

# Pillar of Fire: Recalling the Park Slope Plane Crash

by Nathaniel Altman



Seventh Avenue and Sterling Place, Brooklyn.

Few newcomers to Park Slope, Brooklyn know that our neighborhood was once the scene of the country's worst air disaster. At about 10:30 on the morning of Friday, December 16, 1960, a United Airlines DC-8 jet en route from Chicago to Idlewild (now John F. Kennedy) airport collided with a TWA Super Constellation propeller plane flying from Columbus to New York LaGuardia. The TWA plane broke into pieces and plunged onto Miller Field, a former military airport in the New Dorp section of Staten Island, killing all 44 aboard. The crippled United plane managed to remain in the air for another 8-1/2 miles before crashing into Sterling Place and Seventh Avenue, setting fire to over a dozen buildings and killing five pedestrians. In all, 134 people died that day. The United flight's only survivor— an 11-year old boy named Stephen Baltz— died the following afternoon at Methodist Hospital.

In many ways, the crash and its aftermath bore the traits of a classic American tragedy: tremendous loss of life and homes and businesses destroyed. It was also a time of individual acts of kindness and tremendous heroism. Many also believed that it was a day of miracles, as the two crashes could have been far worse. Government investigations sought to pinpoint the reason for the collision, but were criticized with charges of government and corporate cover-up, that remain unresolved to this day. Ironically, the crash was also a possible turning point for a declining Brooklyn neighborhood, and

sparked a preservation movement grew to embrace much of the city.

## **The Neighborhood**

While still recognizable to today's residents, the area around Sterling Place and Seventh Avenue was called "a neighborhood in transition" in 1960. While good shopping could be found on Seventh Avenue, middle-income families were moving out and banks began redlining the neighborhood, making it difficult for people to buy homes here. While some neighbors would still visit on their stoops during the warmer months, dozens of buildings-- mostly between Fifth and Seventh Avenues-- were abandoned by their owners, who boarded them up and fled to suburbia.

Commenting on the neighborhood in *Brooklyn Heights Paper* in 1995, Joe Ferris wrote, "There were abandoned and derelict buildings on every block from Flatbush Avenue to 15<sup>th</sup> Street. St. John's Place between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenues looked as if it had been hit by heavy artillery." Many of the brownstones became rooming houses, and once-large apartments were divided into smaller ones.

On the morning of December 16, 1960, the snow on the ground had turned to slush. The grey sky was heavy with low clouds and a wet snow was falling throughout the area. *The New York Times* reported that "about the only sound on Sterling Place from Sixth to Seventh Avenues was the slushing passage of an occasional car." Due to the bad weather, few pedestrians made their way along Seventh Avenue and Sterling Place, where two men were selling Christmas trees for the upcoming holiday.

## **The Aircraft**

Trans World Airlines N6907C was a Lockheed Super Constellation delivered to TWA in 1952. Considered one of the most beautiful airliners ever built, the graceful "Super Connie" was powered by four propeller engines and featured a slightly serpentine shape and a unique tri-rudder tail section. The plane's cruising speed was 325 mph and it could carry 64 passengers nonstop for 3250 miles.

United Airlines N8013U was a new Douglas DC-8 jet delivered to United Airlines barely a year before the crash. At that time the largest commercial jet in the air, the Dc-8 was equipped with four turbojet engines. This long-range (5720 mile) transport had a cruising speed of 579 mph and could carry up to 189 passengers.

## **The Events**

TWA flight 266 originated in Dayton, Ohio and stopped in Columbus, where a change of aircraft took place and most of the passengers boarded for the trip to New York. Leaving Columbus at 9 in the morning under the command of Capt. David A. Wollam, the Super Constellation carried 5 crew and 39 passengers, including two infants.

