

Hundreds of unsuspecting people were gathered at an abandoned runway when an airplane that had run out of fuel suddenly began to plummet, heading in their direction...

# Five Seconds From Disaster



- Chaim Rivkin

*It's never fun to run out of gas. But it's a lot less pleasant when you're 41,000 feet above the ground... at the controls of a jumbo jet carrying passengers... with hundreds more people looking up at you in horror from the ground directly below.*

*Read the incredible story of Air Canada Flight 143.*

Strange beeps and alarms begin to sound suddenly in the control cabin of Air Canada Flight 143. "Oh no," Captain Bob Pearson says under his breath.

The alarm is accompanied by a yellow-orange warning light flashing on and off ominously displaying the words "low fuel pressure."

Maurice Quintal, co-pilot on the Boeing

767, stares at the light as he tries to figure out what has triggered the warning. "Something with the fuel pumps," he finally says out loud.

Captain Pearson takes out his instruction manual and



begins flipping pages in search of an explanation for this particular warning. Finally, he lets out a sigh of relief. The situation is not as bad as he first feared.

The fuel pump in the tank under the left wing is suffering from some sort of mechanical malfunction. Fortunately, gravity will guarantee that the engine continues to receive a steady supply of fuel even if the pump fails entirely.

"You know," Pearson comments to Quintal, "I wouldn't take the air..." but before he finishes his sentence a new alarm sounds. And then another. Now an entire bank of warning lights is flashing on the control panel.

"Oh no!" Pearson lets out an exclamation. "We're going to have to head for Winnipeg immediately."

## Mechanical Problems

Although this was not the first time the pilot and co-pilot had to deal with unexpected warnings in mid-flight, it was clear that this time the matter was of utmost seriousness. When Pearson and Quintal had arrived at work earlier that day, July 23, 1983, they were informed that the fuel gauges were not functioning properly due to a problem with the Fuel Quantity Indicator System (FQIS), which is used, as its name signifies, to measure the level of fuel in the airplane's fuel tanks.

Rather than cancel the flight, Captain Pearson ordered the mechanics to check the tanks manually to see how much fuel the tanks were holding. This Boeing 767 had only been in service for four months and it used new technology that came with new problems. There had been plenty of grumbling about the many issues with the new FQIS. The mechanics stuffed measuring rods into the fuel tanks and concluded that there was enough fuel in the tanks to make the flight safely.

The day before, the aircraft had flown from Toronto to

Edmonton, where it underwent a routine check, and from there it flew on to Montreal. With a new crew led by pilots Pearson and Quintal, the plane took off from Montreal at 5:48 PM with 61 passengers on board on its way back to Edmonton. At 6:58, they made a brief stopover in Ottawa where the engineers again checked the fuel tanks just to be safe, and again the conclusion was that the airplane would be fine.

Now it was just past 8 PM and they were flying over Ontario's Red Lake. The jumbo jet was cruising at an air speed of 539 MPH and an altitude of 41,000 feet, and it was just about halfway along the 1,768 mile route from Montreal to its destination in Edmonton.

The passengers were finishing their supper. The brilliant hues of the evening summer sky were making their appearance on the horizon as the plane headed west into the setting sun. The flight attendants were busy distributing drinks and collecting the remains of the dinners they had served not long before. That's when the control panel lit up with warning lights, and a confusing array of beeps and alarms sounded.

## A Flying Brick

According to the flight computer, there was still more than enough fuel in the tanks to make it to their destination, but several of the fuel pumps were indicating that they were experiencing low pressure problems. Rather than take a chance with their control panel telling them that everything was going haywire, the crew decided to request permission to make an emergency landing in nearby Winnipeg.

"Air Canada Flight 143, you have



Captain Robert Pearson.

permission to divert toward Winnipeg," came the response from the air flight controllers in Winnipeg International Airport's control tower. "You will use Runway 31. You are approved to maintain an altitude of 6,000 feet." Pearson and Quintal quickly programmed the new information into their flight computer.

"Air Canada Flight 143, do you need help?" the controllers asked. Of course, for an airplane 40,000 feet above ground, "help" can only be a tactful euphemism for a welcoming committee of fire engines and ambulances.

"At the moment, it does not appear that we will need help," Pearson replied.

Meanwhile, Pearson's flight engineer tried to take stock of their situation. "We have nothing left in the central tank, right?"

"No. We ran the pumps," Pearson responded, referring to an earlier attempt to transfer fuel from another tank. "Let's try turning them on again." Within moments, several more warning lights snapped on in rapid succession.

"Oh no!" Quintal called out in dismay. "They're all out?! What happened to...?"

"All the lights are on," Pearson observed while the "low fuel pressure" warnings continued to flash their urgent message. The captain called the head flight attendant to the cabin and informed him that they were experiencing mechanical difficulty. Within a few minutes, though, this information was rendered obsolete when the flight computer emitted an ear-splitting "BONG!!!" which neither of them could recall hearing before.

"Ok," Captain Pearson said slowly as he carefully sized up his control panel. "Our left engine has died."

It was becoming clear that their problem was not with the equipment or indicators but that they were running low on fuel. The pilots began preparations for a delicate-but-very-doable single-engine landing, and Quintal contacted Winnipeg tower to request the previously offered "assistance."

Following two minutes of uneventful descent, the ever-present vibrations in the deck were disrupted by an almost

imperceptible shudder, and the hum of the remaining jet engine faded away with a long and melancholy mechanical sigh. The gauges and monitors of the control panel—which had been so animated with anxiety mere moments before—fell dark. An unsettling silence hung heavy in the air.

"How come I have no instruments?" Captain Pearson wondered aloud, though the answer lingered mockingly in the cockpit's uncharacteristic quiet.



A Boeing 767 refuels.



Interior of the cabin of a 767.