

JUNE 30, 1956

JUST DAYS BEFORE AMERICA'S 180TH BIRTHDAY, TWO PASSENGER JETS, A DOUGLAS DC-7 OPERATED BY UNITED AND A LOCKHEED L-1049 SUPER CONSTELLATION OPERATED BY TWA, COLLIDED OVER GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK. AT THE TIME, IT WAS THE DEADLIEST COMMERCIAL AVIATION ACCIDENT IN HISTORY. THIS MONTH MARKS THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THAT DISASTER, AND RECENTLY, THE CRASH SITE WAS DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK.

BY ANNETTE MCGIVNEY ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK SMITH

AS RAY COOK HEADED HOME ON SATURDAY EVENING, June 30, 1956, after playing baseball with a friend, he thought the only thing he had to worry about was explaining to his father how he'd gotten a large knot on his head. He had attempted to hit a basketball with a baseball bat, and the bat had rebounded against his forehead. His father was due home from a business trip that day, and Cook mulled what he would say to him. But as Cook, then 12, arrived at his house in suburban Detroit, he found it crowded with people, and members of the media had begun to convene on his front lawn.

"They told me Dad's plane was missing," he recalls nearly 60 years later. "And they told me not to touch the phone, because there was an open line to United Airlines representatives who were keeping us informed of any news."

United Flight 718 had left Los Angeles for Chicago, with a final destination of Newark, New Jersey, at 9:04 that morning, carrying Cook's father — Leon David Cook Jr., a chemical engineer — and 57 other passengers and crew. While the Cook family received no news about the United flight that night, they did get word that the wreckage of a second missing plane had been discovered at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. It was Trans World Airlines Flight 2, carrying 70 passengers

and crew, and it had also taken off from Los Angeles that day, at 9:01 a.m., en route to Kansas City, Missouri.

“When I went to bed, I kind of knew Dad had perished,” Cook says, as his voice quavers. “But I had a dream that night, and I would have it for many years. Dad would appear on the rim of the Grand Canyon, dirty and unshaven, after hiking out because the rescuers didn’t find him. He would exclaim: ‘I’m here! I’m alive!’”

The same day, in New Jersey, Ray Lasby’s family was making preparations to greet him after he had been away on a week-long business trip in California. He, too, was an engineer, and the family had just purchased its first house. “I was only 4,” Kathy Lasby Natale recalls in an oral history recorded in 2014. “We were so excited he was coming home. I remember dressing up, putting on a new dress and a hat. We were so excited. We were on our way to the airport, and Mom had the radio on, and all of a sudden she got quiet and she started to cry. She said to my brother, who was 9, ‘Did you hear the flight? Did you hear what they said?’ and he said, ‘No, I didn’t hear it,’ and she started to cry. She cried the rest of the way to the airport.”

When the Lasbys arrived at the gate for United 718, “there was no one at the gate,” Natale says. “A couple of men came out and walked over to [Mom] and started talking to her, and she started crying.” Another woman came over to Natale and her brother and escorted them out of the room. “I don’t remember much else about that day,” Natale says. “It was just a blur.”

The next day, the wreckage from the United plane also was located at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. In the weeks that followed, a federal investigation found that the two planes had collided at 21,000 feet in unregulated airspace, presumably as the pilots were giving their passengers a spectacular bird’s-eye view of one of the world’s natural wonders. All 128 passengers and crew died, and despite a monumental recovery effort, the remains of most of those on board could not be identified.

“The planes had both taken a detour and were doing what was called ‘flight-seeing’ over the Canyon,” says Wayne Ranney, president of the Grand Canyon Historical Society. “The Grand Canyon loomed large in the American public’s consciousness back then. And these planes had just disappeared into that vast wilderness.”

At that time, the midair collision of the United plane, a Douglas DC-7, and the TWA craft, a Lockheed L-1049 Super Constellation, was the deadliest commercial aviation accident in history. According to Ranney, it brought to light the need for better organization of the country’s airspace. Just one year after the disaster, President Dwight Eisenhower signed into law the Airways Modernization Act, which laid the foundation for the creation of the Federal Aviation Administration and the centralized air traffic control system in use today.