Among the passengers were seven specialists in missile and aircraft development from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton; Richard Bitters, an Ohio University executive; four Ohio State University athletes; Gary Myers, president of the magazine *Highlights for Children* and his wife Mary, parents of five; and Louella Bricker, who was traveling to the Perkins Institute in Watertown, MA to bring her deaf son George back to Ohio for the holidays. At least one of the passengers had a premonition of death. Before she boarded the plane, Nancy Briggs, a student at Ohio State University, told her boyfriend Leonard Hart that she had a dream she was going to die and was afraid that she would never see him again.



**A TWA Super Constellation.**

As his plane approached the New York area in limited visibility, Air Traffic Control advised the Capt. Wollam to stand by in an area known as the Linden Intersection (an 5 x 10 mile east-west oval-shaped holding area above Linden, NJ and the northwest section of Staten Island) before heading towards LaGuardia at an altitude of 5000 feet. Like the route of many of today's flights into LaGuardia, the plane would have crossed Staten Island into Brooklyn, turn left and fly over Prospect Park and on to the airport.

After being given permission to land at 10:33:14, the captain began heading towards LaGuardia. Twelve seconds later, LaGuardia Approach Control advised that there "appears to be jet traffic off your right..." after which communications with TW 266 abruptly ended.

United flight 826 was on nonstop service between Chicago's O'Hare Airport and New York's Idlewild, now known as John F. Kennedy International Airport. It left Chicago at 9:11 with 76 passengers and 7 crew members under the command of Capt. Robert H. Sawyer. The of the best-known passengers included Dr. Jonas Kamlet, a leading chemist; Raymond Walsh, President of Wesleyan University Press; and Allen E. Braun, Vice-President of North Advertising. Dorothy Miner, Head Nurse at the

University of Illinois Hospital in Chicago, was flying here to assist her stepmother who was to undergo surgery, and Elsie Platt was traveling from Illinois to see her newborn granddaughter for the first time. Many others were coming home for the holidays, like Frank R. Dileo, a senior at the University of Utah; Darnell Mallory, a student at Omaha University, and Enrique Bustos, Jr., son of the former Consul General of Chile. Some were on trips abroad, like Edwige Dumalskis and her children Patrick and Joelle, who were en route to France to visit relatives.



**A United Airlines DC-8.**

At approximately 10:21, the crew reported to Aeronautical Radio, Inc., operator of United's aeronautical communications system, that one of their navigation receiver units was inoperative, which was relayed to United Airlines. Unfortunately, the crew failed to report the problem to Air Traffic Control, which probably would have provided extra radar assistance. At 10:32, the crew was told to enter the Preston intersection, a southwest-northeast oval-shaped holding area ten miles west of Red Bank, New Jersey well to the south of Linden; its' border was separated from the Linden intersection by 5 miles. The last transmission from the United crew was at 10:33:33: "Idlewild Approach Control, United 826, approaching Preston at 5000 [feet]."

### **"I think we have trouble..."**

An instant later, at 10:33:34, LaGuardia radar observations showed that two targets merged over Miller Army Air Field, in New Dorp, Staten Island. The controller exclaimed, "I think we have trouble here with a TWA Connie...He's not moving or anything. He might have got hit by another airplane." Flying eleven miles off course and traveling at a speed of five hundred mph— far faster than permitted by Air Traffic Control-- the United jet slammed into the slower Super Constellation before the TWA pilot was able to react to the warning from the LaGuardia tower. The right wing of the DC-8 sheared through the upper right section of the Connie's passenger compartment,

causing the smaller plane to break into three pieces and spin out of control.

Rev. Milton Perry, a Staten Island resident, told a reporter from *The New York Times* that he “felt the earth shake” and saw the plane fall in flames and smoke. At that moment, a Mrs. Weber of New Dorp heard an explosion, went to her window, and witnessed the crash. “It seemed to fall a few feet and there was another huge burst of flame... It went down in a terrible way, one wing gone, and it turned over very slowly. You could watch it all the way and it was always red from the flames.” Others reported that the plane had broken into “millions of pieces”, with both airplane debris and bodies falling from the sky. One TWA passenger was sucked into an engine of the DC-8. Narrowly missing a housing development, what was left of the of the TWA plane and its occupants (along with the engine and wing debris from the United jet) fell onto the vacant airfield, recently abandoned by the Army (it is now part of the Gateway National Park). Local residents rushed to the scene and began pulling bodies from the flaming wreckage until rescue workers and soldiers arrived.



