

Northwest Airlines Flight 307

BY CHARLIE MAGUIRE

A BOULDER FRONTED WITH A METAL PLAQUE maintains a somber vigil marking a little-known tragedy. Northwest Flight 307 crashed across the street on its second approach to Wold-Chamberlain Field (now Minneapolis/Saint Paul International Airport, MSP) on Tuesday, March 7, 1950.

The flight had gone smoothly throughout the day. Both the pilots and crew had almost a full day off before flying. The journey had begun in Washington, D.C. at 12:30 p.m. Eastern time with Winnipeg, Manitoba, as the final destination. Flight 307 was also scheduled to make intermediate stops in Detroit, Michigan; Madison, Wisconsin; and Rochester and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The Martin 202-B aircraft involved in the tragedy stood 29 feet while resting on the tarmac. It was 74 feet 7 inches long, with a wingspan of 93 feet and built to hold 49 passengers. At the point of impact on March 7 it was carrying 1,010 gallons of fuel, 38 gallons of oil, 10 passengers, three crew members and the US Mail.

The time was approximately 9 p.m. (the time of impact on the plaque and in the official report differ by two minutes) when the plane plunged vertically from an estimated height of 300 feet into the basement of Franklin and Marie Doughty's home at 1114 West Minnehaha Parkway. The Doughty's TV was tuned to a Minneapolis Lakers basketball game, and Diane Doughty, 15, was sitting on the couch in her pajamas with the family dog on her lap watching the court action with her mother. Her father had just come into the cozy sun porch, having tucked Tommy, eight years old, and Janet, 10, into bed.

"All of a sudden," Diane recalled, "the house exploded. I remember having this huge ball of fire in front of me."¹

This remains the deadliest airplane crash in Minneapolis history.

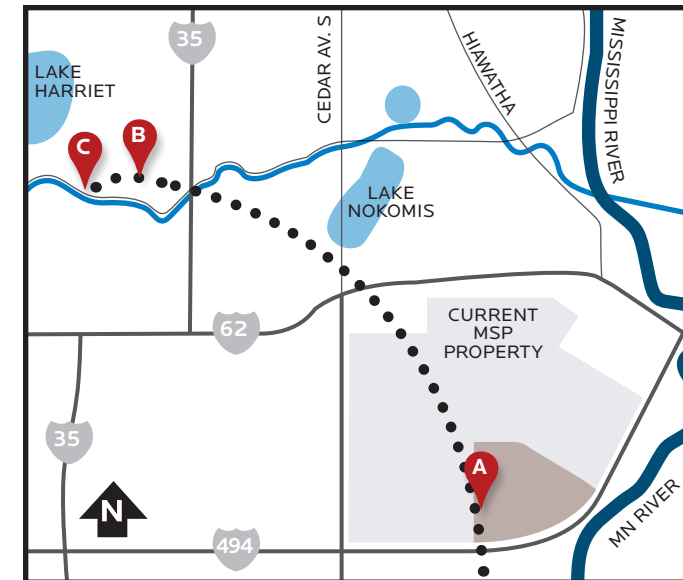
Minutes earlier, Captain Donald B. Jones, the pilot, had radioed the airport tower that they "have got to get in."² He had good reason for saying so. Speaking into the radio from the cramped cockpit he shared with copilot William Tracy McGinn, their left wing had just collided with a flagpole that marked the entrance to the National Soldiers Cemetery (now Fort Snelling National Cemetery), shearing off the wing's front spar cap, taking the bald eagle finial and the neon red obstruction lights clean off the pole, and leaving the top 4 feet bent 17 degrees from vertical.

The two big Pratt & Whitney R-2800 Double Wasp engines roared as Captain Jones advanced the throttle levers and pulled up the nose while making his urgent radio call to get clearance from the airport tower for a second pass. As the plane gained altitude, it was observed flying straight and level. No one could have guessed it had only minutes left in the air.

At the time of the collision, Flight 307 had been less than 70 feet in the air and was flying over snow-covered ground 650 feet off-center from the runway it was supposed to be landing on.

The probable cause, according to the official report, was "the attempt to complete a landing approach by visual means during which time visual reference to the ground was lost."³ The mystery is why Jones, who had been with Northwest for 10 years with 7,619 hours of flying time — almost 1,000 of those in Martin 202s, made this mistake.