For the families of the crash victims, though, little was done to address the pain and financial hardship they would experience for decades. “I think there is an absence of awareness about the impact that a disaster, especially a national disaster like this one, can have on the families of the victims,” Cook says. “There is the initial shock and a big hoopla in the press, and then the event drops out of the spotlight. Long after the public has forgotten about it, the families continue to be impacted over time — over generations, even. That is the real tragedy.”

While Grand Canyon National Park immediately attended to the physical cleanup of the accident and the federal government promptly took steps to prevent another such collision, only in the past decade has the park reached out to victims’ families to bring healing and closure. It’s what Ranney describes as “the emotional cleanup that is long overdue.”

“We didn’t talk about our feelings back then,” Cook says. “I remember, not long after Dad died, I was playing in a baseball game and standing out in left field. I felt this terrible wrenching in my gut over knowing I would never see Dad again. It hurt so bad. But I kept playing. Life just went on.”

Five decades later, while attending a memorial event at the park, Cook finally allowed himself to cry. He was at the common grave of the United victims in the Grand Canyon cemetery (the TWA victims were buried in Flagstaff) and was telling Ranney about his father. “I had never been emotional over the crash,” Cook says. “But for the first time in 50 years, it got to me.”

IN THE DECADE AFTER World War II ended, the number of commercial airline passengers in the United States skyrocketed. In 1956, more Americans were traveling by plane than by train, and each of the four major airlines (American, Eastern, United and TWA) was bigger than the entire industry had been a decade before. But the federal aviation system was ill-equipped to monitor the rapid increase in air traffic. While radio controllers at airports guided pilots during takeoff and landing, the airspace over much of the U.S. was unmonitored, and pilots simply navigated by sight to avoid other aircraft.

On June 30, 1956, the United and TWA flights veered slightly north from their established flight plans — a common practice in unregulated airspace. As the two planes approached the Grand Canyon, the TWA pilot, Jack Gandy, increased his plane’s altitude by 1,000 feet to avoid storm turbulence. This put the TWA plane at the same altitude as the United aircraft, and, probably due to clouds in the area, the pilots did not see each other until it was too late. The planes collided and broke apart as they fell to the ground. While debris was scattered over some 1,000 acres in Grand Canyon National Park, the plane impact sites were both just below the confluence of the Colorado and Little Colorado rivers, in one of the most inaccessible areas of the park.

Over a period of weeks, in temperatures that reached 120 degrees in the Canyon’s inner gorge, Grand Canyon rangers and U.S. Air Force members embarked on a massive recovery effort to retrieve human remains, possessions and plane wreckage that would help investigators deduce how the disaster happened. Grand Canyon Village became a media circus as journalists from across the country waited to report news or gruesome details about the unfolding tragedy. “We found a baby’s body lying across the arm of a woman,” one recovery worker told the *Arizona Daily Sun* in a July 4, 1956, article. “We found a toy boat that wasn’t even scratched. Costume jewelry and articles of clothing were strewn about. ... None of the bodies were thrown very far from the wreckage.”

In a bizarre twist, 148 airmail letters from the TWA cargo hold were recovered undamaged and returned to the U.S. Postal Service so they could be delivered. Climbers from the Colorado Mountain Club and a Swiss mountain rescue group were

brought in to reach ledges atop sheer cliffs where parts of the United plane were scattered. In all, 76 helicopter flights were conducted to and from the crash sites in what remains one of the most dangerous and extensive disaster recovery operations in National Park Service history.

Meanwhile, Cook’s mother, Dorothy, was falling apart. “Two men from United came to the house and told my mother that my father’s body could not be identified and any remains would be buried in a grave at Grand Canyon cemetery,” Cook recalls. “And my mother just utterly collapsed. It was horrific to see somebody that devastated. She cursed my father for leaving her with three children to raise by herself.”

