

By H. G. Bissinger

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April 3, 1979

9:35 a.m.

Los Angeles International Airport

The truth was, flying commercial could be boring work. The old philosophy among pilots, starting in the days when the DC-3 was the biggest thing going, was that you didn't really get paid for all the times you flew without a hitch, but for the one time out of a thousand when everything went to hell and you still brought the airplane in. That was the test of skill, and the reason for all the other paychecks.

After 16 years of piloting for Trans World Airlines, 44-year-old Hoot Gibson didn't find his work particularly creative. Or daring. Or exhilarating. After spending 15,709 hours of flight time in the confining cockpits of 727s, DC-9s, and 747s as a flight engineer, co-pilot and captain, things were bound to become as familiar as the boring drone of a jet engine.

Gibson's excitement came when he left the lumbering commercial birds behind and climbed alone into his own planes to do acrobatic stunts and punch in and out of canyon crevices and clouds.

That kind of airmanship was more in line with his machismo reputation, which, whether it was merited or not, had become the subject of shop talk in TWA hangars and cockpits.

But whatever tidbits circulated about Hoot Gibson's lifestyle, his commercial flying abilities were difficult to fault. In the parlance of his peers, he carried a simple tag: he was a "good airman." He confined his colorful ways to the ground, not the skies.

The April 3 flight package he had drawn was hardly the stuff of glamour, taking him out of Los Angeles at 9:35 a.m. on a hop-skip-and-jump tour to Phoenix, Wichita, Kansas City, Chicago and finally Columbus, Ohio. Once there, Gibson and the other two members of his crew, first officer Scott Kennedy and flight engineer Gary Banks, bedded down for the night in a hotel.

The crew, which had never worked together before, got about eight hours sleep. The next day — April 4 — they left about 3 p.m. for New York's Kennedy Airport.

There was about a two-hour layover at Kennedy as they changed equipment — to Boeing 727-100 aircraft No. N840TW — and prepared for their final hop of the evening.

The plane was old, delivered to TWA in 1965 as part of the first batch of 727s coming out of Boeing's suburban Seattle plant. The destination, considering TWA's other routes, was not the kind of place a pilot would beg for — St. Paul-Minneapolis International on TWA Flight 841.

With all his experience, Hoot Gibson probably could make the trip — a relatively short course over Lake Michigan and Green Bay — with his eyes closed. Any airline pilot could — just get the plane up to cruise altitude and set in the autopilot until it was time to land.

After 15,000 hours of flying, it certainly was not the test of skill that would make a pilot find out just how much he was really worth.



April 4, 1979

6:55 p.m.

Kennedy International Airport

Just when it seemed as if there were no alternative except to stay in New York for longer than he wanted to, Bob Reber found TWA Flight 841.

The flight he hoped to get booked on — a Northwest 6 p.m. flight out of LaGuardia — was full. So Reber, 52, walked to the TWA counter at the Sheraton Hotel and the luck

there was better: A seat was available on their flight to Minneapolis, leaving at 6:55 p.m.

Typically, the plane was late taking off and did not leave the JFK gate until 7:39 p.m., prompting pilot Hoot Gibson to come on the intercom and give the 82 passengers on board one of those little speeches about being held up.

Eventually, the plane took off at 8:25 p.m. Reber settled into seat 22F, a window seat in the last row of seats in the smoking section, pulled out the copy of the New York Times and sipped a cocktail.

The manager of data processing for Powers department stores in the Twin Cities, he stayed wide awake throughout the flight. Falling asleep on planes was a habit he had never acquired. But he thought the trip was extremely dull as airplane

flights always are, with the engines humming and the funny smell of disinfectant tried to rid the cabin of any human smell.

In the Minneapolis Tribune that morning, his horoscope by Jeane Dixon had at least been topical for once:

"Traveling appeals, but is not favored. Try staying close to home (Cancer, June 21-July 22)."

But Reber didn't pay attention to junk like that.

April 4, 1979

8:45 p.m.

Nearing the Great Lakes

35,000 feet

First Officer Scott Kennedy, who had flown the 727 for all but six months of his 13 years at TWA, put the flaps up with effortless routine.

On takeoff, the flaps were extended to produce lift so the plane could get off the ground.

