges, which included allegations of an elaborate plot by three "factions" against the plane and its occupants, achieved widespread circulation throughout the country in underground newspapers and on radio talk shows.

The spark that ignited the suspicions of sabotage was Mrs. Hunt's death in the plane crash, and the fact that she was found to be carrying \$10,000 in cash.

Her husband, a convicted Watergate conspirator, has said that his wife was being used to funnel money to the Watergate conspirators and their families.

Harold C. Carlstead, a Chicago area accountant whose wife is a cousin of Mrs. Hunt, said Mrs. Hunt was traveling to visit his family. He said the money was to be used as the initial fee for obtaining a franchise for a Holiday Inn, which Hunt later identified as being planned for Nicaragua.

A source close to Watergate burglar James W. McCord quoted McCord as saying the investment was to serve as a "cover," creating a legitimate source of income while Hunt was receiving money to keep quiet.

Mrs. Hunt was among 40 passengers and three crew members killed in the non-stop flight from Washington's National Airport to Midway last Dec. 8. Fifteen passengers and three stewardesses survived.

Last June, The Washington Post reported that National Transportation Safety Board investigators had

found that all evidence gathered at the time indicated the cause of the crash was a series of pilot errors and violations of established procedures.

In its report issued this week, the safety board said it had found cyanide in the blood of some members of the crew and in some of the passengers. However, it said this finding is common when an airplane erupts in flames after a crash.

The cyanide is produced by burning plastic and is inhaled by those occupants of the plane who do not die instantly on impact. Board investigators have said it would be unusual if cyanide were not found under the circumstances of the crash.

The board said the crash occurred because the crew did not prepare for landing

soon enough. The result, it said, was a "... rush of cockpit activities during the final descent (that) caused a breakdown of the safeguards inherent in the task-sharing of the crew."

This sequence of events, the board said, was "triggered by the captain's failure to exercise positive flight management earlier during the approach."

In layman's language, the board found that the plane crashed when its speed dropped to the point where it could no longer remain airborne.

The board said the crew was slow to respond to commands from the ground to slow the craft and to descend to the proper level for landing. It said the plane

was 700 feet higher than the "published minimum crossing altitude" when it flew over an electronic marker on the ground.

A safety board spokesman said the published altitude is the recommended height at that point as a plane nears the runway.

The board said the pilot did not call for the final check of instruments until

after he had passed the electronic beam. The board's report did not say so, but safety board investigators say established flight procedures call for the check to be finished at this point.

During the most critical phase of the landing—just before the crash—the board said it found "... there was a breakdown in crew coordination ...

The error-provoking environment set the stage for the crew's failure to notice that the spoilers were still extended at level-off and to arrest the rapid deterioration of airspeed that followed," the board said.

What this means is that when the plane needed power and speed to keep from falling to the ground

the spoilers—flap-like panels that extend from the top surface of the wings to slow the plane—were extended.

The board said both the captain, Wendell L. Whitehouse, and the copilot, Walter O. Coble, had failed flight proficiency tests within two years of the crash. Both had, subsequently passed the tests, the board said.