

Flight 405

Here is something that has always chilled and fascinated me. On the evening of March 3, 1972, if you had been traveling through the dark on the Thruway south of Albany, NY, you might have looked up to notice the lights of an airplane as it made its way north, flying a bit too low through a light fog and a few snowflakes. Mohawk Airlines (soon to become USAir) Flight No. 405 was having trouble on its approach to the Albany Airport. The plane, a 5 year old high-wing Fairchild 227 turbo prop, was in perfect mechanical condition. Later testing would show no abnormalities. But of the 48 souls aboard, 16 had only moments to live.

The crew, evidently reading the gauges wrong, thought there was a problem with one propeller's pitch adjustment and they decided to feather the prop and land on the remaining engine. For some reason, the captain could not get the feathering mechanism to operate. The co-pilot tried to assist him. They were able to stop the engine, but the prop continued to spin, adding drag and increasing the plane's rate of descent. Neither pilot noticed how much.

At one point the Cockpit Voice Recorder microphone heard the captain ask, "Do you see the runway out there?" The copilot answered, "No, not yet," but you wonder if he even looked, busy as he was helping the captain. The NTSB report concluded the captain failed to delegate the feathering problem to the copilot and concentrate on the landing. The co-pilot failed to note the altitude and call it out at regular intervals as he should have during the approach. They must have known they were low, but they didn't realize they were 900 feet below where they should have been at that point. A minute before impact, no one was really flying the airplane. At 8:47 and a half, Sandra, a recently married 24 year old flight attendant, told the passengers to get ready to land in a few minutes. Actually, the plane would meet the

earth in just seconds, almost four miles short of the runway. The captain and co-pilot would realize their mistake just 3 seconds before their lives ended.

Much too low, Flight 405 continued to descend through the night, rushing forward at almost 200 miles an hour. It swooped down over the Normanskill Golf Club, then over New Scotland Avenue and St. Peter's Hospital, where some of the injured and dying would arrive in less than an hour. As the small urban pond known as Buckingham Lake rose like the moon up from the plane's port side wing tip and the maple branches below began to feel the bite of the churning propellers, Flight 405...a 45,000 pound behemoth of aluminum and steel and gears and cables and wires and grandmas and fathers and Moms and sons and daughters and sweethearts ... with an awful tearing screech and chest-pressing thud, slammed into 50 Edgewood Avenue, Albany, NY, 12203.

The plane hit low enough to dig out its own cellar, had there not been one already, and the house collapsed on top of the wreckage. Nothing exploded or even caught fire. Fuel doesn't readily burn; the vapors do, but an outdoor temperature of 13 degrees Fahrenheit that night minimized any vaporization. The fuel-laden right wing miraculously remained mostly intact, even though enough aviation fuel leaked out to turn the crash site into a potential inferno. All of the injuries were from the plane's impact. Passengers were catapulted to the front of the plane and into the forward cargo compartment. Such G forces can cause irreparable damage to a body's organs. In some air crashes, victims' hearts have burst out of their chests. Cargo disintegrates. In the case of Flight 405, passengers were hurled forward like human cannon balls, along with their seats, smashing into luggage and freight. Only one of the plane's occupants got out on his own and he didn't remember how. The rest, dead or alive, had to be pried out.

According to the NTSB report, Accident Investigation Report NTSB-AAR-73-08, complete with charts, photos and maps, (ignore the Wiki entry on the web; it is far too forgiving of the pilots,) the plane's crash into the very bottom of the house was extremely fortunate for the nearby homes. Frankly, it was incredible no fire erupted and only one house was obliterated in the densely built-up neighborhood. Of course,

it was miraculous Sandra and 31 of the passengers lived. Likewise, 5 out of 6 in the house survived. The family of four watching "The Partridge Family" on television was spared any serious injuries, even though the parents were blown out through the family room window and landed in a side yard as the plane ripped into an adjacent room. Their two young sons were found in a closet, just beneath a pool of leaking jet fuel. A graduate student in an upstairs apartment was taking a shower when the plane swooped down out of the sky and took his life. His young wife, Hannah, the friend of a woman with whom I worked in Syracuse, was watching television in the next room. She remembered nothing about the moment of impact except for the loudest sound she had heard in her life and the last one she would hear for a while. The world turned upside down and the lights went out and she was sitting in a pile of rubble, ears ringing and hurting terribly, her bathrobe up under her armpits and caught on something so at first she couldn't stand up. The smell of what she thought was kerosene almost overpowered her. Suddenly cold in the frigid March air, she decided their house had blown up and she had landed down the block. Hannah threw off a piece of debris and began to walk home before she realized she was already there. The street was quiet. Deaf from the crash, she couldn't hear anything anyway. She began to look for Peter, her husband. As the moments ticked by, neighbors came out of their homes and soon the street was crawling with police, firemen and even a reporter with a backpack and a microphone down at the end of the block. With the strong stench of aviation fuel permeating the scene, firemen worked frantically to free the survivors and to suppress their own personal terror of an instant immolation had the fuel ignited.

Eyewitnesses reported the plane came in over the neighborhood and at the last second dipped its left wing, catching it in the street. The plane slammed into the ground, just where the street rises up a small hill to 50 Edgewood Ave. The left wing disintegrated. The fuselage shot through No. 50's living room to the basement and the fuel-laden right wing, still attached to the plane, flopped over on the next lot, No. 54, where a tree stopped it from sliding into the backs of homes on the next street. There was no house at No. 54. Thirty-five years later there is still none. If you look at Google Maps, it is miraculously the only empty lot anywhere in the

area. Had a home existed at No. 54, it would have been hit broadside with a wing full of aviation fuel.

