

Fifty years ago this week, Continental Flight 11 fell out of the sky over Unionville

by **Jonathan Bender**

Continental Airlines Flight 11 was flying into a storm, but Capt. Fred R. Gray was calm. The ride had been free of turbulence for five minutes, and, after a slight course correction, the pilot had begun the aircraft's descent into Kansas City. The night sky ahead was clear.

The 23-year veteran and his crew of seven had left Chicago's O'Hare International Airport at 8:35 p.m. May 22, 1962. It was the carrier's last flight of the evening, scheduled to touch down in Kansas City at 9:36 p.m. before heading on to Los Angeles.

With 37 passengers aboard, the Boeing 707 — able to seat 120 — was two-thirds empty. Passengers like Dale Horn probably had home on their minds. Horn was speeding back to Independence to tell his wife, Joanne, that he'd been hired to manage the Emery freight office in Chicago. Others among the commuting businessmen bantered with the four Continental hostesses, dressed in red berets and sharp, A-line skirts.

The only other woman aboard was Geneva Fraley of Independence, who was traveling with her business partner, Thomas Doty of Merriam. Forty-six minutes into the 61-minute flight, Doty got up to use the 707's rear lavatory.

A minute later, Flight 11 disappeared off the radar.

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People heard a boom and a swish," says Duane Crawford. The newspaper columnist and retired schoolteacher extends his left arm, palm flat to the ground, and traces the plane's flight path east to west across the horizon. Flight 11 came apart at 36,800 feet — 38 feet of the tail section broke away from the main fuselage. Crawford, 77, falls silent, struck by what he felt when he first visited the crash site, more than a decade ago. He rests his arms again on a locked gate, with chipped orange paint, outside this alfalfa field in Unionville, Missouri. "They thought it was thunder. Then they smelled the fuel."

Deer and turkey hunters lease this land now, unaware that this is where Continental Flight 11 fell to Earth 50 years ago. The shattered jet came to rest in a copse of trees a half-mile from the road where Crawford has driven today. He can still point to ruts in the field left in 1962 by Putnam County coroner Dr. Charles Judd's four-wheel-drive truck.

"A chill went up my spine, knowing what those people went through. I knew that I had to tell their story, those that died. Their death cast a shadow and caused all these ripples."

Crawford has become Unionville's caretaker for the legacy of Flight 11. But the story was unknown to him when he moved to the rural town in 1979, after a 26-year stint in the Marines. The 707 he knew in 1962 was the one that flew him to Vietnam.

A few times a year, Crawford makes the drive to the crash site in his black Chevy truck, on his way to what he calls "moose country." Trim and gray-haired, he lives in a low-slung brick house slightly north of Unionville, a little less from five miles from where the fuselage came to a stop. Behind wire-rim glasses, his blue eyes water slightly, maybe from the sun's glare, as he points out where two bodies were found, near the farm of Ilajean and Cleo Weber.

According to the 2010 Census, 3,805 people call Unionville home. Most residents either farm or drive a truck for a living. The "moose," in this case, are spring calves and the occasional turkey that wanders too close to the road. Crawford makes a left onto the pitted pavement of Highway UU — once a dirt road, this is where onlookers and journalists found their cars stranded in ruts and ditches in 1962.

The farming community has recently seen an influx of Amish and Mennonites from Pennsylvania, so horse-drawn buggies share the road with pickups. Next to farmland mailboxes are wooden signs quoting Scripture. Crawford's truck bounces past one that asks: "Is Thy Heart Right With God?"

The alfalfa field is less than a mile from the Iowa border. Debris from the plane dropped on both sides of the state line, with one 8-foot section of the tail ending up in Cincinnati, Iowa, 15 miles northeast of the main crash site. The wind carried napkins and insulation and other light detritus as far as 120 miles away. Authorities knew that a commercial jet had disappeared from radar, but they didn't know why and couldn't immediately pinpoint where contact was lost.

On the ground, drivers began to report seeing debris in roadways, and local law enforcement started hearing from aviation authorities and the media.

The impact rattled the windows of Terry Bunnell's house, but he thought — as many others, who had heard Flight 11 go down, would say later — the storm had simply lingered. By dawn, though, he wondered if the sound was something else. As the sun rose, the Unionville resident walked south and arrived at the crash site

around the same time as Lester Cook and his son, Ron. Cook would later find one of the jet engines cratered in his yard, but the wings remained attached to the fuselage, wires dangling from the damaged plane.