160 knots. Flaps up from 15 degrees to 5 degrees to increase speed.

190 knots. Flaps up from 5 degrees to 2 degrees.

200 knots. Flaps tucked in all the way.

Flight 841 was cleared by air traffic control to an altitude of 5,000 feet. Then up to 8,000, 23,000, and finally 35,000 feet at 8:45 p.m. The air was calm with a little turbulence —

"smooth with a light chop" as the pilots referred to it. Nothing to get excited about.

Five minutes later, the four flight attendants on board — two men, two women, started serving the meal — hot, a forgettable food served on plastic trays.

Headwinds of 110 knots were bearing down on Flight 841 as it maintained 35,000 feet altitude. Gibson didn't like that and figured the best way to beat the winds was to go below them — or above them.

At 9:24, Gibson got on the mike with the air traffic control center in Toronto and asked for clearance up to 39,000 feet to beat the winds.

"Centre TW841 like to try Flight Level 390."

"Roger, TW841 climb to maintain FL390."

"Out of 35 for 39."

At 9:38 p.m., flight 841 reported that it was at 39,000 feet.

"TWA's 841 level 3 nine 0."

"841 roger."

The conditions at that altitude were clear and smooth. It was quiet up there, nice and quiet, the cockpit noise at a whisper compared to other altitudes.

A moonlit trail of clouds shimmered about 4,000 feet below the silver underbelly of the plane as it darted across Michigan in the black night. The clouds stretched for several miles to the shoreline of Lake Michigan, and from his seat in the cockpit, Hoot Gibson could see the on-and-off flicker of distant city lights across the mammoth lake.

At 39,000 feet, the serenity of the sky belonged to Flight

841.

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THE FLIGHT

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April 4, 1979

9:47 p.m.

Near Saginaw, Mich.

39,619 feet

Dr. Peter Fehr had never particularly liked to fly. To be perfectly honest about it, Fehr used to have a horrendous fear of it, and the whole concept of motion was not something that he had ever quite gotten used to.

As a kid, when he used to go on drives with the family, the result was always the same — he got sick. And his first airplane ride, from Minneapolis to Chicago when he was interviewing to be a missionary in Africa, had left his stomach badly upset.

Fehr, an obstetrician-gynecologist, knew, of course, that it was impossible to live in the modern world without flying. So, with the help of God and large dosages of dramamine, he had persevered. He made it to Africa as a missionary, suffering in ancient DC-3s that barely wobbled over the African swamps, making so much noise that it sounded like the metal was being sheared off.

But for the past 11 years that Fehr had lived in Minneapolis, things changed. He had been able to get on an airplane whenever it was required. For the past year, in fact, he had been flying without fear and without dramamine.

But it still didn't take much to get unnerved. A few days earlier, when he had been on his way to New York for a convention, the woman sitting next to him, a large Italian woman, kept repeating her rosary and kissing her prayer book.

Fehr had an urge to look her straight in the eye and say, "Lady, these planes keep flying and most of 'em don't go down." A timid man, he didn't have the courage to say it. But, of course, he was right. The trip to New York was without consequence.

Fehr went to his convention at the New York Hilton, and now he was returning home on Flight 841.

The seat belt sign had gone off, dinner had been served, and the food trays picked up. It was time to relax.

Fehr and the man sitting next to him, a University of Minnesota professor, chatted for a bit.

Suddenly, without warning, the plane shuddered and began to feel as though it were sliding sideways across the sky. There was the sensation that the plane was changing speed and maybe even trying to land. But at 39,000 feet?

"We can't be in Minneapolis already?" said the professor.

Fehr knew the professor was right.

April 4, 1979

9:47.57

Near Saginaw, Mich.

39,046 feet

Gary Bank's mind idled. There wasn't much for the flight engineer to do, so he started filling out parts of his log and looked vacantly at the array of instruments and switches before him. Then he felt a high frequency vibration.

Co-pilot Kennedy was preoccupied with trying to figure out the plane's ground speed.

And Hoot Gibson, with the plane set on autopilot and flying steady, put away his charts and cleaned up the cockpit.

Then he heard a sound — a slight buzz — and saw the wheel of the airplane turning slowly to the left, about 10 degrees. The plane was turning to the right for some reason and the autopilot was trying to correct it.

