

The Crash of United Flight 173 on 12/28/1978

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Mount Hood rose into view as the DC-8 approached Portland, prompting Captain Malburn McBroom to snatch up the intercom.

"For you folks on the right side of the aircraft," he said, "there's a great view of the night skiing on the mountain out the window."

Clicking the intercom off, McBroom turned in his seat and prepared to release the landing gear. Another routine flight was about to come to a close. It was December 28, 1978.

A little over an hour later, United Airlines Flight 173 crashed into a residential Portland neighborhood near the intersection of East Burnside and 157th Avenue. The plane had run out of fuel.

Ten people died when the DC-8 fell from the sky, flattening two unoccupied houses and a clutch of trees before coming to a rest. The dead, *The Oregonian* reported, included four children, two crew members and four [other] passengers.

For hours it had been a very ordinary New York-to-Denver-to-Portland flight, but it turned terrifying all at once. Panic swept through the cabin as the flight attendants issued instructions for a crash-landing.

"Everyone was screaming just like in 'Airport '77,' a passenger said later, referring to one of the sequels in the popular "Airport" disaster-movie franchise.

Flight attendant Sandy Bass, choking back tears, told *The Oregonian* that passengers actually responded well to the crew's directions. "We ordered them to put their heads down. They were prepared. They listened. I love every one of them. They were amazing."

When the plane hit the ground, causing buildings blocks away to shake, nearby residents rushed from their homes to offer help, arriving at the scene before first responders. Some passengers somehow managed to walk out of the debris. Portlander Teresa Salisbury was stunned when five survivors showed up on the doorstep of her East Burnside house.

Among the passengers who wandered off: an Oregon State Penitentiary escapee who was being returned to Oregon on the flight. Corrections officials acknowledged that Kim Edward Campbell had selflessly helped fellow survivors out of the wrecked plane, but they "wish he hadn't then split like he did."

On the run, Campbell became a D.B. Cooper-like folk hero. When he was captured seven months later he said he planned on turning his life around when he got out again, maybe study philosophy. Instead, he robbed a bank in Colorado and ended up back in prison.

Needless to say, commercial airlines aren't supposed to run out of fuel and smash into houses. So why didn't Flight 173 make it to Portland International Airport on that frigid but clear night?

The short answer: Captain McBroom, a World War II Navy veteran and a longtime United pilot, became preoccupied with a landing gear problem. When he deployed the wheels, a strange thump was heard and the plane violently bucked. It turned out the right front landing gear had swung wildly when released, and the cockpit crew didn't know whether it had locked into place. As McBroom, his co-pilot and the flight engineer tried to figure out what was going on, they lost track of the plane's fuel, which, for a number of reasons, was burning at an accelerated rate.

Thanks to McBroom's flying skill, the crew's training and some luck, the crash wasn't nearly as deadly as it might have been. When Multnomah County medical examiner William Brady received an initial report about the air disaster, *The Oregonian* wrote, he "began making plans to rent three large refrigerated vans for storage of the expected large number of bodies."

The Oregonian's headline the next morning: "United DC-8 crashes at E. Burnside, 157th; 10 killed, 175 survive."

Six months later the National Transportation Safety Board blamed pilot error for the crash, stating in its investigative report that "the probable cause of the accident was the failure of the captain to monitor properly the aircraft's fuel state and to properly respond to the low fuel and the crew members' advisories regarding fuel state."

But it wasn't that simple. In "*Crash Course*," her 2018 book about the tragedy, journalist Julie Whipple identified what was arguably poor airline maintenance practices at the time. The NTSB report, Whipple points out, did not address "fuel gauge inaccuracies or [landing-gear] eye-bolt failures -- the very problems [Captain McBroom] felt were largely responsible for everything that went wrong that fateful December night."

The investigation of the crash - and its conclusions about communication problems among the cockpit crew-members as they worked to identify and solve the landing-gear issue -- led to commercial airlines adopting a NASA-developed program known as "Cockpit Resource Management," which helps ensure an orderly and complete flow of information.

