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## Retired Des Plaines Cop Recalls Time When Fire Engine Crashed Through Gate

By [Todd Wessell](#) on June 06, 2019



Black smoke plumes from crash site along Touhy Avenue just north of O'Hare on May 25, 1979. (Photo provided by Aug Schwiesow)

For some first responders to the American Airlines crash 40 years ago just north of O'Hare Airport, all they want is to forget.

Others can't forget the loss of 273 lives and the horrific scene.

Des Plaines motorcycle police officer Mike Banner was stationed at Lee Street and Fargo Avenue across from Lake Park on Friday afternoon, May 25, 1979. He was using a police radar gun to clock the speed of passing cars. Anyone over the 25 mph limit could be ticketed. Banner was facing directly west.

"I saw the black smoke go up," said Banner referring to a scene he thought unusual

because it was not coming from the normal spot where O'Hare firefighting drills were staged. He immediately radioed police headquarters to report a possible plane crash.

"I was kind of the first responder on the scene," explained Banner, mainly because he was stationed only about a mile from the crash site. A Des Plaines fire truck, on a call near Lake Park at the time, raced past Lee Street and Banner in a westbound direction heading for the plume of thick, black smoke.

"I got there seconds before they did," Banner remembered explaining that he overtook the fire rig. "They were the first fire crew on the scene, but they never got the credit."

Besides the scorching heat from the raging inferno that had the intensity to burn his skin off, and the toxicity of the 72,600 gallons of flaming jet fuel that was affecting his eyesight, Banner said he will never forget what he next witnessed.

"They came flying in turning right off of Touhy," Banner said of Des Plaines Fire Engine 62. "There was a 10-foot high Cyclone fence around the property where the plane crashed. It was closed and chained. The truck didn't slow down, but accelerated and crashed through the gate and cleared the way for emergency vehicles that followed. They risked severe injury. For all they knew, debris from the fence could have come through the windshield and caused severe injury or worse. The fragments of the fence were flying. I had such a close view of the heroics of our fire department. No one has that knowledge to this day."

Current Des Plaines Fire Chief Alan Wax, and Des Plaines' Fire Chief in 1979, Charles Gedroic, both confirmed this week that Fire Engine 62 was the first fire truck to arrive at the site shortly after Flight 191 exploded at 3:04 p.m. They, along with two other retired Des Plaines fire officers, however, do not recall the incident of crashing through the fence as described by Banner.

"I know Engine 62 was first on the scene," said Gedroic in a telephone interview Monday. He now lives in North Carolina. "It was Elk Grove Fire District's call and territory." Engine 62, however, was on duty near the crash site, so it responded immediately.

"I never heard anything about it crashing through a fence," added Gedroic. "I'll never forget the crash. I was the newly-appointed fire chief and I helped fight the nearby mobile home fires and I helped coordinate ambulance units. People on the scene would look at me in a funny way. That was because my face was black from the oil smoke."

Retired firefighter Rick Ornberg, who was on duty that day, said it was his understanding that Lt. James Gardner was on Engine 62 when it arrived at the site behind the Chicago canine building north of Touhy. Ornberg said Gardner told him that when they arrived, a Chicago fire truck was already on the scene.

In a magazine story about the response of fire departments to the crash, written by Ornberg, he said, “Des Plaines Engine 62 spiraled its way around a Chicago police canine training facility just off Touhy Avenue, a few hundred yards from the end of Runway 32R. Directly behind them came five Oshkosh and Walters Airport crash trucks with men from Chicago FD’s Crash Station 2 who ran for their rigs when they saw the DC-10’s left engine hit the runway.” The loss of the engine led to the crash.

Now retired Des Plaines Fire Chief Tom Farinella, who four decades ago was a firefighter/paramedic with the department, said he was told that when Engine 62 arrived a police officer from the canine unit opened the gate and drove to the scene of carnage just a few yards away.

Officer Banner, however, unflinchingly maintains that he personally witnessed Engine 62 crashing through the locked gate in an effort to try to save lives and pave the way for other responders.

“That’s the kind of thing you never forget,” Banner said. “It’s like it happened yesterday. It was the Des Plaines fire truck I overtook on Touhy west of Lake Park. It was definitely our truck.” Banner added that as he was speeding toward the heavy smoke, he continuously saw the fire truck through his mirror speeding behind him.

“The scene was so horrific,” Banner continued explaining that as soon as he stopped his motorcycle and the fire engine crashed through the gate, he was confronted by dozens of screaming people who had jumped out of their cars on Touhy right after the plane hit the ground.

“People were in a frenzy. The jet fuel was so toxic.”

When told that several retired Des Plaines firefighters were unaware of the Engine 62 crashing through the gate, Banner stood firm on what he said he saw. He did acknowledge the possibility that the truck he noticed may have been an engine from Rosemont. A check with Mayor Brad Stephens yesterday (Tuesday) refuted that possibility. Banner also theorized that Engine 62 may have entered the crash site through a different drive to the west. He, however, maintains that he saw a fire truck enter the scene of horror by ramming through a secured 10-foot high gate and that those

inside the vehicle did so at the risk of losing their lives. He still believes that truck was Des Plaines Engine 62.

Banner also vividly remembers the moment when one of the motorists on Touhy, upset at witnessing the crash of the giant DC-10, yelled out to him, “Aren’t you going to do something?”