An accident team was assembled and the investigation began almost immediately. When the NTSB would allow it a few days later, a truck came and hauled away what remained of the luggage and freight to be delivered to survivors and families and businesses. Among the cargo was an oil painting, an imaginative portrait of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, "Lily of the Mohawks," a Catholic princess of the Mohawk Nation, died 1680. She is revered by some Catholics for her work with the French missionary priest Isaac Jogues, who toiled among the Mohawks, bringing medicines and Jesus. (They martyred him for his efforts in 1646.) Kateri was derided in life by her fellow tribesmen, but honored after her death. Admirers had built a shrine to the would-be saint about 35 miles west of Albany, commissioning the painting and arranging for the artist to ship it on Flight 405. It was encased in a wooden frame and wrapped with heavy canvas and tape. Found underneath the remains of baggage and boxes, it was completely undamaged. It must have dodged all the coffee cups, attaché cases, seats and bodies that came at it.

On a warm drizzly morning in March of 1972...the kind when you first smell the rich, fecund earth after a long interminable winter in the Mohawk Valley... a truck pulled up at the shrine and delivered the overdue portrait of Kateri. The package showed no ill effects, except for a few stains noticed by an older woman who signed the receipt and saw what she thought at first was mud on the outer wrapping of canvas. On the shipping label taped to the outside she could see similar dried smudges the color of red umber.

Not long ago, I parked my car on Edgewood Avenue, got out and looked around. It's a quiet street just south of Washington Avenue and not far from the University of Albany's campus. The demolished house has been replaced, of course. I felt a bit self-conscious; adults don't walk around on a residential street in the middle of a weekday afternoon these days. How strange it was to hear the birds chirp and an airplane pass overhead as if nothing unusual had ever happened in this neighborhood of families and students. I looked around at the well-kept homes and wondered if any of the people living

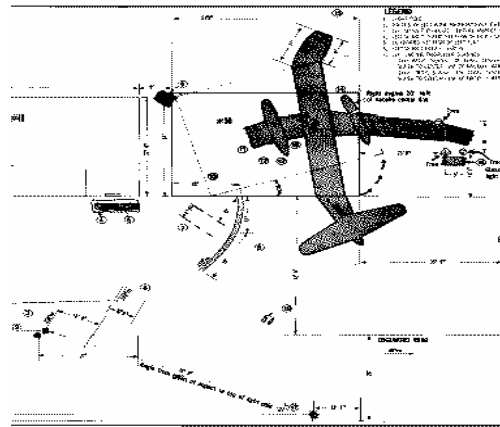
in them today were here on that night in 1972. Myself, I would have moved away within weeks of the crash. Maybe sooner. I was in a plane crash in 1970, two years before Flight 405. It had been difficult for me to stay in the same town for a year afterward, before I was finally able to quit my job and leave.

My crash occurred on a snow-covered hill in March of 1970, a mile from the Binghamton airport. I can say now it was the turning point of my life. I doubt if it's possible to make so many emotions add up to a logical sum. Terror and relief, even bravery coupled with cowardice. Anger directed at the wrong targets. I have never been able to understand all the crash brought to me and took away. However, there was a strangely exultant awareness, as I came down the hill with the other survivors, our bodies burned and stuffed into airport limousines hastily recruited for the task, that I had been touched by the whirlwind, roughly perhaps, but changed forever. Sometimes I think I was given my handicap on that day. For the longest time I fought it and wouldn't let it live its own life. But I couldn't control it, make it do what I wanted it to do. I didn't want to learn anything. I just wanted to feel better, for the awful fear and pain to go away. Now, almost 40 years later, it seems the crash dug out a new cellar deep inside of me and the house that was my life collapsed upon it. And having a wreckage to crawl from was a gift.



For some reason, I wanted to follow Kateri ... or the painting ... to her shrine in the vicinity of Auriesville, NY. It's in a small park-like area sitting just up from the banks of the Mohawk River, supposedly on the site where her native village stood over 300 years ago.

Soon I was standing in the log cabin chapel looking at the portrait, hung near the altar of the small church. The late afternoon sun streamed in through the bare windows and illuminated the interior with warm tones, yellowing the chinked mortar between the logs. I had read, when canonized at some future date, Kateri might be named a patron of story tellers. Iriquois children were said to have loved her tales of wisdom, even if they didn't always understand them. The message must have been outside the words. Due to her struggles, she has also been proposed as a patron saint to people in exile, to those who lost their parents, to the deaf (she had



small pox as a child) and to people ridiculed for their piety. I like that one best, although my piety is long gone.

Kateri and I have in common our escape from a plane crash sort of. It cost her nothing but a few smudges of blood on her canvas wrapper. I came away with real scars, though perhaps more psychic than physical.

As the sun lowered and the chapel darkened, I sat down in the front pew and deeply breathed in the scent of the spruce logs all around me, letting my shoulders relax and drop. An airplane passed high overhead. I faced the question I had avoided all afternoon. Why was I here? I felt instinctively Kateri had known something I still could not understand. What was it?

I sat there as the light faded until I could hardly see the portrait. The light was almost gone. I wanted an answer, as usual. But this time I didn't know how to ask, or wouldn't. Not directly. I don't believe in ghosts or saints any more.

In my mind's eye, I see Kateri walking by the river, her face ugly with small pox scars. Her tribal brothers and sisters don't want her, with her deformities and odd-ball white-man beliefs, but the children follow her anyway, crying out, "Kateri, tell us a story." To children, not everything needs to make perfect sense. Maybe it's why they learn more easily.

The light is almost gone, Kateri. Tell me a story.