The buzz continued, and now the plane was shaking slightly. And it was turning slightly, and still rolling to the right. And the autopilot was still turning the wheel to the left. But it wasn't doing a thing. The plane was still turning to the right.

Gibson watched for about 10 seconds. Then he disconnected the autopilot. The plane was still rolling to the right. Still rolling.

Gibson grabbed on to the wheel with both hands and turned it all the way to the left. Leaning back in his seat, he took his foot and punched down on the rudder pedal all the way to the left to try to bring the plane around.

It did nothing. The thing was still going to the right. Through 20 degrees. Then 30.

Speaking to his co-pilot, he said what was by now the inevitable truth.

"This airplane's going over."

It continued.

50 degrees.

60 degrees.

70 degrees.

And in that fraction of a second, Hoot Gibson felt stark terror. The plane was rolling over and going in. He knew it. That was it.

He was going to die. And take 88 other people down with him.

April 4, 1979

9:48.04

Near Saginaw, Mich.

36,307 feet

The tiny 2-month-old baby in Holly Wicker's lap started gasping for breath and turning blue as the plane hurtled downward at a vertical pitch, the speed increasing.

The baby's name was Asha (it means "hope" in Hindi) and this was her first experience in the United States after coming from India. She was on her way to Minneapolis to be adopted and Holly was in charge of her.

With each foot that the plane lost, the forces of gravity (G forces) increased. The pressure was forcing Wicker back into her seat, shoving her skin backwards, almost like someone had grabbed her cheeks and was trying to pull them back to see how much they would stretch.

Wicker tried to rotate Asha onto her back and pull the baby towards her. But she couldn't — the gravity was too great — and instead Wicker leaned forward.

Out of the corner of her eye, she looked across the aisle and saw the instrument panels over the passengers' heads pop down even though they weren't supposed to — forcing down oxygen masks and light bulbs and wires.

Wicker watched the knuckles of hands turning white as passengers tried to fight gravity and reach for the masks. She watched people with their mouths open as though they were trying to scream. But there wasn't a sound, as though the gravity had frozen their cries.

Wicker bent down and gave Asha a breath. She gave another. And then another, when a searing

pain ripped across her chest. She couldn't give any more. There was nothing left. And she knew that the next breath she would take would have to be for herself — not for the tiny baby on her lap turning blue.

April 4, 1979

9:48.07

Near Saginaw, Mich:

34,459 feet

The plane went into its first roll and Gibson pulled back on the control wheel to try to apply enough downward pressure to keep the passengers in their seats. With the seat-belt sign off, they all could be walking around for all he knew.

He closed off the engine throttles — shutting off some of the power to the plane's engines — and started saying "Get 'em up. Get 'em up here." Kennedy thought he was talking to the plane, as pilots often do, trying to coax it back up, pleading with it.

But what Gibson wanted was for Kennedy to

grab the "spoiler" handle and pull it back so the flaps on the top of the wing would pop up and help slow the plane down.

By now the plane was into a second roll — this one almost vertical. Gibson let go of the control wheel and pulled the spoiler handle up and down himself.

Nothing happened.

He tugged on the control wheel to see if he could get the plane to reduce its pitch.

It didn't matter.

The plane was in a dive.

By this time, Gary Banks had pulled his seat in between Gibson and Kennedy and tried to get a fix on their instruments. He couldn't figure out what was going on and he needed to get a look at the artificial horizon indicator — an instrument that tells a plane's position on the horizon and where it is pointing. It is divided into two colors — blue for the sky and black for the ground.

Gibson's elbow was blocking the indicator, so Banks looked over at Kennedy's panel, which has an identical set of instruments.

The indicator was black. Pure black. Not a trace of blue in there. It was like walking into a room and finding all the furniture on the ceiling. Banks couldn't believe what he was seeing. And it meant only one thing.

The plane was heading straight for the ground nose down.

He watched as Gibson and Kennedy tried to regain control. From his days as an Air Force instructor on the supersonic T-38s, where you did spiral dives on purpose just to let the student know what the plane could and couldn't do, Banks was impressed: Gibson and Kennedy were doing everything right.

But they weren't saving the plane. They weren't doing it.

Banks glanced at Gibson. He glanced to the right at Kennedy. Then he sat back in his chair and became very calm. He knew the ending now, and in a whisper he confirmed it to himself.

