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Before Their Eyes

Witnesses detail the last moments of doomed Flight 587

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The diner owner, the sales manager, the contractor, the teacher and the publisher share one common experience: They saw American Airlines Flight 587 on its final, ghastly dive into the ground.

They saw the plane for different spans of time, from different angles: a diner overlooking Jamaica Bay, a nature trail in Marine Park, a parking lot, the Rockaway Beach boardwalk and the window of a private home.

Because it occurred on a clear day over a heavily populated area, the Nov. 12 Belle Harbor crash brought federal and local investigators a large number of detailed witness accounts. For example, a detective said that on the first day, he had 60 accounts. The National Transportation Safety Board has interviewed about 40 eyewitnesses, but investigators tend to favor flight data over such accounts, believing that people tend to embellish their memories based on news reports or conversations with others.

Federal investigators, who say they can't explain why the plane's tail section came off, are probing whether the crash may be linked to wake turbulence from a jet that took off before Flight 587. Investigators say they do not believe engine problems are to blame for the crash, which killed all 260 people on board and five on the ground.

While details differed, four of five witnesses who spoke with Newsday said the plane appeared to be shaking or fishtailing from side to side in the air.

"Everybody has a little different view, because everybody had a different angle," said Susan Locke, a witness and publisher of Rockaway's 108-year-old weekly newspaper, The Wave.

John Power, a sales manager, was walking with his wife on a nature trail in Marine Park when he saw the plane coming across his field of vision. "The nose is up, the right wing is up and there's smoke and fire coming out of the right engine," he said. "It is struggling to make the left turn. It's sliding like a car across the ice."

The plane arced past him with its underbelly visible. "It was almost floating in the sky. It had no thrust. It was like it was trying to get out of a wind tunnel." The nose pointed higher until it was almost vertical, then the plane rolled once, came to a horizontal position and spun four times. "It was the most ferocious spin I've ever seen," Power said.

The plane was still intact, Power said. The jet then stopped, appearing to stall nose up, and fell tail first. He said it spun again and threw off a "large rectangular piece," probably the tail section, drifted down, bounced or jerked, flipped nose first and hit the ground. "There had to be some kind of external force on it," Power said. "Having seen something like that, it makes you scared and angry that this could happen, that you knew those people were going to die."



Newsday Photo / Mayita Mendez

As he watched the jet's engines fall off, diner owner Kenny Good said he thought, "It looked like a plane dropping a bomb."

Steve Kotansky, a Chestnut Ridge, N.Y., private school teacher, was in the Rockaways to give a Hungarian exchange student her first look at the ocean. They reached the boardwalk and noticed the plane to the west as it still was ascending. "It was sort of fishtailing," he said. "Almost as if it was rudderless. It was shaking in a way that it didn't look like it had much control. The tail flew off, and a long thin piece of something. They fell like an autumn leaf."

The plane began to plunge. Kotansky said he saw something near one wing ignite and black smoke.

"At this point, it was headed to the ground at about a 75-degree angle," he said. "And we said, 'Oh my God.' Then there was a huge plume of smoke."

Kenny Good, 34, owner of the Rockaway Sunset Diner, was eating breakfast when he heard a crackling noise. He said he looked west and saw the plane climbing. Then, Good said, the right engine dropped off. The plane tipped to the left side and that engine fell as well, he recalled.

"It looked like a plane dropping a bomb; that's what I thought it was," Good said.

Contractor Scott Woody was in the parking lot of the Waldbaum's at Beach 113th Street and Beach Channel Drive in Rockaway Park when he heard a loud bang "like an explosion."

"The left engine is on fire," he said. "Behind the plane is the tail falling down. The plane still appeared stable. After several seconds, the left engine came off."

Woody said the right wing tilted down and left wing "flipped up high," and the nose immediately pointed straight down. There were three descending spirals then, and the plane struck the ground.

The first thing Locke heard was a rumbling sound. She rushed to the window and saw the plane "come down like a bullet," she said. "It was noise like an engine in trouble, or I thought maybe it was a military plane going overhead," she said. "My house shook. By the time I was at the window, it was just about on the ground."

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