"If Captain McBroom had known the history of the rod failure" in the landing gear, retired FAA inspector Frank Harrell said during a trial related to the crash, "and maintenance had reassured him that the gear was safely locked down, and if dispatch had questioned his fuel state, the combined help just might have moved him out of the mental block he was so obviously in."

A jury ultimately found that McBroom wasn't responsible for any deliberate wrongdoing but that United was, hitting the airline for "wanton misconduct" over its maintenance practices.

On December 28, 1998, many survivors of Flight 173 and their family members gathered in Portland for a 20th-anniversary reunion of the crash that had changed their lives. Even though he had never emotionally recovered from the accident and believed he was widely blamed for it, McBroom, now 72, decided it was only right that he attend. "The fact that I lost some people and destroyed the airplane -- it's painful," he said shortly before the reunion. He admitted he had considered suicide at one time.

The reunion ended up surprising him. When he was introduced to the assembled attendees, Whipple writes in *"Crash Course,"* the room erupted in applause. McBroom was stunned as people rose from their chairs clapping...for him. Whipple continues:

Why? McBroom struggled to find words to express the swirl of grief and astonishment inside him. The last time he'd addressed these people was from the cockpit of the jet he was about to crash-land. Ten people had died, dozens more were injured. And yet here were so many of his passengers and their families standing with a message of forgiveness and gratitude for their survival. McBroom couldn't speak through his tears. He had come from a sense of duty and responsibility to these people in the hope that his presence might give them some closure, some peace -- but he suddenly realized that it went both ways.

McBroom died six years later, at 77. "I hope he's at peace now, truly at peace," Flight 173 survivor Mary Clare Deveny said when she learned of McBroom's death. "We never, ever, ever blamed him. We always knew he had done the best he could."

Forty years have now passed since that DC-8's engines flamed out and the plane glided toward the ground. The crash killed 10 people, a terrible toll.

By prompting airlines to retrain their crews with "Cockpit Resource Management," it also may have saved many more in the years since.

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### **Accounts of that night by Portland Firefighters**

Frank Johnson (Portland Firefighter)

I was stationed at E-6 that evening. I was on one of the first 2 1/2 inch lines but as there was no fire I ended up front of the plane helping remove the bodies, not a pretty sight. Later on in the operation we were told that there was still one person missing, which was the Flight Engineer. I was working my way on the ground near the edge of the plane and debris then came upon a black shoe and the body of the Flight Engineer. I reported that I found him and a group of us dug him out from under the plane. Too this day I can still see that black shoe as if it were yesterday.

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Tom Ray (Portland Firefighter)

Don Bloom and I put the roof ladder into the rear door. Many passengers were still in their seats. It was surreal. The Port Fire Department was there first but they were up front. I was driving Truck 41, across front lawns, over picket fences, etc. The wires and poles down had left Burnside Street undriveable. Chief Ham arrived first, then Engine 45, then us. Don and I were the first firefighters on

board the airliner. I think Chief Ham used Engine 45 either up front or had them lay in a hose line from a hydrant. What a night!!

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John Drake (Portland Firefighter)

I was working on Engine 45 "A" Shift at the time and this was a "B" Shift incident. I got called back into work, but had to stand by with the reserve rig, lights off at the station with no power. We never got to hear any of this radio talk. Chief Ham did a great job running this.

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Mike Braet (Portland Firefighter)

I just arrived at Station 46, to trade time with Frank. I think he was going to a Christmas party. There was a lot of chatter on the radio about a plane down in East County. It wasn't long before Bob Cummings headed out. Then Engine 46 was dispatched. I was switching gear with Frank when he said "I've never been on a big plane crash before. To heck with the party, I'm going with you guys."

Harley Cissna, and Bob Smith were up front of the old American LaFrance fire engine. Frank and I were in back and didn't have any idea what was going on till we arrived in the pitch black and saw that huge "United" tail in the woods. We were assigned to stretch hose lines, in case it caught fire....Engine 46 was probably the only four person crew on that night! And so started one of the most memorable runs of my career.

