

## Flight 232: A Story of Disaster and Survival

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the Oneida, like many other Native peoples, have shown the ability to thrive in new environments, and they will carry that resourcefulness into the twenty-first century.

*Flight 232: A Story of Disaster and Survival*, by Laurence Gonzales. New York: W. W. Norton, 2014. ix, 415 pp. Illustrations, notes on sources, list of interviews, notes, index. \$27.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Frank Durham is associate professor in the University of Iowa's School of Journalism and Mass Communication. His research and writing have focused on critical analyses of media framing processes, including news coverage of the failed attempt to frame the cause of the crash of TWA Flight 800 in July 1996.

When United Airlines Flight 232 made an emergency crash landing at the Sioux City, Iowa, airport, on July 19, 1989, the DC-10 had lost its steering when its tail engine exploded. En route from Denver to Chicago, it had sustained irreparable damage to its hydraulic steering system, making a crash inevitable. In heroic fashion, the plane's pilot, Alfred C. Haynes, and a passenger who was a licensed DC-10 instructor muscled the plane down, using the throttle to control the rudderless plane. Amazingly, 185 of the 296 people on board survived the massive, fiery crash.

The challenge for author Laurence Gonzales in telling this tale of heroism, loss, and survival was how to narrate such a traumatic event that lasted such a brief time. He settled on an organizing device that works quite well by alternating eyewitness accounts of the moments leading up to, during, and after the horrific crash with a more linear analysis of the forensic analysis of the plane's mechanical failure. An effect of this two-part approach—which carries through nearly each of the book's 24 chapters—is to take the reader to the center of the trauma over and over again in the words of survivors, only to relieve the stress of those vivid accounts with discussions of how and why the titanium in the lost engine failed and why the McDonnell-Douglas design for the DC-10 was flawed.

The effect of this rhythm is to produce a story that is at once informative and compelling without ever resorting to melodrama. In the personally focused vignettes of life on the doomed plane, we are given a sense that every witness's account is being heard and that every victim's last moments are being accounted for in a dignified and meaningful way. In this mix, the science of metallurgy and engineering is explained in plain language, but in a way that unwinds the detective work needed to explain the miniscule but fatal flaw that led to this massive plane's destruction. Achieving a tale of this scope and depth in such readable

form is a great accomplishment for Gonzales, a nationally acclaimed magazine journalist who has written about aviation for years.

A key organizing theme that Gonzales develops to unify more than 400 pages is just how unlikely jet flight is at all. Apart from detailing the mysteries of the jet engine, which he does without ruining the allure of that question, he develops this point about technology within his dual personal-technological narrative to explain the humanity of the disaster. And he does this in a way that draws readers in by allowing them to identify with the innocence of everyone on Flight 232 that day 25 years ago.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens explains this trusting effect in terms of our faith in "expert systems," which "bracket time and space through deploying modes of technical knowledge, which have validity independent of the practitioners and clients who make use of them. Such systems penetrate virtually all aspects of social life." And, he concludes, we trust them implicitly. (*The Giddens Reader*, ed. Philip Casell [1993], 292-93.) As Laurence Gonzales tells us, that kind of unblinking faith in things we don't understand is how humans believe we can fly. And in this book, he shows us that it is how we sometimes survive, as well.