Don Jones was a pilot's pilot, checking the skills of other Northwest captains and first officers. He had flown the approach into Wold-Chamberlain Field 200 times before. It was dark and snowing. The ceiling that night was 900 feet, and visibility was variable, one-half to three-quarters of a mile, with winds gusting at 27 to 40 miles per hour. That might sound passable for someone on the ground driving the speed limit along Minnehaha Parkway in front of the Doughty home, but the 202-B has a cruising speed



Likely path of Flight 307.

- A Fort Snelling National Cemetery
- B Washburn Park Water Tower
- C Bronze plaque on West Minnehaha Parkway across from crash site.

of 254 miles per hour and approach speeds only 100 miles an hour less than that. Why did Captain Jones ignore his instrument landing system (ILS), which provides vertical and horizontal guidance for landing, and choose to attempt a visual approach in a blizzard?

The airport had experienced two power outages that evening, and although Jones was reassured by the tower that all was well, including the ILS equipment, perhaps Captain Jones didn't trust the tower and instead relied on his eyes and reactions.

Captain Jones may also have based some decisions on history. An identical Martin 202, Flight 421, lost a wing over Winona, killing 58 just two years earlier, and that aircraft had not hit anything. A design and materials flaw was discovered, and after that, 202s had been refitted with additional wing bracing for strength, making them Martin 202-Bs due to the modification.

Flight attendant Mary Alice Kennedy was aboard for the whole flight but not mentioned by name in the official accident report. She had attended to the passengers as they got off and on, serving drinks and snacks as they flew from city to city. They had taken on fuel in Madison but had to abort the landing in Rochester due to freezing rain. Twenty minutes later they were on approach to Minneapolis with just one more leg to fly, and it was imperative to put the damaged plane down on the runway — right now.

Flight 307 radioed the tower a second time with words every pilot dreads having to say: "We are going in — we are going in."⁴

More than 25 feet of the left wing had just broken off the Martin 202-B. The wing section just missed the Washburn Park Water Tower and ended up crumpled at its base. Later examination of the wing showed that "after being torn or cut through, the forward portion had rotated upward and rearward, and as a result of this twisting action, separated from the remainder of the wing."⁵ The aircraft had flown just 3.8 miles northwest of the airport before the separation and then continued another 2,640



Northwest Airlines sold off its entire fleet of Martin 202-Bs after the crash in Minneapolis. They continued to fly around the world.



Cockpit of similar Martin 202-B aircraft.

feet before striking the Doughty home.

Sixth-grader Bob Christenson was two blocks away, listening to the Lakers game on the radio, when he heard a loud noise. "I yelled to my parents who were downstairs. The whole sky lit up."⁶

Another student, Dick Erdahl, had just been to the movies and rushed to the crash site. Later he could see the flames from his bedroom window. "If the plane had continued on its path another block or two, it could have landed on our house. That sticks in your mind."⁷

Diane remembered: "Everything just exploded and I have no idea. Your first reaction is self-preservation, and I just jumped up and dove out the window."⁸ She sustained cuts from the

"I have got to get in.
We are going in —
we are going in."

— Captain Donald B. Jones



CITY PLANE CRASH KILLS 15

NWA Craft Hits 3 Houses in Snowstorm

A Northwest Airlines plane crashed into three south Minneapolis homes during a snowstorm at 9:52 p.m. Tuesday, killing all 10 passengers, the crew of three, and two children in one of the homes.

The Martin 2-4-2 from Washington, D. C.,

PROBERS SEEK CLUE IN PLANE RUINS

Civilian Defense Against A-Bombs Stymies Planners
 AREA BEGINS DIGGING OUT AFTER STORM
 Telephone, Telegraph and Power Lines Still Out of Full Service

WASHINGTON, D. C.—President Truman said last week that he felt perfectly safe in Washington under the possibility of atomic attack. He was touching on a subject which actually has become a big federal problem: the extent and nature of a civilian defense program.

It is worth it to review the progress of the program by preparing to meet the possibility of atomic attack.

The strong winds of Wednesday were gradually stalling off a passenger resulting from a powerful spring breeze blowing down the throat by a powerful wind.

