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Off The Record: Solemn Remembrance Planned For Flight 191

By *Todd Wessell* on March 20, 2019

A year ago on May 25, Kim Borchers Jokl and her siblings had arrived at the memorial on the north end of Lake Park in Des Plaines to remember their parents, Bill and Corrinne Borchers. They soon noticed several other people who were standing nearby. All were there for the same reason: to remember and to honor a family member or friend. One of those individuals was an elderly man who was a former Illinois state trooper.

“He was crying,” said Kim during a telephone conversation yesterday (Tuesday). “He expressed sorrow and said “there was nothing he could do.”

Kim, her siblings, the state trooper and the others were standing in front of the memorial to the 273 people who died 39 years earlier in what at the time was the worst air disaster in American history. American Airlines Flight 191 had just rolled down O’Hare Airport’s diagonal runway heading northwest when suddenly one of its giant engines snapped off a wing. The pilot, who could not see what had happened, tried to correct the aircraft’s angle, but could not as the thrust of the remaining engine forced it downward. The plane plummeted into an open field just north of Touhy Avenue and west of Mount Prospect Road exploding into a thunderous fireball. The 273 passengers and crew members died instantly. Bill and Corrinne, Kim’s parents, were among the victims. They were on their way to Hawaii.

Two months from now, on May 25, Kim, her family members and the surviving families and friends of those who perished in the crash, will be joined by hundreds of others at the Lake Park memorial to mark the 40th anniversary of the disaster. Among the invited attendees will be local first responders who had rushed to the scene moments after the

crash only to find literally nothing except a big hole in the ground and parts of the airplane. Among the first on the scene were firefighters from Elk Grove Township and Des Plaines.

Kim is organizing the observance with the assistance of the Des Plaines Park District, which provided the peaceful spot for the memorial to be built. It consists of bricks engraved with the names of the 273 who died. Behind the bricks is a landscaped area, which should be ablaze in color from the flowers and trees planted in 2011 when the memorial was commemorated.

Des Plaines Park District spokesman Gene Haring said yesterday that while all plans for the event are still being worked out, a large crowd is expected. In a post on a special Facebook page devoted to the memory of those who died 40 years ago, Kim invites everyone to the solemn ceremony on May 25 that begins at 2:45 p.m.

“Pray for sunshine,” wrote Kim.

On May 25, 1979, at 3 p.m., the sky over O’Hare Airport was bright and sunny. The temperature was 58 degrees with a breeze from the north.

The tentative schedule for the upcoming observance calls for a 31-second moment of silence at 3:04 p.m. — the time Flight 191 was in the air before it crashed to the earth. At 3:05, the names of the deceased will be read one by one with those speaking stating their names and connection to the flight. The ceremony will end on a “joyous note”, possibly with the playing of bagpipes. A water salute by the O’Hare Fire Department is also planned at the conclusion. Certain details still have to be confirmed.

Things will most likely become very emotional for everybody, said Haring. The priest who was in charge of the airport chapel 40 years ago, Father Mike, is expected to attend May’s event and bring with him some dirt and ashes that he had picked up at the site on the day of the crash. All known family members of the victims will be contacted and invited to the observance. In addition, State Rep. Marty Moylan, State Sen. Laura Murphy, U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky and former State Sen. Dan Kotowski will be invited. The latter two helped provide funding and support for the memorial’s creation eight years ago. Mr. Moylan was mayor of Des Plaines when the memorial was dedicated in 2011.

“We will help and do whatever is necessary,” added Haring of the park district’s contribution.