The cockpit was intact, though the nose had crashed into the earth at a 20-degree angle. The three men in the cockpit were still strapped in, smoke masks attached to their faces. Reports indicated that the crew's emergency checklist was found between the captain and his instrument panel. The plane's landing gear was down.

Bunnell and Cook heard moaning coming from a nearby tangle of clothing and luggage. Takehiko Nakano was alive, lying on his back across a row of three seats. The 27-year-old Japanese engineer, the crash's only survivor, lived another 90 minutes after he was found; he died at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital (now known as Mercy Medical Center) in Centerville, Iowa, later that morning.

Early speculation was that the plane had been torn apart by the severe weather or had flown too high trying to escape it. But the morning after the plane crashed, W. Mark Felt, then the bureau chief for the FBI's Kansas City office, was already hearing another explanation. Explosive residue had been found on one of the bodies.

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Thomas Doty arrived at O'Hare International Airport that Tuesday night with Geneva Fraley, a former co-worker at Luzier Cosmetics, with whom he was planning to open a home-furnishings business in June. The two had both stayed the previous evening at the Hotel Sherman in Chicago. Inside Terminal 2, Doty and Fraley purchased life insurance from one of the two circular counters across from the check-in area. A last-minute insurance purchase was nothing unusual for travelers, but the amounts that Doty and Fraley purchased were. Doty paid for a policy worth \$250,000, one that covered accidental death in flight. Fraley picked up \$75,000 worth of the same coverage.

Doty, like Fraley, was married. He named his wife as the beneficiary of his new policy; she was pregnant with the couple's second child.

Doty was 34, a graduate of the University of Missouri-Columbia who had moved to Kansas City expecting greatness. But his ceramic-coffin business had gone into bankruptcy in 1961, and by March 1962, he'd left his next job as a salesman with Luzier. A month later, he was charged with attacking a woman at a Kansas City, Kansas, intersection; police said he struck her and took her pocketbook. When police found Doty with a gun

and the woman's purse, Doty claimed that he'd discovered the pocketbook while walking around to get fresh air. He was due in court to face first-degree robbery and concealed-weapon charges on May 25.

Ralph Boerster, a 21-year-old psychology student, was working part time in Continental's reservations department when Doty and the other 36 passengers checked in. Boerster's manager had gone home for the night, leaving the young man to oversee the passenger list. The airline managed passenger information from the 18th floor of the Precious Gems Building, at Wabash and Madison in downtown Chicago. There, Boerster handled seat assignments and relayed information on the number of passengers and baggage to the operations side. After Flight 11 pushed away from the gate, he sent those records on to Kansas City Municipal Airport via teletype.

This particular Boeing 707 had been in the news the previous August, when authorities shot out its tires on a runway at the El Paso International Airport to foil a skyjacking attempt. Leon and Carl Bearden were trying to divert the plane to Cuba. The plane returned to Continental's rotation after that, and Gray prepared the flight plan this night to account for the severe weather expected west of Chicago. He decided to fly at an altitude of 39,000 feet, rather than the 28,000 proposed by the dispatcher.

"If you were on an airplane, and there was bad weather, and you still wanted to get there, you wanted Freddie Gray up in that cockpit," Boerster tells *The Pitch*.

Flight 11's progress was steady once the plane was airborne. Gray checked in over Bradford, Illinois. At 9:01 p.m., just after the flight was east of the Mississippi River, he asked for an update on the storms ahead of him. Thunderstorms, some capable of producing tornadoes, were expected near Kirksville, Missouri. The radar was functioning normally, and the flight control operator in Waverly, Iowa, recommended that Flight 11 fly south of the storm. Gray instead went north and, after clearing the storm clouds, requested clearance to turn toward the KC airport, and the Waverly operator prepared to pass him off to a controller there. At 9:14 p.m., Waverly made the connection with Municipal Airport, but there was no further word from Flight 11.

Doty got up from his seat and carried his briefcase into the rear lavatory. Inside the case were six sticks of dynamite — the charge would snap the 707 in half at 9:17 p.m. Doty brought down the \$4.5 million jet with \$1.54 worth of explosives.

As a matter of routine when he prepared to go home, Boerster checked the status of his shift's last takeoff: Flight 11.

