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'67 plane crash: A mystery?

Man's curiosity raises questions about findings

'67 plane crash: A mystery?

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HENDERSONVILLE -- For the past five years, Paul Houle has been trying to make right what he calls a terrible wrong.

In July 1967, a Piedmont Airlines 727 collided with a Cessna 317 in the skies over Hendersonville. With 82 people dead, it remains the worst aviation disaster in state history.

In a National Transportation Safety Board report, adopted in 1968, the Cessna was blamed for the collision.

On May 23 of this year, Mark Rosenker, the acting chairman of the NTSB, sent a letter to Houle saying the agency would consider evidence he found through his own investigation, which exonerates the Cessna as the cause of the crash.

Houle's findings claim the tragedy can be blamed on two things: negligence of the 727 crew, whose members ignored airport departure procedure and were preoccupied with an ashtray fire in the cockpit moments before the collision; and Asheville Regional Airport air traffic control, which gave improper landing clearance to the Cessna pilot.

Houle, a truck fleet manager who has always loved research, also says a conflict of interest may have compromised the original NTSB investigation. NTSB investigator Thomas Saunders was the brother of H.K. "Zeke" Saunders, the vice president of Piedmont Aviation Inc.

Normally, a case can only be reopened if "parties to the investigation" provide evidence. In his letter, Rosenker said independent investigators such as Houle don't normally fall under that designation.

"I'm heartened that the NTSB has taken the first step in looking at this case in an unbiased light," said Houle, a Spartanburg, S.C., resident who started investigating the accident after he began securing funds for a memorial for the victims, which was dedicated in 2004.

NTSB spokesman Ted Lopatkiewicz said the board would consider any information if members deemed it worthy of review.

"If someone sends us what they consider to be new information, we will certainly consider it," he said. "We want to get it right, and we're not above admitting that we were wrong."

'Good cop, bad cop'

At one minute past noon on July 19, 1967, the bulk of the two planes' fiery wreckage fell into a clearing that is today littered with piles of gravel and brush.

Halfway across the country, Holly Anderson Case, 10 at the time, soon heard a knock on the door of her family's Springfield, Mo., home.

Her father, Bob Anderson, traveling with colleagues, was among the victims. He was a safety engineer for Lanseair Inc., an insurance agency based in Springfield.

"I remember everything that happened, I remembered everyone that came to the house," said Case, who lives just outside of Springfield.

Visitors included FBI agents, who Case said subjected her mother to intense "good cop, bad cop" interrogations.

"My family is gratified that the NTSB will finally analyze this case without prejudice or influence from outside sources," she said.

The documents

According to NTSB documents and cockpit transcripts, at less than four minutes before noon, the Cessna, carrying Case's father, approached the Asheville Airport. At the same time, the Piedmont 727 was readying for take-off.

In 1967, Asheville air traffic control didn't have the luxury of radar. James Watkins, the controller working at the time, had to be on the phone with Atlanta to receive radar direction.

John Addison, the pilot of the Cessna was cleared to land as he approached the airport from the Asheville VOR or Sugar Loaf Mountain beacon, 10 miles east of the airport. The documents show Watkins gave the following clearance:

"Three one two one Sugar cleared over the VOR to Broad River, correction make that the Asheville Radio Beacon ... over the VOR to the Asheville Radio Beacon"

The actual Asheville radio beacon, where Watkins had directed the Cessna, was seven miles northwest of the airport.

Addison replied that he would be approaching "via two three eight," a specific bearing that would put him at the Broad River Beacon and the same area the 727 would be in after take-off. On Addison's flight charts, the recently installed Asheville beacon where he was directed to go was not even marked.

Houle found that the "via two three eight" in the official transcripts had been omitted in the NTSB report. In its place, a four-second pause was reported.

"He told air traffic control exactly the direction he was going," Houle said.

Meanwhile, Watkins was busy on the phone with Atlanta, directing the landing of another Piedmont jet.

He did not hear the bearing of "two three eight" and told the Cessna to approach for landing.

Court records sealed

Joe Dando, the owner of Lanseair Inc. and the Cessna involved in the collision, was shocked to see the reports of the crash on national news and even more shocked to find out two of his employees and the pilot were dead as a result.

"It had an impact on me personally," said Dando, who lives in Springfield, Mo. "I had some valued employees that perished."

The collision put Dando out of business. He also spent nearly three months in Asheville, giving a deposition for a civil case filed in U.S. District Court by victims' families.

A settlement was made outside of court, but Dando said he didn't know how much actual settlement money the families received.

Although all the settlements were approved in 1971, U.S. District Court Judge Lacey Thornburg said the case was sealed and would remain sealed, after Houle requested to see the court documents.

The collision

At two minutes before noon, the Piedmont 727 took off from the airport, headed for Washington, D.C. Houle's report suggests the pilot and crew of the 727 made some egregious errors in the seconds before the collision.

Once in the air, Houle says the crew of the jet violated airport departure procedure by turning the plane to the east before it reached a mandatory 5,000 feet.

When the plane changed direction at 4,200 feet it exited a computer guided flight plan that would direct it to the next waypoint. Now, the crew fell under visual flight rules where they were responsible for looking out for what was in front of them.

Right after take-off, the transcript reports that the crew became preoccupied with a small fire that had apparently flared up in an ashtray in the cockpit.

According to Houle, the Cessna should have been visible to the crew within moments if its members were following visual flight rules.

The fire was a burning cigarette. A few seconds of good-humored conversation followed. After that, the transcript abruptly ends with one of the crew members saying "Ugh."

At that moment, the Cessna and 727 had collided in mid-air killing everyone on both planes.

In the NTSB report, there was no mention of the ashtray fire and the distraction it may have caused.

Old case, new evidence

The report was adopted in 1968 and became the first major air catastrophe the NTSB had investigated. The board was formed only three months before the accident.

During the investigation there was a hearing in which John Yodice represented the interests of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association,

"At the time, the concern always was that the recommendations coming out from the NTSB would be inimical to private aviation," said Yodice, who still works as an attorney for the AOPA.

Although the NTSB report says the Cessna was the primary cause of the accident, Yodice said some safety recommendations were made. As a result, navigational aids are no longer named after the airports.

The Asheville beacon, the source of the Cessna pilot's confusion was renamed Biltmore. The Asheville VOR was officially changed to the Sugar Loaf beacon.

But after nearly 40 years, Yodice is not sure how much effect the consideration of Houle's new evidence by the NTSB will have.

"The question is after such a long period, is it just a Pyrrhic victory or is there a good tangible result that comes from it?" Yodice asked.

For Houle, a man with no connection to the accident who made it his mission to find the real cause of one of the nation's worst mid-air collisions, he just wants the facts revealed and entered into the record.

Man's curiosity raises questions about findings

Visit CITIZEN-TIMES.com to hear researcher Paul Houle and Holly Case, whose father died in the Piedmont Flight 22 crash, talk about the accident and to read documents related to the crash.

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PHOTO Paul Houle, a Spartanburg, S.C., resident who investigated the 1967 mid-air collision that left 82 people dead near Hendersonville, stands near the site where the bulk of the wreckage was found. MAP of crash site and surrounding area

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