"It is all over. I wonder what it's gonna feel like to hit the ground."

April 4, 1979
9:48.10
Near Saginaw, Mich.
29,982 feet

The increasing gravity forces pulled Peter Fehr's glasses off his face. He tried to grab them with his arms but he couldn't. Gravity had glued them to the armrests. The upper part of his body went upright against his seat like a diving board.

The plane was rattling like crazy, the vibration increasing with each foot of the plunge. The noise sounded like the B-29s that went down in the World War II movies, that horrible, moaning whine that got louder and louder. And then there was another sound, the wrenching, gnarling sound of metal being torn from the right wing.

Fehr knew there was no way the pilot — any pilot — was going to bring the plane back up.

The passenger in the seat in front of him kept trying to coax the plane back up. It sounded like he was talking to the pilot, "Take it easy," the man whispered. "You haven't lost it yet. You can pull it out." Fehr thought the man was a fool.

He knew he was going to die.

He became calm and objective. The scene became an abstraction, with Fehr a detached observer.

In the remaining seconds left, he began to make a checklist. He reviewed his will — it was in order and his wife should be well-cared for. He remembered what he had said to his four kids before he left for New York.

And it irked him now that one of his sons had taken out a loan to buy a new pair of tires for his car without coming to him. The interest rates were probably ridiculous . . . his son was probably getting gouged to death . . . it wasn't a good business deal . . . in fact, it was downright stupid . . . why did he do something like that . . . they should have talked about it beforehand . . . they really should have.

The roar of the plane grew louder.

April 4, 1979

9:48.16

Near Saginaw, Mich.

24,121 feet

As the descent of the plane grew faster, Scott Kennedy's mind worked faster.

He remembered the crash of a commercial plane that had been flying at 39,000 feet and dropped into Lake Michigan.

He remembered the crash of the Pacific Southwest Airlines jet in San Diego that had happened only six months ago and left close to 150 people dead.

And then he remembered a conversation he had with the flight engineer only the night before — an insiders' conversation about recovering a plane from a vertical stall.

From his experience in the Air Force, Banks knew of only one way to do it — pop the drag shoot on the tail of the plane — a parachute-type piece of equipment that was normally used to slow the air-

THE FLIGHT

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craft down during landing. Activating it during a stall would slow the plane down enough so the pilot could get control of it back, Banks had told Kennedy.

The co-pilot watched as Gibson tried just about every maneuver there was and still the plane was screaming through the sky. He was impressed by Gibson's perseverance, his reluctance to give up.

Then Kennedy's eye was drawn to something that might help — putting the landing gear down.

He suggested that to Gibson and had his hand poised and waiting on the landing gear handle. The plane continued to plummet, the altimeter unwinding so fast that no one in the cockpit could read it.

21,000 feet.

20,000 feet.

They were getting close and Gibson could see the lights of cities spinning through the fog.

15,000 feet and dropping vertical.

"Gear down," said Gibson.

Kennedy followed the command.

For a second, the two pilots fought against each other as they worked their control wheels — Gibson pushing in to get the tail into the wind current so it would fly again, Kennedy pulling his out to keep the nose of the plane up.

The gear dropped down.

The explosion was deafening, like nothing Gibson or Kennedy or Banks had ever heard in their lives.

TWA Flight 841 continued to fall.

10,000 feet.

8,000 feet.

Gibson didn't know where he was. He couldn't read the instruments. Where the hell was the ground?

And then the plane started to fly again.

And Gibson couldn't help but feel what a damn shame it was that he was getting control back just as the plane was going to crack.

He pulled back on the control wheel as if he was trying to rein a wild mustang. The nose of the plane shot up about 50 degrees. Gibson almost looped the plane, he was so desperate to avoid the Michigan farmland beneath him. He was afraid the wings might move or snap off the plane but he had no choice but to pull up.

The G forces were incredible — flight data showed them registering 6 at one point — meaning a person's weight was six times what it normally would be. The blood rushed downward from the brain as passengers were flattened into their seats with incredible force. Their faces were pushed sideways as though they were being held in a vise.

Gibson, the acrobatic pilot, had taken 6 Gs before and knew what they were like. Banks, as he had learned in the Air Force, tightened his stomach and tried to keep the blood from pushing down.