"I picked up the hotline ... to check and I heard, 'When was the last time you heard anything from Flight 11?' Flight control then responded that it had been 15 or 20 minutes. Soon it was 30 minutes."

He woke up his manager.

Continental representatives began trying to locate contact information for the families of those onboard. At 10:30 p.m., Joanne Horn was asleep, tired from ironing her husband's shirts and watching 3-year-old Kevin and 18-month-old Jo-Ellen.

"It was my husband's boss. He called and told me the plane was down," Horn recalls. "My husband was always the last to leave the office, and he'd call me and say, 'Honey, I'm heading east.' When his boss called [me], he said, 'Well, now he's headed west.'"

Within a few days, Flight 11's last few minutes were being uncovered at the Appanoose County Fairgrounds in Centerville. Continental employees and investigators from the Civil Aeronautics Board (the precursor to the Federal Aviation Administration) began to reassemble the plane using recovered pieces of Flight 11 and a 4-foot-tall stack of Boeing construction manuals. Felt oversaw the FBI's investigation and directed a ground crew toward pieces of the wreckage from a helicopter. As the plane was put back together, the FBI Disaster Squad determined that the blast had originated in the used-towel bin of the rear lavatory, where they'd discovered dynamite residue.

Soon, investigators found that in the days before the flight, Doty had purchased six sticks of dynamite from the Pierce and Tarry Trading Post in Wyandotte County and had studied the use of explosives at the Kansas City Public Library. They also interviewed a witness who had seen brownish-red round sticks in Doty's briefcase before his trip to Chicago but thought they were emergency road flares. (The FAA didn't introduce airport screening of passengers and carry-on baggage until 1973.)

The FBI had its man, but there was nobody to charge.

The news cycle moved on to another Boeing 707. On June 3, Air France Flight 007 rolled off the runway during an aborted takeoff at Orly Airport in Paris, killing 130 of the 132 people aboard. *Life* magazine shot photos of Horn and her two children for a potential cover story that never ran. By September, Felt was in Washington, D.C., higher up in the bureau and eventually privy to secrets he would tell Bob Woodward under another name: Deep Throat.

The crash has been said to be the inspiration for *Airport* — Arthur Hailey's 1968 novel, made into a feature film that spawned the disaster genre. The plot: An airline passenger locks himself in a jet's bathroom and tries to blow up the plane, forcing Dean Martin to make an emergency landing at a snowbound airport.

"All that is fiction," Crawford says. "In *Airport*, everybody lived. It was a love story. There's no love story in this. Not at all."

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Andrew Russell, 26, lives 7,914 miles from Unionville. The New Zealand man is studying to be a teacher, paying for school by working as an usher in an Auckland movie theater.

Poor eyesight and an aversion to math have prevented him from learning to fly, but he has always loved aviation history. Five years ago, he was clicking through old crash reports on the FAA's website. The Civil Aeronautics Board's final report about Continental Flight 11 caught his eye. It was the first commercial-jet bombing in the United States, but a Google search yielded nothing beyond the CAB document.

His curiosity led him to put up a simple blog asking why no memorial had ever been built in Unionville and if anybody had more information about what had happened.

"I'd never blogged before, and I just wanted to see what happened," Russell says. "I never even expected to hear back. I was just satisfying my own curiosity."

Nothing happened for a year. But then Crawford came across Russell's blog and found himself eager to share what he had uncovered.

"The idea that someone of his generation would take an interest in this — it's just incredible," Crawford says. "And to be from so far away."

Then Russell began hearing from the families of crash victims, stories of fathers who had never made it home. The comments section came alive with people's recollections.

"They never had the luxury of being able to talk about this thing," Russell says. "I've been almost like the paperweight that's been lifted off of them. Finally, after 50 years, they can vent their frustrations and grief and anger."

As families began to connect with one another, talk shifted from why there was no memorial to how one might be built. Crawford and the Putnam County Historical Society & Foundry School Museum, which maintains a small exhibit of Flight 11 artifacts, collected donations and designed a memorial that was dedicated in 2010 in Unionville.

This week, Russell is flying 28 hours to attend the memorial's rededication, commemorating the crash's 50th anniversary. He'll spend nearly three days of his weeklong travel visa in the air. Crawford is picking him up in Des Moines; the two men haven't met in person before. For Russell, it's the end of a journey.