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Dave Short (Portland Firefighter)

I came to the scene from Station 9 with C-4, Jack Dooney, at about 50 mph up Stark Street on the wrong side of the street, against traffic. It was, perhaps, the best example of District 10's organization and training under severe pressure. Whoever came up with the idea to empty the hose beds of a fire engine to transport the survivors to a safe location should have been recognized for creativity.

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Mike Glenn (Portland Firefighter)

I was just finishing up dinner at the Woodshed restaurant when the lights went out. We never heard the crash even though we were only 5 blocks away. When we got in my brother-in-laws truck, Chief Ham was just arriving. Of course we listened to it for hours after that.

I'm proud of how our fore fathers ran that incident. One portable radio per rig. Most communication was face to face. You can feel the birthing pangs of the incident command system when listening to the radio communication. I remember Froney Matthews telling us about this call. It was with fond

memories and amazement of how well things turned out as I heard Brusse, Persons, Chief Ham, Smith, and Howland managing this incident on the radio.. These are men I came to admire.

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Jerry Fellows (Portland Firefighter)

I was off duty and called back to Rescue 2. Later, Reserve Rescue 2 went to the scene. We lived at 146th SE Taylor Court, just south of Stark. Our son, Jeff, in a photography class at David Douglas High School, heard me leave for the station. Jeff took his new camera and went to the crash scene. I have several color photos of the scene. Our good friends lived between Burnside and Glisan, just a few blocks from the crash site.

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Stew White (Portland Firefighter)

It was a dark and stormy night ...and I was just north of Glisan. My date got cancelled and I spent the majority of the evening with Squad 1. I got to do a bit of triage until an ambulance crew arrived, helped search for a missing infant, and kicked a cameraman off the plane. My coat went with a 9 year old boy...and came back to me a couple of weeks later. Heck of a memory!

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John Hill (Portland Firefighter)

I had just left my Aircraft fueling job at the Airport. I was going home. I was at a 181st and Burnside when the Aircraft crashed down the street from me. I saw a flash to my right and the surroundings went black for miles, I went down to the crash scene and helped triage injured people.

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Greg Keller (Portland Firefighter)

I was a volunteer EMT 2 on Alpine Ambulance from Sandy. As was done back in the bad old days of EMS we just self dispatched. We transported a few passengers to the old Gresham Hospital. Ironically my younger brother, Gresham Fire Explorer Scout Dave Keller showed up too.

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Norm Anderson (Portland Firefighter)

I traded time that night to go to a party. Heard about the crash about the time I got home. I called dispatch and they told me to go to Station 19, borrow someone's gear, and head to the crash. While it was a surreal scene, the amazing thing about it to me was the great job done by the first in resources, and the high degree of organization at this potentially chaotic scene. In spite of the mistakes alleged to have occurred by members of the crew before this plane came down, I believe that pilot put that plane down right where he should have.

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Mike Fogarty (Portland Firefighter)

I was working at Providence hospital that night. Everyone was waiting at the door when one of the doctors came walking in. He was talking to people he knew. After about 15 minutes, someone ask him, "what are you doing here?" " I was on the plane" was his answer.

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Marc Ham (Portland Firefighter)

I was the young age of 13 and was at the Eastgate Theater with a friend watching the "Superman" movie. My friends brother came to pick us up and it took forever to get home. The roads were packed, lights were out, and we had no idea what was happening. We finally got home and I turned on the news. Wow was I surprised. My mom and brother were at the beach so at this point I assumed my dad (Incident Commander Dick Ham) was at the crash and I was going to be alone for a bit. I also had in the back of my mind that my sister might be on that flight because she was a flight attendant for United and sometimes flew into Portland without telling us ( or at least not telling me) as a surprise . Fortunately she was not on the flight. The next day my dad brought me to the crash site, it was an amazing sight.