

83 Die in Shannon's Worst Disaster

Charter Plane Plunged Into Sea and Mud Near Runways' End

The big jets, roaring westward out of Shannon Airport on Sunday and Monday, flew over a scene of horror on the mudflats about a mile from the end of the runway. There, on the mud and water, rescue workers toiled against the incoming tide to bring eighty three bodies ashore from a wrecked airline.

The airliner, a DC6 of President Air Lines of California, had made a refuelling stop at Shannon and took off in fog and darkness at 3.53am on Sunday. After it had cleared the runway, it crashed into ten feet of water and mud in the Fergus Estuary. It was the worst disaster in Shannon's history.

On board the charter aircraft were 77 passengers, mainly German and Austrian farmers and their wives, on a visit arranged between German and American agricultural machinery firms. They had flown from Dusseldorf in Germany and were bound for Chicago, via Gander and New York.

Assistants in the Shannon Free Airport shops and other workers told of the happy group which had come into the lounge when the plane landed. Another President airliner had been held up in Shannon with mechanical trouble and the passengers, students of Cornell University, talked with the ill-fated travellers. Some agreed willingly to phone relatives of the students in America telling them that all was well and that they would be home soon.

Then the four-engine plane taxied off to the end of the two mile jet runway. Reports said that people at Shannon remarked on the unfamiliar raucous sounds made by the engine of the plane shortly after it had become airborne. Within a short time of leaving the runway, two loud bangs were heard followed by sirens. The position of the plane as it lay on its belly in the thick mud indicated that the pilot was almost to swing to the left. It was thought that he was about to turn back to the airport two miles away.

Rescue launches were quickly on the scene and one girl was picked up. She was alive, but very badly injured. Mr. Ralph Parkes, one of the rescue squad, gave her some brandy and said an Act of Contrition in her ear. He told reporters later that she seemed to understand what he was saying. Despite heroic work by three doctors, she died three hours later.

Alson on the scene were Rev. T. Comerford, CC, Rev. D. Woods CC and Rev. P. Cloonan, CC all of Newmarket-on-Fergus. Father Comerford said that the scene was "just desolation". He said there was little they could do as there appeared to be no sign of life near the wreck.

All day long on Sunday, the launches made their sad journeys to the airliner. It was a slow process, as progress was made difficult by the thick, glue-like mud. The bodies were brought from the scene to a boat-house about a mile away and then conveyed by ambulance to the Fire Brigade Station, which had been converted into a temporary morgue.

The Gardai, under Supt. J. McDonagh, Ennis, cordoned off the area around the wreckage to stop sightseers from hampering with the rescue operations.

In all, sixty-three bodies had been recovered when the search had to be abandoned on Sunday night. This included one washed up on the coast at Kildysart. Later, two other bodies were recovered on the Kildysart side.

In the aircraft were 66 Germans, 7 Austrians, two Swiss and two Dutch. The pilot, co-pilot, navigator and engineer were all Americans. The two hostesses were Europeans, one from Helsinki and the other from Linz.

Rescue workers resumed operations on Monday. The workers included many local people as well as members of the Red Cross in Clare. Mr. Frank Glynn, Area Director of the Red Cross, paid tribute to his fellow workers and the members of the Red Cross. "In spite of the gruesome tasks they had to go through, they have all been wonderful", he said.

On Sunday afternoon, Bishop H. Stanistreet, Protestant Bishop of Killaloe, and the Very Rev. Edwin Owen, Dean of Killaloe, called to the Airport and expressed their regret to the Airport Management.

The Chairman of Ennis Urban Council, Mr. D.P. Honan, has sent messages of sympathy to the German and American Embassies.