

## **Shannon Inquest on 77 Air crash Victims**

“The cause of the accident is a matter completely for a Commission of Inquiry, who will investigate the crash and will be in a better position to judge what the cause was. Let us hope when the cause is discovered that we will be able to have it prevented on future occasions and so help to make air travelling safer than it is now”, said Mr. M.J. Walshe, State Solicitor, when he addressed the jury in the inquest on 77 of the victims of Sunday’s air-crash at Shannon Airport.

The inquest was held by Dr. T.E. O’Connor, Coroner for East Clare, at the airport on Wednesday, and after hearing the evidence of several witnesses it was adjourned.

The crash, in which the entire crew and passengers lost their lives, occurred in a place called the Silver Strand, which is about two miles from the airport, early on Sunday morning when a chartered DC6 airliner, belonging to President Airlines, plunged into the muddy reaches of the Shannon Estuary immediately after taking off for Chicago. 83 people died in the tragedy. They were on their way from Dusseldorf and their nationalities were American, German, Swiss, Austrian and Finnish.

At the outset, Mr. Walshe said the crash was an unfortunate and appalling tragedy. He pointed out to the jury members that the inquiry was a public one and they could ask any question they liked and would not be restricted in their scope of inquiries. He then went on to outline the history of the fatal flight from Dusseldorf and said that the Douglas aircraft was on a chartered flight bringing a number of people from Germany to the USA. It had been organised by a German steel company and the people on board were mostly agriculturalists. When the aeroplane landed at Shannon on Saturday night, there were 76 passengers on board and a crew of six. A new crew, again of six, then took charge and the passengers complement was increased when another passenger joined the plane. The aircraft arrived at Shannon at 9.50 pm on Saturday and left at 3.51am on Sunday. The crash occurred about a minute and a half after the take-off and the aircraft came down in the Shannon Estuary, about two miles from the airport “as the crow flies”.

### **EVERYTHING POSSIBLE**

Mr. Walshe continued, “Up to date, the bodies of 71 passengers and the six crew members have been recovered, leaving six more to be found. Four bodies were found floating the in the estuary, some distance from the actual scene of the crash, while a girl was found standing in three or four feet of mud and water soon after the alert had been sounded. Everything possible was done for her but unfortunately, the doctors could not save her life.”

Concluding, he stated that the remains of the six crew members and fifty passengers had been identified and there were twenty-one bodied unidentified.

John O’Loughlin, clearance officer at the air junction, told the jury that at 9.50pm on Saturday, the Douglas aircraft touched down at Shannon and it had been cleared for landing.

James Geoghegan, control officer, said he was in the control tower on Sunday morning and the pilot of the ill-fated plane requested permission to take off at 3.31am and after making arrangements, witness cleared the plane for take-off at 3.42am, but as there was other traffic involved he amended that time to 3.46am. Visibility from the tower was poor and at no time was the plane visible to witness. Witness told the pilot to taxi along the old runway and the control

officer increased the brilliance of the runway lights to 60%. At 3.51am the pilot told him that he was “rolling” and after that he was judging the plane’s progress on the sound of the engines. He heard the sound of the engines decrease about a minute or a minute and a half after take-off and then heard a much louder sound as the engines’ noises increased and decreased. Those sounds continued for about four or five seconds after which he heard “a dull thud”. Witness had instructed the pilot to take a right-hand turn after take-off, but he judged the sound of the crash to be coming from the left of the runway and the control officer assumed that the pilot had taken a left hand turn. Witness immediately sounded the crash siren and told the rescue service to search the estuary. He called the plane twice as a matter of routine and got no reply. Up to the time of the dull thud, everything regarding the plane’s progress had been normal.

Patrick A. Connolly, control assistant was also in the tower and said the aircraft took off at 3.52am. After that, he heard the sound of the engines decrease and they seemed to increase for a period of about five or six seconds. He then heard the crash.