**Wreckage of the TWA flight 266.**

## **Pillar of Fire**

While the tragedy was over for the TWA passengers and crew, the terrible events awaiting those on the United flight and residents of Park Slope were still unfolding. Losing altitude, the crippled DC-8, which was missing its right engine and part of the right wing, managed to continue northeast in the direction of LaGuardia airport and towards Prospect Park, where witnesses speculated that the pilot was attempting to make an emergency landing. Slope residents first saw the plane heading directly for the St. Augustine’s Academy on Sterling Place below Sixth Avenue, with over a hundred students in class, when it was able to bank to the right. After barely clearing the school, the jet lost altitude above Sterling Place between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. At an

estimated speed of 200 mph, the plane's right wing struck the roof of a brownstone at 126 Sterling Place, causing the fuselage of the plane to veer to the left and crash directly into the (ironically named) Pillar of Fire Church across the street. The aircraft and the church exploded in flames, killing dozens of passengers and Wallace E. Lewis, the church's 90-year old caretaker, as he lay in bed. The left wing, now on fire, sheared into an apartment building next door to the church, while another section of the cabin, filled with screaming passengers, crashed into McCaddin's Funeral Home on the corner of Seventh Avenue and Sterling Place. The severed tail section, mostly intact, fell upright into the intersection of Seventh Avenue and Sterling Place. Several buildings were totally destroyed and at least ten were damaged.



**The tail section of UA 826.**

For those on the ground, the scene was as if taken from a horror movie. Interviewed by a reporter from *The New York Times*, a Mr. Manza said, "All of a sudden, the right wing dipped: It hooked into the corner of the apartment house [122 Sterling Place], and the rest of the plane skimmed into the church and the apartment house across the street. All at once everything was on fire, and the fire from the plane in the street was as high as the houses." Mrs. Robert Nevin (back in 1960, wives were often identified by their husband's name) lived at 122, and was standing in her nightgown standing in the front room of her top floor apartment doing her hair when she heard a

shattering crash. “The roof caved in and I saw the sky.”

Henry and Pauline McCaddin, owners of the McCaddin Funeral Home, were enjoying a mid-morning cup of coffee in their second-floor kitchen while their one year old daughter played under the table. Ms. McCaddin reported, “We were having our coffee and I said to Henry, ‘My goodness, that plane sounds awfully low!’ And just then the whole house shook like it had been hit by a bomb, and the room was all in flames.” The McCaddins escaped with the help of Robert Carter, owner of a hairdressing establishment on Seventh Avenue, who ran into the burning building to rescue them. A burning section of the plane’s left wing landed on top of 124 Sterling Place, and soon a fire spread to the roofs of numbers 122, 120 and 118. The jet also set fire to six buildings on Seventh Avenue, including numbers 18, 20, 22, 24, 26 and 28. Repairs can still be seen on the upper floors of many of these buildings.



**The Crash Scene on Sterling Place.**

The crash scene was described by reporters as “an orderly kind of pandemonium” with screaming residents rushing from their shattered buildings into the snow, sirens wailing, emergency radios crackling, and firefighters spraying water on the flaming wreckage. Members of Fire Department Rescue Company No. 2 worked continuously for almost 72 hours at the crash scene, deploying their specialized equipment to both combat the fire and search through the wreckage for bodies. In addition to chunks of airplane and brick, the debris included broken dolls and wrapped presents destined as Christmas gifts, as well as mailbags bulging with holiday cards.

In addition to Mr. Lewis, five people on the ground were killed. They included Charles Cooper, a sanitation worker who was shoveling snow, Joseph Colacano and John Oppersano, who were selling Christmas trees on the sidewalk, Dr. Jacob L. Crooks,

who was out walking his dog, and an employee at a butcher shop on Sterling Place. About a dozen others were injured, including firefighters and residents of several neighborhood buildings.