The nose still pointed up about 50 degrees as the plane punched through the clouds again — this time on the way up.

Banks felt a rush of panic. If Gibson pulled the nose of the plane down too fast to bring it level, the reverse force of the gravity could be enough to rip an engine off its mount.

Banks coaxed Gibson to get the wings level and gently ease the nose over. "Keep 'em level," he repeated. "Keep 'em level."

Gibson was having trouble figuring out the plane's direction. And then he saw the moon. He pinned it on the windshield, it became his compass, and he kept it in the same exact spot until he pushed the nose over and brought the plane level.

The noise and vibration in the tiny cockpit was incredible. Almost unbearable. Inside the cabin, the shaking and gravity had caused more of the overhead panels to pop open. Oxygen masks accidentally came tumbling down in some of the rows. But some of the passengers didn't realize it was an accident. They thought everyone was supposed to have a mask. And they were clawing at their closed panels with their fingers, trying to pry them open.

Gibson got on the intercom. He had to say something. Anything.

"We've had a slight problem, but everything seems to be under control."

April 4, 1979:

9:51 p.m.

Near Saginaw, Mich.

10,509 feet

Even though the plane was flying again, Atul Bhatt knew something was terribly wrong. One look at the flight attendants told him that.

They were agitated, upset, one of them was crying. And he was scared to death. Once when he was 10 years old, he was riding his bicycle on the edge of a highway when he lost control and fell under a moving truck. The driver just caught a glimpse of him, and the back wheels came to a halt right next to his body.

He had missed death by a screeching second. But he had been a kid then, and the whole thing had happened so quickly.

But this wasn't happening quickly. This was taking forever. There was time — too much time — to think again and again about what would happen. As the plane had started to plummet, the knowledge of a death that would be quick and painless had somehow been comforting.

But now the plane was going to make a crash landing, and Bhatt didn't even know where it would be. The Chicago airport maybe? Or a forest? Or a farm? It was so dark outside, he couldn't see a thing.

The fear of being paralyzed gnawed at him. Or of being maimed. Or half-burned. And Bhatt, 27, a Ph.D. candidate from India at the University of Minnesota, couldn't bear that. If the plane did crash, he wanted to die quickly. Survival at any odds, with a thousand different possible after effects, wasn't worth the risk.

But the choice wasn't his.

Bhatt was lost in his fear when an Italian woman sitting next to him, after watching his agony for a few minutes now, spoke up. "Don't be scared, young man," said the woman.

Bhatt felt a little embarrassed after that. Here he was, a grown man, being admonished just like a little kid for being a coward — not even tough enough to take a bumpy little plane ride. And then he thought a little more.

And he knew in his heart exactly how he felt.

And he couldn't think of one single reason to be brave about it.

He had never been more scared in his entire life.

April 4, 1979

9:55 p.m.

60 miles from Detroit

12,749 feet

Hoot Gibson needed to find an airport. Quickly.

He checked with air traffic control about Saginaw, where the weather was overcast with light snow and three miles visibility. Then he checked Lansing. And Detroit, where the weather was a little better but certainly not perfect — overcast skies, seven miles visibility, wind at 10 knots.

Although it was the farthest away of the three choices — about 60 miles — Detroit's Metro Airport seemed to Gibson to be the most logical choice. He was familiar with the airport and it could handle a major emergency.

— And he figured he could make it.

While Gibson handled the controls of the plane, Kennedy and Banks went through a series of emergency "checklists" to pinpoint what was wrong with the plane and how to try to remedy it.

The noise and vibrating inside the cockpit was still deafening. Banks and Kennedy were shouting, and they still could barely understand each other and had to rely on reading lips.

The diagnosis was not good.

One of the plane's hydraulic power systems was out, so the flaps would have to be extended by an alternate power source. A yaw damper — an electronic device on the rudder that stops a plane from weaving uncontrollably — was apparently out of commission, too.

The landing gear indicator lights inside the cockpit were red, meaning the dropped gear was unlocked and unsafe to land on. It would have to be cranked down manually.

Banks' hands shook and his body shivered as he removed a plate from the floor of the cockpit and used a lever to put the main landing gear down by hand. There was no feel on the gear at all, as though it wasn't holding. And when he was through, the indicator lights still were red.

