

Deadly Departure

Chapter One

In a matter of seconds, the men in the cockpit realized they were going to die. In the minute that passed before the plane hit the water, fifty-seven-year-old pilot Steven Snyder was probably astonished that the Boeing 747, a plane he knew intimately and trusted completely, was failing him. Oliver Krick, the twenty-five-year-old flight engineer on the verge of becoming a commercial airline pilot was likely feeling a different and unfamiliar emotion. For the first time in a life filled only with accomplishments, Oliver Krick felt helpless.

Thirteen minutes into the flight, the plane was still climbing out of New York airspace. There had been an explosion closely followed by a disorienting tempest of unrecognizable sounds. The force behind the noise shook the flight deck. When a quick fog of condensation filled the cockpit, the men grabbed for their oxygen masks and set the control knobs to the emergency position to begin a flow of pressurized oxygen.

Pilot training always includes time in a flight simulator practicing for in-flight emergencies, but there's no practice for the situation that was facing the pilots of TWA Flight 800. They did not know it, but the plane had split apart.

Desperate, Captain Snyder ordered flight engineer Krick to check essential power, looking for some reason why the battery in the electronics bay beneath the cockpit wasn't supplying an emergency source of energy for the flight control instruments. Krick was confused, unable to comprehend the sudden shift from normal to unimaginable. It might have crossed his mind that he'd done something wrong, and he was frantically reconstructing his actions.

Struggling against the cockpit's wild pitching, training flight engineer Richard Campbell eyed the panel by Krick, noting that the emergency battery switch was

already in the “on” position. It should be providing electricity to the cockpit instruments. Yet dozens of amber flags had popped up in the flight control dials, indicating they were powerless. So was the crew.

On July 17, 1996, the Boeing 747-100 that was TWA’s Flight 800 to Paris was one day younger than Oliver Krick. It had come off the assembly line in Everett, Washington, on July 15, 1971, the 153rd 747 made and given the tail number N93119. Twenty-five is young for a man, but it’s old for an airplane. Though this 747 still looked modern from the outside, its technology was essentially the same as that of the first 747 flown in 1969. The Boeing 747 and twin-engine 737 are the oldest commercial Boeing designs still in production.

N93119 had been scrupulously inspected by TWA under an FAA program to prevent age-related structural weaknesses, but the plane’s systems were as old as the plane, including hundreds of miles of wiring that hadn’t been examined since the day it was installed. The cockpit was a quaint array of yesterday’s technology, dials and knobs, toggle switches, and analog gauges. There were no color graphical displays, no wiz-bang computers capable of improving on the calculations of the human flight engineers in a fraction of the time. This model 747, referred to as a “747 Classic,” is one of the few remaining commercial jetliners still requiring a third crew member, like flight engineer Krick, to monitor the amount of fuel in the tanks and the operation of the engines.

At its twenty-five years, the jumbo jet had made 16,000 flights. It had flown 100,000 miles in just the last two weeks, making twenty-four transatlantic flights. It checked out fine as pilots Snyder and Ralph Kevorkian, and Campbell and Krick prepared it for the scheduled 7 P.M. departure to Paris. Reports filed by the pilots who’d brought the plane to New York from Athens showed nothing unusual during their nine-hour-and-forty-five-minute flight.

The ground crew at Kennedy noted that the Athens to New York leg had drained the fuel tank located between the wings down to the last fifty gallons, but since that

tank would not be needed for the shorter trip to France, it was not refilled. Thirty thousand gallons of Jet A kerosene would be pumped into the plane's six wing tanks only. The wing tanks held enough fuel to get the plane to Paris: Filling the center tank would have increased the plane's weight, making the flight more expensive to operate.

TWA would have been pleased with more passengers. In the height of the summer vacation season, the 433-seat wide-body was carrying only 176 fare-paying passengers. The fifty-four others on the flight were TWA employees and their families working the flight or enjoying free travel, the benefit of working for an airline.

Snyder, Kevorkian, Campbell, and Krick were not planning to fly Flight 800 to Paris. Their scheduled trip to Rome on TWA Flight 848 was canceled, so both passengers and crew were switched onto the Paris flight, which would continue to Rome after stopping in France.

Rather than go as passengers, a practice known as deadheading, as TWA schedulers had arranged, Krick and Captain Kevorkian were flying because Captain Snyder convinced New York's chief pilot, Captain Hugh Schoelzel, to let them get the experience. Kevorkian would be completing his last supervised flight.

These fellas are on check rides, Hugh, Captain Snyder pleaded. Why not give us this trip and let 800's original crew deadhead into Paris?

And so it was that Oliver Krick, lucky from the day he was born, found himself in one of the best seats in the sky, two miles above the rustic shoreline of southern Long Island and climbing.