"I'll be standing there and actually looking at where that plane went down," he says. "I think that's going to be quite hard. It's going to hit me like a freight train."

Crawford pilots his truck down Main Street in Unionville. The United Methodist Church still stands at the intersection of 19th Street and Main, across from the Dairy Lane, a local burger-and-shake shack. In the park between the church and the Unionville Print Shop, Putnam County set up a temporary morgue in 1962. The print shop was the communications center for the media, members of which had taken to barging into farmhouses in an attempt to use the party lines that were the only locally available phone connections.

Crawford walks up the grassy slope, in the shadow of the Putnam County Courthouse. His fingers wipe a little dust off the top of the simple black-granite memorial. He stands in front of a black flagpole between two granite benches, both installed in 2010 when the memorial was dedicated.

"I feel like I'm part of the Flight 11 family, and I just wanted to do something for them," Crawford says. "We'll never know the whole story. But I'm at peace because I know this is going to be here forever, and people can come see it."

The town of Unionville has never forgotten. Ilajean Weber still plays bingo in town. A passenger's body was found 100 yards from the white barn on her property. And Mayor Don Fowler was one of the high school seniors guarding the perimeter of the crash against looters and gawkers. His uncle, David Fowler, was the Putnam County sheriff at the time.

"That town just reached out to us," Horn says. "Everything they've done to remember, the people on the plane deserved that. But I'm just so thankful."

Crawford expects several dozen family members of those lost on Flight 11 at the May 26 ceremony in Unionville. At 11 a.m. that day, they'll see the new stone tablet, which corrects a few spelling errors. (After the

initial dedication, Crawford secured a copy of the FBI report.) It also adds an inscription: "This Flight 11 tragedy occurred in Putnam County on May 22, 1962, and changed America's air travel forever."

Joanne and her daughter, Jo-Ellen Horn, will be among those in attendance. In Jo-Ellen's home, in Independence, Joanne sits at the kitchen table, slowly rubbing her thumb across the face of a manila envelope. She has 19 grandchildren (she married Dale's brother, Kenneth, in the late 1960s; he died last year), but she still thinks about the boy she met on a blind date. She remembers how nice he was, mentions the tin cans that rattled around behind their car after they were married in her parents' house. Their future together stopped when they were 29 years old.

"It makes me happy to think of how happy he would have been on that flight home," she says. "That was his dream job. Of course, I still miss him, but he gave me two wonderful children, and that's the main thing."

The envelope is from *Life* magazine. Inside are pictures taken to accompany that never-published article — black-and-white images of Joanne, posed with a scrapbook on her lap, her two children leaning against her and smiling at the camera from a living room couch. There's a shot of a teenage Dale, a photo yellowed with age. And there's a copy of the crash report. She keeps it all together. Her record of Flight 11, the plane that fell off the radar





## REMEMBERING FLIGHT 11... MAY 22, 1962

### CREW

Capt. Fred R. Gray  
First Officer E.J. Sullivan  
Second Officer Jack D. Allen  
David E. Olssen

Marilyn Bloomquist  
Mary McGrath  
Joyce Rush  
Stella Ann Berry

### PASSENGERS

Jack Alexander  
K.H. Berger  
Don D. Bowman  
Marcus Brand  
B.M. Carter  
William C. Chapin  
J. Clarity  
Tom Cox  
Thomas G. Doty  
Geneva Fraley  
Clyde Fritz  
R. Gach  
Philip E. Giberson, Sr.

Sidney H. Goldberg  
Frank J. Green  
Maurice E. Hamilton  
John Hamm  
Henry Hanna  
Fred P. Herman  
R.I. Hoare  
Dale Horne  
Edward A. Kuhn  
Robert Miller  
Virgil W. Mourning  
Takehiko Nakano

R.A. Raid  
Andy Roucka  
Bruce Sewart  
Robert Tabors  
R. Thomas  
Frank Tuttle  
Edward C. Waffle  
Clifford L. Walton  
James Webb  
Roger J. Welch  
B.J. Wilks  
Russell Wolf







# Casualties Aboard Airliner.

Denver, May 23.(AP)—Passengers killed last night in the crash of the Continental Airlines Boeing 707 jet include eight persons from Greater Kansas City. They are:

Marcus Brand, 27, of 9931 Delmar lane, Overland Park.