## The Brave Little Boy

All of the occupants of the DC-8 were killed instantly, except Stephen Baltz (see photo at right), an 11-year old redhead from Wilmette, Illinois, who planned to spend Christmas with relatives in Yonkers. His father delivered him to O'Hare that morning, and he was to meet his mother and sister at Idlewild, who had flown in the day before. As the plane hit the ground and exploded in flames, Stephen was thrown from the tail section and onto a snow bank, where local residents rolled him in the snow to put out his burning clothing. Though conscious and repeatedly calling for his mother and father, Stephen had inhaled flames and smoke, and also sustained severe burns and broken bones.



Dorothy M. Fletcher, who lived at 143 Berkeley Place, rushed to Stephen's side. Knowing that he was in shock, she called upon neighbors to throw down some blankets, and was photographed in a leopard-patterned coat holding an umbrella over the boy to shield him from the falling snow. (She appears at the upper right corner of the photo above. The photo appeared on the front pages of both *The New York Times* and the *Daily News* the following morning). It was Ms. Fletcher who brought Stephen to Methodist Hospital (now New York-Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital). See my interview with Dorothy Fletcher at the end of this article.

Still conscious after his terrible ordeal, Stephen Baltz later described the crash to doctors at the hospital. "I remember looking out the plane window at the snow below covering the city. It looked like a picture out of a fairy book. Then all of a sudden there was an explosion. The plane started to fall and people started to scream. I held on to my seat and then the plane crashed. That's all I remember until I woke up."

Newspaper reports said that people all over the country prayed for Stephen, whose courage and sweet disposition won the hearts of everyone who met him. In spite of heroic efforts by doctors and nurses at Methodist, Stephen Baltz died peacefully at 1 o'clock the following afternoon, his mother and father by his side. A small bronze memorial to the crash victims containing the boy's blackened pocket change— 65 cents-- was set up at the hospital, where Ms. Fletcher placed flowers on the Sunday closest to the anniversary of Stephen's death. (The memorial is now in storage). Recalling the event in 2003, the 91-year old great-grandmother said, "What broke my heart was when he asked me if he was going to die. I couldn't do all I wanted to do. I couldn't save him."

## Cause and Responsibility

Faced with the biggest air disaster in American history, the Civil Aeronautics Board (now the National Transportation Safety Board) undertook an extensive investigation into the causes of the crash and made recommendations so that similar events never happened again. On June 18, 1962— about a year and a half after the crash— the CAB released its report, which stated that the probable cause of the accident was that United 826 proceeded beyond its clearance limit allocated by Air Traffic Control, with contributing factors included a high rate of speed and a change of clearance which reduced the en route distance by approximately 11 miles.

Critics of the report called it a whitewash designed to prevent lawsuits resulting in punitive damages not covered by the airlines' insurance. In an updated edition of *Unfriendly Skies: Revelations of a Deregulated Airline Pilot* by "Captain X" and Reynolds Dodson (Doubleday, 1989) the authors wrote that FAA inspectors had previously complained that the United Airlines training program was dangerously unsatisfactory, that many crew members were denied corrective training, and that United routinely falsified air safety records. Those who were critical of airline policy and government collusion were often transferred. "...FAA inspectors who discovered serious fraud relating to violations of the government air safety requirements were blocked from taking corrective actions. Obstructing compliance with the air safety laws were FAA and United Airlines officials, and pressure from members of Congress." Documentation related to these earlier charges were suppressed from the CAB report.

