



# Lives lost among the waters of the Shannon

Fifty-five years have passed since President Airlines flight 90773 crashed into the estuary

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THERE was a very poignant visit last week to Shannon of family members of those who lost their lives in the 1961 President Air Lines crash. A special prayer service marked the 55th anniversary of this horrific event in Irish and European aviation history.

Most of our work in the Limerick Leader archives involves looking back on happy, triumphant or nostalgically pleasing events of the past. Occasionally, however, it is our sad duty to reflect on the unpleasant and sometime tragic occurrences which have left their indelible mark on our history. This week, we look back on the 1961 Shannon air disaster and, once more, ponder the "what ifs" of the events of that dreadful day.

On September 9, 1961 a happy bunch of 76 holidaymakers set out aboard a Douglas DC6, President Air Lines flight 90773, from Dusseldorf in Germany bound for Chicago in the USA. The mostly Dutch, German, Swiss and Austrian travellers were tended to by six crew members. There was a scheduled stopover at Shannon Airport and they landed there at 9.50pm on Saturday evening.

Sometime before takeoff, an extra passenger joined the group and the crew decided to switch places with a crew from another plane.

The plane was cleared for takeoff in heavy fog at 3.31a.m. on Sunday morning and was airborne at 3.52a.m. However, the plane had been cleared to make a right turn but inexplicably turned left. Less than two minutes later, the plane was embedded in the muddy waters of the Shannon and all 83 lives on board were lost.

The crash site is described as being about midway between Beigh Castle on the Limerick side of the river and Rineanna South on the Clare side, about half a mile off shore.

Witnesses on the ground de-



The shattered remains of the President Airlines crash at Shannon, on September 10 1961, spread out on the mud flat of the estuary

scribed the plane making "wrong sounds." Staff at the airport gave evidence that when the plane was taking off it sounded more like it was about to land. This was followed by a loud thud.

Sarah Donlon, a resident of Rineanna South, whose home lay in the flight path of the doomed plane, also recalled hearing the "wrong sounds" too. The engine sounded like rattling chains. Moments after the plane flew over her house, she heard the thud. When she went to investigate, all Ms Donlon could see was a tiny light in the dis-

tance.

The rescue operation swung into action immediately but all efforts to save lives were in vain. One young woman was found alive in the mud but she had suffered very severe head and leg injuries and she died shortly afterwards. Limerick Harbour Board's dredger, The Curragower, was used to recover the bodies.

As daylight and news of the disaster broke, sightseers started to wade across the mud to view the site, including two honeymooners from Donegal.

Twenty men from the Board of

Works built a temporary railway across the mud flats to enable wreckage and debris from the plane to be brought ashore for expert technical examination. The investigation team was led by Mr. R. O'Sullivan, chief aeronautical officer with the Department of Transport & Power.

Hay, recently saved from the airport grounds, was placed underneath the temporary tracks to prevent them sinking in the mud. Debris was recovered over a wide area and including blankets, pillows, light bulbs and even a plastic apron.

Mayor of Limerick, Donogh

O'Malley, sent messages of condolence to the Dutch Embassy and the German, Swiss and Austrian Legations in Dublin: "On behalf of the citizens of Limerick, please convey to the relatives of your countrymen, who were victims of the tragic air disaster at Shannon Airport, our heartfelt sympathy." He also sent a message of sympathy to the airline. Similar messages were sent by the Limerick Harbour Commissioners.

At the time of the inquest into the deaths in the Conference Room of the Airport building on September 13, 1961, six of the

bodies had not yet been recovered. Medical evidence gave the cause of death in all cases as shock and haemorrhage consistent with involvement in an air crash. The medical evidence was unanimously accepted.

In the immediate aftermath of the crash, Shannon's fire station served as an emergency morgue. Limerick undertaker, Frank Thompson, was highly praised for the way in which he set about the grim task of procuring 83 zinc-lined, hermetically-sealed oak caskets and then embalming, coffining and repatriating the bodies. He went several

nights without sleep. It was said at the time that dealing with the certification to comply with transport regulations alone was a job in itself.

The Embassies and Airline also heaped praise on the Airport staff, rescue teams, medical teams, Board of Works workers and the many volunteers.

No one cause has been attributed to this disaster. Pilot error and fatigue, instrument failure and adverse weather conditions seem to have combined to bring about the deadliest air crash in Irish airspace. Long may it remain so.



Board of Works employees and volunteers laying a temporary railway line from the shoreline to the site of fatal crash at Shannon, 10 September 1961. The rails were used to trolley wreckage and debris from the site. The hay was placed beneath the rails to prevent them sinking in the mud



Frantic efforts to save the one woman who emerged alive but very seriously injured from the President Airlines crash at Shannon, 10 September 1961. Sadly this woman succumbed to her injuries shortly afterwards.



The sole survivor of the impact being rowed ashore by the rescue team. Sadly she died soon afterwards



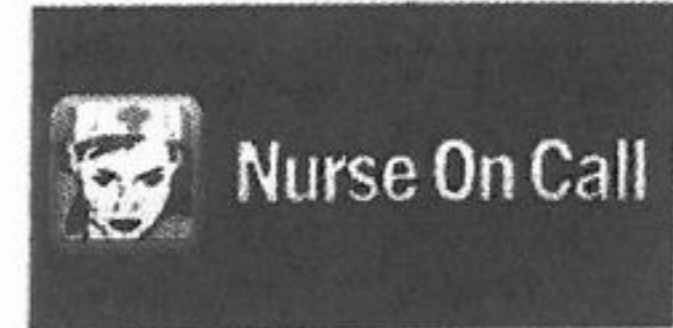
Bemused onlookers pictured at the airport as the rescue effort proceeded



Onlookers peer into the darkness at the rescue effort



Part of the rescue team in action on the Estuary



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