The nose landing gear was extended manually, and the indicator light showed green — the gear was down and locked into place. Once the nose gear dropped, the terrible cockpit noise stopped. Banks couldn't believe what a relief it was to have a little quiet. That noise had almost driven him crazy.

The crew then tried to use alternate power to get the flaps to extend, so the plane would slow down and be easier to land.

The flaps were barely out before the aircraft rolled sharply to the left. Gibson couldn't believe it — he figured he had lost the plane again. But he recovered, and for the rest of the trip, he had to fly with the control wheel and the rudder pedal pushed all the way to the right so the plane would not roll over.

Gibson realized that his margin for error here was very small. Below about 170 knots an hour, the plane would begin to roll. Above about 210 knots an hour, the same thing would happen. It gave him about 40 knots to work with, and the likelihood of a landing under the worst possible conditions.

When TWA Flight 841 came in to Detroit on runway 3L, it would be making its touchdown at almost twice the normal speed. And on landing gear that, for all Hoot Gibson knew, might not even be there.

April 4, 1979
10 p.m.
Near Detroit, Mich.
13,000 feet

Passenger Barbara Merrill had crashed to the floor, trapped in the lavatory. Stewardess Fran Schaller, walking to the liquor cart to get someone a drink, had fallen flat in the middle of the aisle. Unable to get up, a passenger cradled her head while she clung to the cart with her left hand. Others on board had blacked out. As the plane leveled out, Merrill, 41, crawled

out of the bathroom and made it as far as the right aisle seat in the last row of the plane, Row 22.

Her ribs ached, maybe one of them was cracked. Her hip had crashed against the toilet seat when she had been flown to the floor, and she had a cut on her knee.

Merrill's 14-year-old daughter, Susan, walked to the back of the cabin to be with her mother.

She sat in seat 22E, in between her mother and Bob Reber.

Under the conditions, there couldn't have been a more reassuring figure. Reber had blacked out almost instantly after the plane had started to dive. But now he felt quite calm and not really aware that something terrible had happened — or was going to happen.

"We're gonna die!" Reber heard Mrs. Merrill repeat over and over. "We're gonna die!"

"Are we?" Mrs. Merrill's daughter asked, her mother's sense of panic becoming infectious.

Reber remained immune. "Don't worry about it," he told them. "If you get to pick your place to land, you got a 50-50 chance."

April 4, 1979
10:20 p.m.
Flying over Detroit Metro Airport
1,600 feet

Gary Banks called flight attendant Mark Moscicki into the cockpit and asked him if he remembered his training for an emergency landing.

"You have 10 minutes to get the plane ready, and you get back here in eight minutes," Banks told him.

Moscicki met briefly with the three other flight attendants in the center galley. Then they went to work.

They whipped through the cabin, instructing passengers to remove their glasses, pens, high-heeled shoes, false teeth, canes, anything that was sharp and might cause injury.

They started emptying the overhead racks, distributing available pillows and blankets. One of the stewardesses threw Catherine Rascher's leather jacket on the floor, and she winced. Even in a time of fear and crisis, it was hard for her to forget the coat was brand new and cost \$200.

A passenger got into an argument with a flight attendant who wanted to remove his glasses. The passenger refused. The attendant persisted, and finally just plucked the glasses off the man's face.

Another passenger willingly had her glasses removed, but gave forewarning that she was blind without them. The flight attendant immediately designated the man sitting directly behind her as a guardian: The woman's life and the lives of her two children depended upon him, the man was told.

Moscicki got on the intercom and told the passengers about the plane's evacuation procedures. He showed them the impact position — hands behind the head, the body bent forward as far it would go, a pillow to cushion the head from the seat in front.

At 1,600 feet, Gibson flew over the Detroit airport tower so ground personnel could get a look at the landing gear. Searchlights panned the underbelly of the plane. From what they could tell, the gear looked down and locked.

Peeking out the windows from the emergency position, passengers could see a mass of fire trucks sitting on the runway, waiting to see whether TWA Flight 841 would make it. The plane swooped so low that they could see the expressions on the firemen's faces.

Moments away from landing, TWA Flight 841 skidded level.

April 4, 1979

10:30 p.m.

