

SETTANTA VITE IMMORTALI



Olgiate Olona - 26 giugno

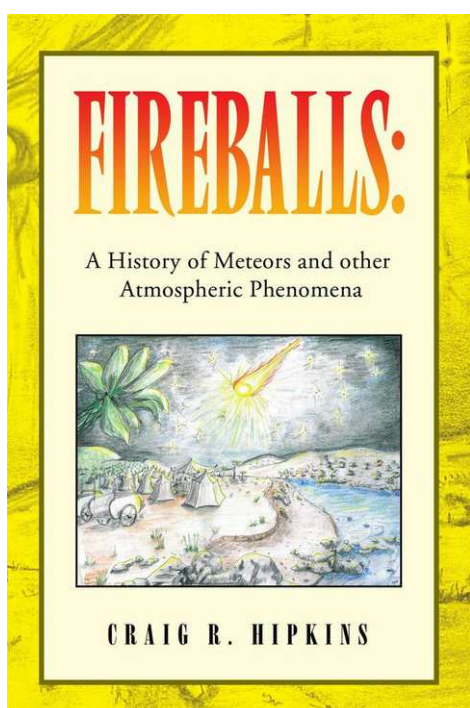
June 26, 1959: plane crash

excerpt from:

Fireballs: a history of meteors and other atmospheric phenomena

by Craig R. Hipkins

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On June 26, 1959 a TWA Super Constellation took off from Milan, Italy bound for New York, via Paris. For the 68 passengers and crew members it was supposed to be just another routine flight. The plane took off and reported nothing unusual. However, only twelve minutes after takeoff something terrible happened. The right wing of the aircraft came off causing the plane to lose stability and crash in a fiery explosion in a wooded area outside of Milan, killing all on board. Investigators were perplexed by the crash. All takeoff procedures and radio communication with the crew showed no sign of the plane having any difficulty. The debris scattered woods offered few clues to go on. After an eleven month investigation, experts ruled out various likely culprits such as engine failure, a wiring problem, or sabotage. They then decided to look at the possibility of St. Elmo's fire as the cause. For years pilots had

reported seeing the fires on their wings, propellers and other parts of their aircraft. Generally, however, the phenomenon was looked at as being quite harmless. Even lightning hitting a plane, though rare, had occasionally knocked out a radio, or caused minor structural damage, but had never been known to take down a plane. Since the investigators of this tragedy had little else to go on they began to investigate the fire of St. Elmo a little more closely.

After ruling out the list of usual suspects, the investigators reexamined the results of metallurgical tests and determined that the fuel tanks had undergone extreme pressure and had exploded causing the wing of the aircraft to rip away. They believed that St. Elmo's fire had entered a pressure vent and ignited gas fumes which led to the explosion of the fuel tanks. Lockheed Aircraft, who had built the aircraft performed a reenactment of the event at their proving facility in California. They built a replica of the plane's wing and attempted to duplicate the event of that fateful June day. Their experiment succeeded, and Lockheed then ruled that the cause of the crash was due to an errant case of St. Elmo's fire.

Examining Lockheed's conclusions I find it hard to believe that the fire of St. Elmo was the definitive culprit. In order to prove this beyond a shadow of a doubt, the atmospheric conditions related to the experiment must be exactly the same as they were the day of the crash. Also, like ball lightning and the will-o'-the wisp, the fire of St. Elmo, although better understood now than in centuries past, still possess' a lingering aura of mystery around it. How can it ignite a fuel tank on an airplane, but travel harmlessly up a man's sleeve, or appear on the tip of an umbrella without burning the fabric below it? These questions need to be answered before the fire of St. Elmo can be convicted for causing the TWA disaster.