Cook’s mother asked him to go to boarding school to ease her parenting load, and he reluctantly agreed. Nothing was the same after that. “At age 12, I didn’t just lose my father; I lost my whole family,” he says. An out-of-court settlement with United brought some money to the family but didn’t come close to replacing the lost salary of the family breadwinner. After the accident, Cook’s mother started drinking heavily and would continue drinking until her death in 1971, when she was intoxicated and drove over an embankment. Cook’s brother, also an alcoholic, committed suicide in 1978. Cook joined the Marines at age 18 and served in Vietnam. He, too, struggled with alcohol, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder, until he stopped drinking at age 45.

Ray Lasby’s family fared somewhat better, but the tragedy weighed on them, too. After the accident, Lasby’s widow took her two children from the family’s dream home in New Jersey to live in Colorado, near her parents. “Mom was seven months pregnant with my sister” at the time of the crash, Natale recalls. “I think that’s what made her survive. ... That baby was what pulled her together.” A newly single mother of three, she supported the family with a flight-insurance payout and a modest out-of-court settlement from United. When the money ran out, she went back to work in her mid-50s and continued to work until she was 72.

“[Dad] was the only one for her,” Natale says. “Taking care of us, she was strong, but there were countless, countless nights when we would hear her sobbing from her loneliness and her heartbreak.”

JUNE 2006 WAS the 50th anniversary of the collision, and Cook, who now lives in Phoenix, and his wife, Christa, decided to go to the cemetery at Grand Canyon National Park. They stumbled upon a Grand Canyon Association presentation at Shrine of the Ages, next door to the cemetery, that was commemorating the tragedy. For the first time in his life, Cook talked to park staff, as well as the children of other victims, about how the accident had impacted his family. “It was cathartic,” he says. “I learned that other people had a similar



story to mine.”

Park staff also realized at the 2006 event that there was more the park could be doing to protect the crash sites, better educate the public about the significance of the tragedy and facilitate closure for family members who were still grieving, even after five decades. “We asked, ‘What can we do to give the accident sites proper recognition, and also to honor the victims’ families?’” says Ian Hough, a Park Service archaeologist.

From those goals came a proposal to nominate the site as a National Historic Landmark. Hough and others spent eight years completing the application process, and the proposal was approved in 2014. The

landmark, which Hough describes as a “mass grave,” encompasses a remote area on both sides of the Colorado River and includes both plane impact sites and the surrounding debris fields. The artifacts in the landmark are protected under federal laws and park regulations, and to prevent pillaging and preserve the site, the boundaries are not disclosed to the general public.

Along with the designation, an interpretive display and a monument were installed near the Canyon’s Desert View Watchtower. The display, on the lip of the South Rim, encourages visitors to reflect on the accident and look out over the airspace where the collision occurred. A map points to the impact sites near Chuar Butte and Temple Butte, and photos of personal items retrieved, including a key and lock, remind visitors of the lives affected by the disaster.

On June 30, 2014, the 58th anniversary of the accident, the Park Service held a reception to celebrate the landmark designation and allow victims’ families to meet each other, share stories and lay a wreath at the common grave. About 50 children of the victims and their extended family members attended.

“A lot of these people had avoided coming to the Grand Canyon their entire lives,” Ranney says. “But even if they didn’t realize it before, when they got to the event, they discovered they had been longing for closure. And after 58 years, many of them finally got it.”

Cook met Natale and the son of Gandy, the TWA pilot. The latter “apologized to me for his father’s decision to go to that higher altitude,” Cook says, choking back tears.

As for the recurring dream of Cook’s father hiking out of the Grand Canyon, it rarely happens anymore. “I have put that behind me now,” Cook says. “But that dream helped me get through all those years growing up when I was a mess. It was like I was able to talk to my dad, and that gave me comfort. It helped me to believe there is more to this world than we know.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: This month, Grand Canyon National Park is commemorating the 60th anniversary of the crash, but details had not been finalized at press time. For more information, call the park at 928-638-7888 or visit www.nps.gov/grca. 