Many years later, valuable observations about the crash were shared by Air Traffic Controller Jeff Wesche, accessed on *YouTube*, January 20, 2019:

*I'm currently an Air Traffic Controller in the FAA. My father, a retired controller, was the supervisor on duty at Idlewild Airport, (now Kennedy), when this mid-air occurred. The background story here is that the aircrew on the United DC-8 was relatively inexperienced flying such a large, fast jet-(jets had only been in wide usage a few years at that point, and the UAL crew's flying experience, up to that point, had been in multiengine piston aircraft). In those days, holding patterns were defined by intersecting "radials" from at least two separate navigational aids. During a heavy snow storm, UAL 826 was instructed to enter holding, on the Idlewild final, at 5000 feet, but was unable to locate the holding point due to a partial failure of its navigational equipment, (i.e. only one radial was available to the crew), resulting in the DC-8 flying through its assigned holding pattern directly into the TWA Constellation. Not only that, the DC-8 was flying in excess of 500 knots!! As a result of this accident, FAA rules now require all pilots to enter holding patterns within specific airspeed parameters, and ALL airplanes flying at or below 10,000 can fly no faster than 250 knots.*

Overall, verdicts concerning the lawsuits (which exceeded \$300 million) stipulated that United Air Lines was responsible for 61 percent of the claims, Trans

World Airlines 15 percent, and the U.S. government 24 percent, because the planes' instrument landing approaches were being guided by FAA controllers.

In addition to the families of the deceased passengers and crew, local residents received settlements from United Airlines, some of which were considered unsatisfactory. Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Boyle, who owned a brownstone at 130 Sterling Place, received \$3700 in compensation less \$900 in lawyers' fees. In an interview with *The New York Times* four months after the crash, Mrs. Boyle said, "We settled for peanuts. We'll be in debt for the next ten years over that crash." One woman told an opposite story. Her husband was also given a settlement of several thousand dollars, and the windfall (remember that \$3000 went a lot farther in 1960 than it does today) caused him to go on a spending spree. "He went haywire with it—bought a television set, snappy clothes. Then he took off with the rest. He hasn't been around for two months." The four-story building containing the McCaddin Funeral Home was demolished and was soon replaced with a nondescript one-story building; it is now the site of a new multi-story construction that will contain both commercial and living space. While other families eventually moved back to the site of the crash, others simply left the area. Jimmy Moy, who owned a Chinese laundry on the parlor floor at 26 Seventh Avenue, decided to move to Manhattan. The vacant lot on which the building housing his laundry once stood is now the site of new construction.

## **Saving the Neighborhood**

In his article in *Brooklyn Heights Paper*, Joe Ferris addressed the danger the neighborhood faced after the crash: the government's answer to dealing with damaged buildings in an already declining neighborhood was urban renewal: level the area and construct high-rise housing projects. This threat was a wake-up call for many local residents. Though many worked to save the neighborhood, Ferris cited a number of community leaders who helped save Park Slope at that critical time: Robert Makla, who helped found the Park Slope Civic Council; Irene Wilson, publisher of the monthly *Park Slope Civic Council News*; Evelyn and Everett Ortner, founders of the Brownstone Revival Movement and who helped secure landmark status for many local buildings; Herb Steiner, whose organization helped force the banks to stop redlining urban neighborhoods; and George Lovgren, who saved a local firehouse from closing.

Today, the area around Seventh Avenue and Sterling Place is one of the most vital in the neighborhood. Few would recognize the quiet intersection as a scene of the nation's worst aircraft disaster. Yet the memories remain for many of the neighborhood's long-time residents. Dorothy Fletcher, recalling the events over coffee at a neighborhood restaurant in 2003, said, "The crash remains so vivid in my mind. It's like it happened just this morning."

## Interview with Dorothy M. Fletcher (2003)

A great-grandmother with twinkling eyes and a sharp mind, Dorothy M. Fletcher won national recognition as the woman who held an umbrella over crash survivor Stephen Baltz to protect him from the falling sleet. She later comforted the wounded boy on the way to Methodist Hospital (now New York-Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital). Until shortly before her death in 2005 at the age of 93, Ms. Fletcher worked full-time at Neergaard Pharmacy in Park Slope as office manager, a “temporary” job she began 29 years before. She shared her impressions of that day with me in 2003.



*NA: How long have you lived in Park Slope?*

DMF: I am a native New Yorker and have been in this neighborhood since 1948. I lived at 143 Berkeley Place, just down the street from Seventh Avenue at the time of the crash. The back of our apartment faced Sterling Place. I was working in Manhattan for a chemical company at the time.

