



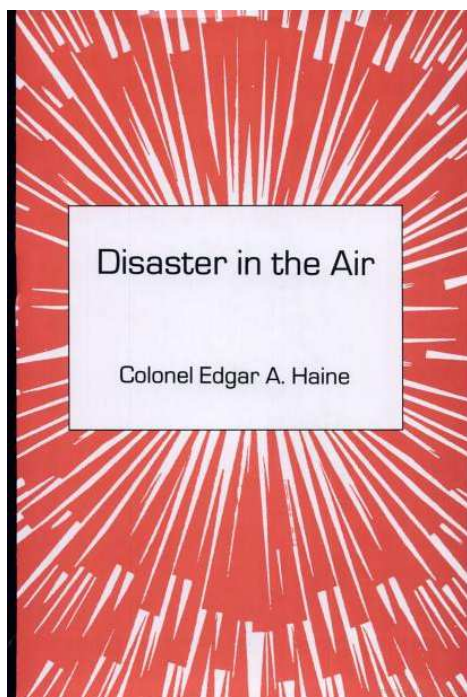
June 26, 1959: plane crash

excerpt from:

Disaster in the air

by Edgar A. Haine

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26 June 1959.

Constellation Crashes, near Milan Italy, 68 Dead.

On 26 June 1959 a Trans World Airways Constellation took off from Malpensa International Airport, near Milan, Italy during a thunderstorm, to resume a flight from Athens to Chicago by way of Milan, Rome, and Paris. A few minutes later, at 5:35 P.M. local time, witnesses said that at about 2,000 feet altitude the plane seemed to catch on fire, explode, lose a wing, and plunge quickly to earth. Wreckage was scattered over a five-mile area near Olgiate Olona, eleven miles from the airport. The fuselage crashed and exploded in a field just seventy feet from a farmhouse. The airliner was carrying fifty-nine passengers and nine crew members,

all of whom perished in the disaster. Among the dead were thirty-four Americans, in addition to many Italians and other passengers from France, England, Egypt, and Chile.

Within fifteen minutes, fire squads from the towns of Busto Arsizio, Gallarate, and Legnano arrived at the scene where the airplane was still burning fiercely. The firemen found it impossible to get near the conflagration until some hours later when all the fuel taken on at Milan had been consumed. Also arriving quickly at the crash site was a Roman Catholic parish priest from Olgiate Olona who administered the last rites to the dead. At 8:45 P.M. Giovanni Battista Cardinal Montini, the Archbishop of Milan,* arrived and remained in prayer for some time.

Italian authorities from the Defense Ministry, TWA officials, and representatives from the insurance carrier started inquiries immediately into the cause of the disaster. TWA representatives were R. M. Dunn, vice president for Technical Services; J. T. Davis, Director of Maintenance; Ray North, structures engineer; Clark Fisher, power plant engineer; and William Meador, electronics engineer. Experts from the United States

Federal Aviation Administration, headed by Martyn Clarke, Assistant Chief Engineer, also set out from Washington to participate in the investigation.

The Italian Meteorological Service stated that at the time of the crash an unusually violent thunderstorm, with continuous lightning discharges, had been raging over the Olgiate Olona area. Villagers said they had never known of such a severe and prolonged lightning display. However, aviation experts refused to concede that a lightning bolt had caused the accident. The Civil Aeronautics Board indicated it had no record to show that any airliner had ever exploded as a result of aerial electrical discharges.

One victim of the Constellation catastrophe in Italy was Maria Sacchetti Fermi, age sixty years, sister of the late famous Enrico Fermi, nuclear physicist who helped develop the atomic bomb. The crew of the TWA plane were as follows Pilot, Paul S. Grade, Brookfield, CT; relief pilot, Harry L. Stanton, Seafood, NY; first officer, Frank. W. Ellis, Rowley, MA; flight engineer, John Victor Powell, Syosset, NY; assistant flight engineer, Donald Lueke, Mission, KS; copilot, Jack Davis, Westchester, IL; purser, Edmund Mauchino, based in Paris; hostess, Jacqueline Jaussen, based in Paris, and hostess Marguerita Fay, based in Paris.

By 27 June sixty-eight bodies had been recovered from the twisted wreckage of the TWA Constellation. The bodies, dismembered and charred, were taken to a large Red Cross tent near the scene and later placed in coffins transported by truck to the crash site. The bodies were later sent four miles to a mortuary at Busto Arsizio for possible identification. The identifications were handled by the local prosecutor's office, but only the identity of ten bodies had been established.

The cause of the airliner crash remained a mystery to Italian, TWA, and United States authorities. While the common belief was that somehow lightning had damaged or shattered the plane in flight, Italian Air Force Commission members stated that "theoretically airliners like this one are completely lightning proof." However, it was admitted that the explosions reported to have ripped through the airplane might have been initiated by a bolt of lightning. Maj. Arcangelo Paoletti, Manager of the Milan airport and Director of Operations there, said it was "an impossible accident! The evidence we have," the major added, "seems to tell us it happened for reasons that are logically impossible by the laws of physics." Also an executive of Trans World Airways expressed doubts that lightning or a thunderstorm were probable causes for the crash of the airliner.

(*) Later Pope Paul VI