Don D. Bowman, 10201 West Fifty-sixth terrace, Merriam.

Thomas G. Doty, 9902 West Seventy-first terrace, Merriam.

Mrs. Geneva Fraley, 32, of 3508 North Pleasant, Independence.

Clyde D. Fritz, 31 of 26 Thorp, Kansas City, Kansas.

John Hamm, 39, of 2518 Oakley.

Dale Horn, 29, of 700 Partridge, Independence.

Edward C. Waffle, 44, of 2101 East Sixty-second, North.

## OTHER PASSENGERS.

B. M. Carter, Alden, Kas.

Tom Cox, Meade, Kas.

R. Gach, Chicago.

Phillip E. Giberson, sr., Jackson, Mich.

Maurice E. Hamilton, Cleveland.

Henry Hanna, 51, Lyons, Kas.

Bruce Sewart, Des Plaines, Ill.

Tuttle, Liberal, Kas.

Clifford L. Walton, La Verne, Okla.

Russell Wolf, Guyman, Okla.

Jack Alexander, Dallas.

K. H. Berger, Rochester, N. Y.

William C. Chapin, Rochester, N. Y.

J. Clarity, Des Plaines, Ill.

Frank J. Green, jr., 30, Minneapolis, in computer account-

ing section of General Mills, Sidney H. Goldberg.

Fred P. Horman, 46, Dearborn, Mich.

Edward A. Kuhn, Aurora, Ill.

Takehiko Nakano, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern university student.

Robert Miller, Chicago.

Virgil W. Mowbray, 45, Franklin, Mich.

Robert Tabors, Providence, R. I.

R. Thomas, Mount Prospect, Ill.

B. J. Wilks, Durham, N. C.

Roger J. Welch, 45, Grosse Point, Mich.

R. I. Hoare, Surrey, England.

R. A. Rald.

Andy Roucka, 4503 North Oakley, Chicago.

James Webb, Anaheim, Calif., Nortronics corporation.

## CREW.

Capt. Fred R. Gray, 50, Pacific Palisades, Calif.

First Officer E. J. Sullivan, Inglewood, Calif.

Second Officer Jack Dean Allen, 32, Palos Verdes, Calif.

David E. Olsen, 40, El Segundo, Calif., director of passenger services.

Hostess Marilyn Bloomquist, 24, El Segundo, Calif., daughter of Mr. and Mrs. H. F. Bloomquist, Traverse City, Mich.

Hostess Mary McGrath, 20, El Segundo, Calif., daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas McGrath, River Forest, Ill.

Hostess Joyce Rush, 23, Manhattan Beach, Calif., daughter of Mr. and Mrs. M. L. Fletcher, Odessa, Tex.

Hostess Ann Berry, 21, Los Angeles, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. James S. Berry, Tomah, Wis.



## Crew and Passengers of Flight 11

### Flight Crew:

Captain Fred R. Gray  
First Officer Edward J. Sullivan  
Second Officer Jack D. Allen

### Cabin Crew:

David E. M. Olssen (director of passenger services - this role was like a chief purser and unique to Continental)  
Marilyn I. Bloomquist  
Mary R. McGrath  
Martha J. Rush  
Stella Ann Berry

### Passengers:

Jack D. Alexander  
Kenneth H. Berger  
Marcus C Brand  
David D. Bowman  
Beauford M. Carter

William C. Chapin  
James A. Clarity, Jr.  
Tommy J. Cox  
Geneva O. Fraley  
Clyde D. Fritz  
Robert C. Gach  
Philip E. Gilbertson, Sr.  
Sidney H. Goldberg  
Frank J. Grene, Jr.  
Philip I. Hoare  
Marvin D. Horn  
Edward A. Kuhn  
Robert L. Miller  
Virgil W. Mourning  
Takehiko Nakano  
Ross A. Reid  
Andrew P. Roucha  
Bruce Stewart  
Robert G. Tabors  
Rex O. Thomas  
Benjamin F. Tuttle  
Edward C. Waffle  
Clifford L. Walton  
James R. Webb

**The Aircraft:**

N70775, Boeing 707-124 built in 1959 for Cubana Airlines but went to Continental Airlines instead.

**The Flight:**

"CO11"/"CAL11" Chicago-Kansas City-Los Angeles.