*NA: Please tell us what happened that day.*

DMF: It was a miserable Friday, with cold and sleet. I didn't feel too hot so I decided to stay home. When I was in the kitchen I heard an airplane and all that went through my mind was “that plane is in trouble”. And then I heard a horrible crash and flames shot up four stories above a brownstone. I was a member of Civil Defense at that time [she was actually chief of The Brooklyn Volunteers for Civil Defense] so I grabbed a coat and raced out. As I turned on Seventh Avenue and looked down towards St. Johns Place, all that went through my mind was “this is a movie set”. It was amazing to see that plane, most of it over Seventh Avenue, the tail of it on Sterling Place and what was left of the nose was at the other side of Sterling Place.

When I got down there, I saw a policeman and I told him that I was from Civil Defense and asked what could I do. And he just said, “Take care of that little boy. He was a passenger.” His name was Stephen Baltz and he was 8, 9, 10; a real young kid. And the child was so badly burnt, I thought that he was an African-American boy. His jacket was still smoldering. But he was conscious and was talking to us, and I had an umbrella and I opened it and put it over him because the weather was really miserable. Because I had been working with Civil Defense and was a member of the Boy Scouts of America, I knew First Aid. I looked at him and all I could think of was “That child is in shock.”

So I looked up at the people hanging out of the windows of the brownstones and I said “Please throw me down a few blankets. He's in shock. I have to get him to the hospital. If he comes out of this, he'll be in agony.”

There were two men walking by, and I called out to them, “Do you have a car?” Because there were so many people around there, and so many automobiles that ambulances couldn’t get through. And they said, “Yes, we have a car.” It was on Lincoln Place. And I said, “Well, please help me get him up there.” I found out that they were two lieutenants from the Fire Department.

We lay Stephen on the back seat and I knelt down beside him. All the way up to the hospital he talked to me. What broke my heart was when he asked me if he was going to die. I said, “Not if we can help it. We’re taking you to Methodist Hospital.” And he said, “That’s good, because I am a Methodist.” He also told us that his daddy was still in Illinois, in Chicago, and his mother and sister were waiting for him at the airport. They were going to spend Christmas with his uncle up in Yonkers.

It’s almost as though he were talking to me now. I can hear him. We got him up to emergency and I told him who I was and said, “I’ll go back and see if I can do anything else. There was a friend of mine who was also with Civil Defense, and he came over and said later that night, “Let’s go over to the hospital to see how Stephen is” and I left and I said, “I know he’s with his parents; I don’t want to see him, but just want to find out how he’s doing”, and I was talking to the chaplain and he said, “Let me take your picture to show to the Baltzes.” Well, the next morning I got a call from a reporter asking me to go to the hospital so the Baltzes could thank me, but I declined. My reason was that I felt they had gone through enough and didn’t need to thank me. Up to three years ago, Mrs. Baltz and I sent each other Christmas cards and would report what was going on with our families. And then it stopped like that and I just surmised that she had passed away.

*NA: After the plane crashed, how long did it take you to get to the scene?*

DMF: Three minutes at the most. At that time I could run. When I got to the street, I stopped in amazement to think about what happened. There were fires burning and the church that was on Sterling Place was in flames. Ironically, it was known as the Pillar of Fire. And the caretaker was killed in that church. A wonderful man named Dr. Crooks was killed while walking his dog; he was President of the Brooklyn Council of the Boy Scouts of America. His lungs were badly seared, but he lasted maybe four or five days. I knew him. There were men selling Christmas trees who were killed. It was chaos.

My children and I went to the Methodist Church [33 Seventh Avenue at St. John’s Place] which opened its doors to firemen and rescue workers. We were there serving soup. And we had some clothes we gave away because people’s clothes were lost; many lived in the building across the street from the funeral home, which was completely demolished. The school down the street [St. Augustine’s Academy] opened its’ gymnasium as a morgue.

The only one who got out of that horrible state was Stephen. To this day, all I can say that there’s one thing that always bothers me: I could not save him.

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