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Which makes weather forecasters in Minnesota and the Dakotas see a non-recognition of normal ground level. About the most likely to be seen, the most common is called for?

This month has created a kind of paradox in dealing with the storm.

No plans have actually been put in motion. Officials of many cities, however, the most common is called for?

HEARDEN DELAYED
 Congressional hearings on civilian defense against atomic attack have been delayed. At the same time Paul Lammie, deputy in the department security program has been by the same day and the

Power Failure Before NWA Crash Reported

Wold-Chamberlain field had a 20-minute power failure about an hour before the Northwest Airlines plane crash during the severe snowstorm of March 7, but apparently the interruption of the field's instrument landing system was not the cause of the crash.

The inquiry was being handled by an aeronautics board panel of six members after, Washington, D. C.

Eight death to three crew members and 10

The 15 people killed in the crash:
 Joseph V. Breitwieser
 Robert C. Buhmann
 Mathilda Debeck
 Janet Doughty
 Tommy Doughty
 Donald B. Eberhart
 Helen Overlien Hott
 Donald B. Jones
 Mary Alice Kennedy
 William B. Lampert
 Robert N. Lohn
 William T. McGinn
 Dora Nolder
 Emery E. Oliver
 Charles H. Pafford

window glass and burns from the explosion. Her parents exited the same way and also survived. A news photo shows Franklin Doughty with a bandage on his left forearm.

Janet and Tommy Doughty and the family dog, however, died instantly and all the passengers and crew perished.

Officer Floyd Roman of the Richfield Police was first on the scene and saw the fuselage and tail sticking out of the house in an inferno of flame. "The plane from all the heat was melting down and it disappeared entirely into the house,"⁹ he said.

Classmate Janet Strand who was a sophomore with Diane at Washburn High recently recalled: "After she came back to school I remember [Diane] looking stunned and quiet. I could not even imagine such a horrible time."¹⁰ A neighborhood friend lent Diane clothes to wear to school.

On August 27, 2016, there was a crowd at the location of the old Doughty house, which has been replaced by a new single-family home. Former Minneapolis Council member and neighbor Mark Kaplan, led a campaign to remember the tragedy that, as Diane said, had largely been "forgotten."¹¹

Grace Jones, 99, wife of pilot Donald Jones was there, along with Kathleen Kennedy, sister of flight attendant Mary Alice Kennedy who is recognized by name on the large bolder that holds the plaque. Relatives of the 13 passengers also attended, along with neighbors who knew Diane and her family, former council member Betsy Hodges and Park Board commissioners. Attendees heard immediately after the unveiling an aircraft heading into Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport, rumbling routinely low on the glide path that receives airliners coming in from all corners of the world.

It is a sound also heard clearly by the sword-wielding sentinels in concrete decorating the Washburn Park Water Tower. No plaque marks their part in the tragedy there, but the somber expression on the faces of the figures seems to say it all.

NOTE
 Diane Doughty Madsen, age 88, passed away in Elk River on July 12, 2022 as the author was writing this article.

PUT ON YOUR FLASHERS
 No need — there is a place to park just a few feet from the memorial located on West Minnehaha Parkway between Dupont and Emerson Avenues South. There is also plenty of street parking around the Washburn Park Water Tower.

Charlie Maguire is a songwriter and performer who makes frequent stops to sing or typewrite a story in Hennepin County. In the 1960s he often flew with a friend in an ERCO Ercoupe around Western new York.

- FOOTNOTES**
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 - "We are going in. We are going in." Ibid.
 - "Separated from the remainder of the wing." Ibid.
 - "I yelled to my parents." Tom Meersman, "Keeping a tragedy from fading." *Star Tribune*, July 29, 2011. *Star Tribune* archive.
 - "That sticks in your mind." Ibid.
 - "I just dove out the window." "Long Forgotten NWA Crash in Minneapolis Stirs Memories." CBS, March 1, 2011, cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/long-forgotten-nwa-crash-in-mpls-stirs-memories/.
 - "Melted down into the house." "I yelled to my parents." Tom Meersman, "Keeping a tragedy from fading." *Star Tribune*, July 29, 2011. *Star Tribune* archive.
 - "I remember her looking stunned and quiet." Author interview.
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Unless otherwise noted, photos courtesy author.



Washburn Park Water Tower.