On landing approach to Detroit Metro Airport
50 feet

After the fly-by, Banks opened the cockpit door to speak to the flight attendants one more time. But when he glimpsed outside, he saw everybody bent over, ready for the plane to crash.

The action was a little premature, there was still a little time left, so Banks got on the intercom and told everybody to sit easy for a moment. He said he would tell them when it was time to assume the . . . he was about to say "crash position" but then he stopped himself, and just told the passengers he would let them know when it was time to get ready.

Gibson circled on the final approach to the runway.

He turned the plane downwind, his eyes glued to the strip so he wouldn't lose track of it for a second.

Suddenly, the plane started rolling to the left again.

Gibson was losing control, the plane was getting away from him again.

The crew erupted in the cockpit. After 40 minutes of fighting to keep the aircraft up, the adrenaline was running out. Now was the perfect time to screw up.

"Don't let it roll too far!" yelled Banks, on the verge of panic. "Don't let it roll!"

Kennedy got on the control wheel and started working the engine throttles. He cut the power to the right engine and increased the power to the left.

Frederick and Catherine Rascher held hands and waited.

They had been married for 43 years, had just enjoyed a wonderful trip to Spain, and were looking forward to a life of quiet retirement in St. Paul. Whatever happened now, at least, they would be together.

They turned and looked at each other as they prepared for the crash landing.

"We've had a nice life together," said Mrs. Rascher.

"It's too bad it has to end this way," said her husband.

The plane was on its approach now. Lifting his head up slightly, Frederick Rascher peeked out the window and began the final countdown.

"Forty feet . . . thirty feet . . . twenty feet . . . ten feet . . . get ready."

They bent their heads down and waited for the last time.

April 4, 1979

10:31 p.m.

Landing at Detroit Metro Airport

Gibson bore down on the runway at 170 knots. As he was coming in, the plane started again to roll to the left. The left landing gear hit the runway first — "pretty damn smooth," Gibson thought to himself — and the gear was holding.

The plane was rolling quite a bit and Gibson had to get the right gear on the runway, although he thought the gear would probably shear off on impact.

He brought the plane level and the right gear wasn't even hitting. Maybe it already had fallen off, Gibson thought.

The gear, when it had been extended during the dive, had broken its side brace. If any substantial pressure was put on it from either side, it would collapse on impact.

Using his controls, Gibson tilted the right wing down and finally the right gear hit the runway. It was there . . . and it was holding.

A burst of applause went up from the passengers as the plane touched down. Hoot Gibson was getting a sitting ovation.

Part of the right gear dragged along the runway, causing sparks as Gibson turned left toward the emergency vehicles. As soon as the plane stopped, fire engines sped up and started spraying the aircraft with foam.

Gibson felt exhausted — more exhausted perhaps than he had ever been in his entire life. He also felt relieved and surprised. From 39,000 feet until touchdown some 43 minutes later, he had been convinced that the plane was going to crash.

The only thing he hadn't figured out was where

April 4, 1979

10:40 p.m.

On the ground at Detroit Metro Airport

Dr. Peter Fehr thought one of the passengers on board was having a heart attack. He got an oxygen tank for her and made sure she got to a hospital. He gave medical attention to some of the other passengers. And then, once outside the plane, Peter Fehr — the cool, detached doctor — lost control. For 20 minutes he vomited and wretched and his legs turned to water. Then he called home to tell his family he was safe.

Atul Bhatt looked over at the man in his row and couldn't believe what he was seeing. The plane had landed; it was probably about to blow up, there were firemen all over the place, and here was this guy whose first instinct wasn't to run for his life, or move quickly, or even to move at all. Instead he slowly took his comb out of his pocket and started combing his hair.

Bhatt had no pretensions of vanity. In his eagerness to get off the plane, he left his suit jacket on board. And when a bottle of Scotch was passed around in the shivering cold of the runway, he gladly swigged.

The passenger came up to Gary Banks as he and the other crew members were leaving the cockpit.

"Isn't it interesting?" the man said. "Isn't it interesting? What the hell was interesting about a plane that by all rights should have been a hole in the ground and left 89 people dead?"

"God no!" said Banks, slightly stunned by the comment.

But the passenger wasn't finished.

"Isn't it interesting that it isn't anyone's time on this plane to die," said the man. And then he walked away.