

SHANNON'S GREATEST AIR MYSTERY

BY MIKE ROYCROFT

Probably only a handful of people at Shannon Airport watched the routine take-off on a summer morning 35 years ago. As the navigation lights of one more US-bound plane faded into the western darkness, they turned to other things, unaware they had witnessed the beginning of a flight that was to end as one of the greatest air mysteries of the North Atlantic.

The late 1950s were still the years before the jet trails, before the Boeings left their tracery in the early morning blue skies over Limerick. It was still an era for the airports "in the middle of nowhere" - airports perched strategically at the edges of the North Atlantic to cater for the lumbering petrol-thirsty giants - as they seemed at the time - that had made the rapid crossing of two thousand miles of ocean a routine, if noisy, experience.

Buses leaving Limerick for "the Airport" still bore the name "Rineanna" as their destination - the place where, legend had it, Charles Lindbergh himself ordained that an airport should be raised. Many a house in Limerick still had the odd ration book and gas mask knocking about, reminders of the War while, 15 miles away on the tarmac, those mechanical souvenirs of World War Two, the Stratocruiser and the DC6, were vital components in Shannon's Golden Age.

But this era, soon to be threatened and ultimately ended by the arrival of the big jets, was also the brief hour of glory for what was arguably the most graceful of all propeller-driven commercial aircraft. With its stylishly-curved fuselage and distinctive, three-finned tail, the Lockheed Super-Constellation was just beginning to establish itself on the North Atlantic route and it was a familiar sight at most international airports.

Thus, few would have paid particular attention to the KLM Super-Constellation PH-LKM named Hugo de Groot when it landed at Shannon in the early hours of 14 August, 1958, from Schiphol, Amsterdam, with 85 passengers and 8 crew. While engineers carried out routine maintenance checks and the fuel tanks were topped up, 6 more passengers embarked for the onward hop to Gander, en route to New York.

At 4.05am., it took off again from runway 23. For approximately 40 minutes the flight proceeded normally and there were two routine radio exchanges with the airport. But then,

soon after leaving the Irish coast, some catastrophe, sudden, complete and to this day inexplicable, overtook the Hugo de Groot and all further attempts to contact it yielded only silence.

As long radio silences were far from rare in those less technically sophisticated times, no concern was felt at first. When five hours had elapsed, however, with no signal being received by either Gander or Shannon, a search and rescue operation was organised, involving planes and shipping. In the early afternoon the first bodies and twisted bits of wreckage were sighted 120 miles off the Clare coast. The search continued for a number of days but only 34 bodies in all were recovered, together with small pieces of debris, such as seat backs, ceiling panels and parts of the nose landing gear.

Nine days after the crash, a mass funeral of 22 of the victims took place in Galway.

There was naturally much immediate speculation as to the cause of the disaster and one of the first theories blamed an explosion. There were even rumours of one being heard along the coast but enquiries by the Gardai failed to find any witnesses.

As the accident had occurred outside Irish territorial waters, the enquiry into the crash was held in Holland, the home of KLM. It was an investigator's nightmare, having happened in apparently good weather, in mid flight, over water 7,000 feet deep, at normal cruising height and speed, with no survivors, eyewitnesses or distress signals. Nor was there at this time a "black box" to record aircraft performance or a cockpit voice recorder - vital aids in modern air crash enquiries.

What the Hugo de Groot examiners had were some small pieces of wreckage, the airliner's log book (found by a Spanish trawler weeks after the crash), autopsy reports on the 34 bodies and a file of past accidents to other Super-Constellations. Unlike today, there was then much less media pressure on enquiry boards to produce rapid results and soon the story of the accident naturally faded from the public consciousness.

It was three years later, in June, 1961, before the experts published their findings and by then Shannon had suffered other air disasters and the sorrow of 1958 was a receding memory. From airline records, the enquiry found that the Hugo de Groot (53 models of its

particular type of Super-Constellation were built) was fully airworthy and, in fact, it was almost new, having had less than 1,000 hours flying time, while its crew had been well qualified and experienced. The time of the disaster was fixed at about 5 minutes after the last radio contact with Shannon. The experts also determined that there had been no explosion. Collision with a guided missile or rocket - a possible cause of the as yet unexplained Aer Lingus Viscount tragedy off Wexford 10 years later - was ruled "out of the question".

Examination of the wreckage and the bodies suggested that all the passengers had been seated but were not wearing safety belts at the moment of impact and that the angle at which the aircraft struck the sea had not been very great.

They could not say, however, whether or not the plane had been intact when it plunged into the Atlantic. At the time of the accident many were puzzled by the absence of an S.O.S. signal. In the report, this was explained away with the scenario of all 5 cockpit crew members being too preoccupied trying to control the stricken plane.

In summing up, the panel of experts decided there was a "high degree of probability" that a unique series of defects had led to an engine over-speeding, with sudden and disastrous consequences. This was, however, merely a very educated guess and they conceded that such a catastrophic occurrence had never been reported in any airliner up to 1961.

Thus, the report concluded rightly that the cause of the accident remained "undetermined", a thought-provoking verdict that was somewhat overshadowed by the prominence given to the "over-speeding engine" theory.

There is little doubt that had the Hugo de Groot suddenly plunged into the sea in clear weather off the coast of Florida rather than Clare, its mysterious loss would surely be by now a further piece of evidence for the existence of the Bermuda Triangle.

Today, the wreckage holding the solution to what really happened that morning 35 years ago lies at the bottom of the sea off our continental shelf.

In a Galway cemetery, a stark monument standing watch over 2 rows of graves commemorates the name of the Hugo de Groot and the memory of those who died in Ireland's greatest mystery of the air.

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