

REMEMBERING THE LOSS
OF FLIGHT 191

Names in the Wind

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258 passengers and 13 crew members were buckled in and ready for take-off on American Airlines Flight 191 from O'Hare to Los Angeles on May 25, 1979, using runway 32R.

Captain Walter H. Lux, First Officer James Dillard, and Flight Engineer Alfred Udovich were all highly experienced with tens of thousands of flying hours in which thousands were on the exact DC-10 they were flying that day. At 3:04 p.m. the plane was cleared for takeoff.

Seconds later the left engine ripped off and tumbled over the wing, making the captain lose control of his side. Knowing the plane could continue flying on two engines, the pilots kept gaining altitude. People on the ground could see the plane turned on its side, headed straight for the Des Plaines Mobile Home Park on Touhy Avenue.

After 31 seconds in the air, the plane crashed into an airport hangar, killing two hangar workers and 271 people on board. What had started as a busy Friday before Memorial Day weekend, ended as the day marking the deadliest aviation disaster in U.S. history.

Without the instant forms of communication we have today, families had to sit with gut-wrenching fear of their loved-ones' fates until they got the official confirmation. Families received no news from American Airlines but got their information as any regular individual, in newspapers. With the long process of identifying passengers, delayed death certificates, and no physical remains to bury, the grieving process was painfully prolonged.

Kim Jockl, who lost her parents Corrine and Bill Borchers on the flight, remembers her overwhelming feelings of shock and grief. "Your world as you know it is blown up into a million little pieces into the air; that takes years to come back together if you are lucky. My brother and sister and I were lucky" that they were able to eventually find peace, Jockl said.

In 2003, three families who lost loved ones gathered together at the crash site, and it became their mission to get all families of the crash victims a place to grieve and heal, too.

With no official passenger manifest available, looking through obituaries in newspapers and contacting people using phone books was the only option. After combing the country for the victim's loved ones, 15 families were able to at-



NADER ISSA

Firefighters search among the smoldering debris.

tend a 25th-anniversary service.

The O'Hare Chapel, however, was filled with many more people than expected. American Airlines employees came to grieve their friends and colleagues. Police officers, firefighters, and first and second responders were all in attendance to mourn the loss they all witnessed. They, too, never received help navigating the tragedies they suffered that day.

Decatur Classical School located in Chicago, where Jockl was assistant principal, taught about Flight 191 and its impact year after year because of her personal connection. In 2009, a class of sixth graders from the school took it upon themselves to make the first-ever memorial for the crash as part of Project Citizen, a national civic education program. Jockl kept her distance from their project but remained an open resource as the 60 students did their research.

Illinois Senator Dan Kotowski's office helped put together an official manifest through the coroner's office. The Des Plaines Park District felt a connection to the flight, too, since the head of the Illinois Association of Park Districts, Robert Artz was on the flight. United States Representative Jan Schakowsky, Des Plaines Mayor Marty Moylan, and director of the Des Plaines Park District John Hecker all helped turn the students' national award-winning project into a reality after they chose Lake Park for the memorial site.

Each passenger's name was engraved on a brick as part of the memorial, which was dedicated next to Lake Opeka on October 15, 2011. Loved ones finally had a place for people to gather and heal. Today, people walking by can read about what happened in 1979, and never forget what critical changes to aviation safety came as a result of Flight 191.

As part of their investigation after the crash, the National Transportation Safety Board discovered that American Airlines didn't follow proper maintenance procedures. During a maintenance repair eight weeks earlier, when incorrectly inserting the pylon and engine back onto the wing, the metal dented. Every time the plane took off for the next eight weeks, the pressure put on the pylon caused cracks in the metal, and it finally snapped, making the engine fly off. The hydraulic and electrical system was also damaged, preventing the pilots from regaining control of the plane.

The crash caused major reforms to be taken in maintenance practices and the engineering of planes.

At the dedication of the memorial, "while there was a lot of grieving going on, there was also a lot of joy. Everything on that day was so positive. Everybody was so thankful. Everybody was upbeat because they got to meet people who were involved, and now they had a connection," said Gene Haring, the Des Plaines Park District communications manager who worked with the families, the school, and state officials on the design and plans for the memorial.

"There are not enough adjectives to express our appreciation to the Des Plaines Park District and community for all the support and generous spirit," Jockl said.

The park district maintains the area and has corrected the bricks of names over the years. They've also provided support to the remaining family members. "If someone couldn't get to

the wall, we would go out and do a [pencil and paper] rubbing for them. We would do half a dozen rubbings, however they wanted, and we would send them so their family members could have something," Haring said.

Eight years later in 2019, hundreds of people gathered again at Lake Park for the 40th anniversary of the crash. It was now a generational event with parents, children, and siblings passing down the stories of what happened to their loved ones. "We don't meet people by accident. They're meant to cross our path for a reason. The blessing of this journey, for my siblings and me is all the wonderful people we've met and stories shared since 2002," Jockl said during the opening of the 40th anniversary.

This year marks the 45th anniversary of the crash of Flight 191. The commemoration will begin at 2 p.m. on May 25, 2024.



JAY NEEDLEMAN

During the 40th anniversary Ray DeVito etches the brick with his late girlfriend's name: Debra Moruzi.