Jeremiah O’Leary, security officer, said he was in bed when he heard the siren. On getting up, he looked out of the window but could see nothing. He, with several other men, went out into the estuary in a launch and saw the plane in the water. They had a searchlight operating all the time and they saw a person near the plane who was waving at them. It was a girl and they brought her onto the launch. After carrying out another search around the plane they went back to the airport with her. Before going back, they shone lights on the plane and saw nothing. “It was obvious” said witness “that there was no life there at all”. On leaving the girl at the airport, witness with other rescue workers returned to the scene and picked up two bodies that were floating in the water and saw personal items of the passengers floating around. They smashed the port windows of the aircraft but saw nothing but debris within.

John J. Ransowe, Aer Lingus traffic supervisor, gave evidence of receiving a list of 76 passengers who were on the aircraft when it touched down at Shannon Airport. He was aware that another passenger boarded the plane later.

Leonard Pettit, representative of the steel company that organised the flight, also gave evidence regarding the passenger list.

Detective Garda J. P. Cafferkey, Ennis, told the inquest that he assisted in the recovery of the bodies and added that 77 bodies were in the temporary morgue at the airport. He examined the remains and their clothing and helped to identify the six crew members and fifty passengers.

Michael Devane, representative of President Airlines, at the airport, said he also helped to identify the remains of the crew, whom he had known personally, and some of the passengers.

Dr. Wm. Flynn, airport medical officer stated that he was alerted on Sunday morning. He examined the body of the girl who had been taken from the water. He went to the launch at the jetty and saw the girl lying on a couch on the launch. It was dark but with the aid of flashlights he saw that she had received a very severe injury to the right side of her head and had extensive injuries to her legs. She was not conscious when witness saw her. Her general condition was very poor and he gave her some morphine. He then dressed her wounds and had her removed to the airport hospital. There she was received by three doctors who gave her a blood transfusion, treated her wounds and her condition improved. After about an hour, it was felt that she was well enough to be removed to a hospital and while arrangements were being made towards that end, the girl suddenly died.

## GROSS INJURIES

Dr. Flynn continued that he carried out post mortem examinations on 45 bodies recovered from the crash. The injuries were very, very severe and in many cases, the body was fragmented. In others, the lower part of the body was divided completely from the upper, while there were some bodies where the head had been completely destroyed or was absent altogether. On many occasions, he saw that the chest had been crushed. In many cases, there were multiple fractures in the upper limbs and in a lesser number of cases multiple fractures in the lower limbs. A small number of bodies were not so grossly injured but all had some injuries which would account for death. Dr. Flynn had no doubt that the cause of death was the initial shock due to the gross injuries received.

Dr. P.J. Walsh, Newmarket-on-Fergus, told the inquest that he carried out 32 post mortem examinations on the victims of the disaster. He said his evidence was similar to that given by Dr. Flynn. He added that he also attended to the girl in the airport hospital and all that could have been done for her was done.

In answer to Mr. J.G. Lyons, Solicitor, appearing for the next of kin and the German Embassy, witness said the deaths of the pilot and co-pilot of the plane were due to multiple injuries.

The Coroner stated that in view of the fact that there were still six bodies missing, there was no point in closing the inquest at that stage.

Mr. Walshe said that if they were recovered before the official inquiry into the crash was completed; the coroner may call another inquest.

The jury unanimously agreed to accept the medical evidence presented and the inquest was adjourned.

The Coroner, jury, foreman, Mr. John McNamara, Mr. Walshe, Supt. J. McDonagh, Ennis, Mr. M.B. O'Malley, Solicitor, appearing for President Airlines, representatives of the Dept. of Transport and Power, and President Airlines, offered their sympathy to the relatives of deceased. The airline representative stated that this company was making arrangements to fly the remains of deceased to their respective countries later this week.

A representative of the German Embassy thanked everyone for their sympathy and paid tribute to the rescue workers and staff of the airport for their endeavours to save the passengers and crew of the plane.

A number of the bereaved relatives were present at the inquest.