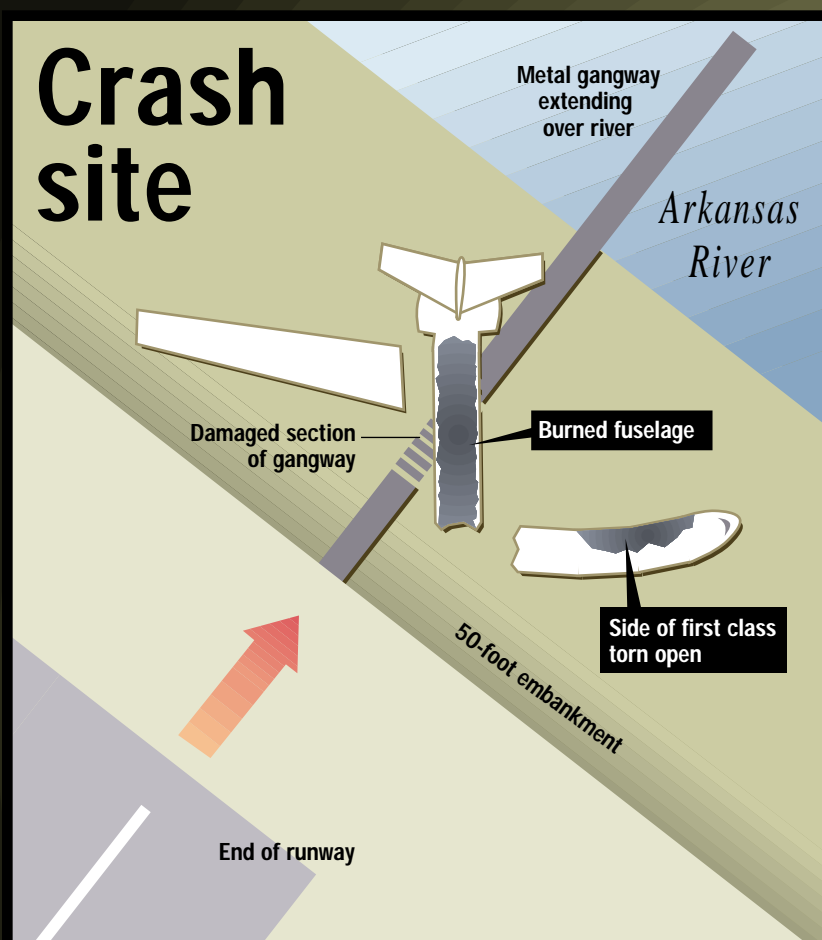


THE CRASH OF Flight 1420



THE START OF THE TERRIFYING ORDEAL for the passengers of American Airlines Flight 1420 began with turbulence from an early summer storm. The plane rocked and rumbled in the air, and bounced hard twice on the 7,200 foot runway. Passengers said that even though the pilot put on the brakes, the plane just didn't stop. After going off an embankment and hitting a 125-yard metal gangway, the plane snapped in half and burst into flames. Of the 145 people on board, 86 were injured and nine killed, including the pilot.



'We all knew,' survivor says

BY MATTHEW WAITE AND JENNIFER LIBERTO
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

American Airlines Flight 1420, although late leaving Dallas, was a smooth ride until it got to storm-soaked central Arkansas, where passengers said they first felt the turbulence that would end in disaster.

Families, visitors and Arkansas natives both injured and unscathed said it wasn't until they descended into Little Rock National Airport, Adams Field that they felt the wind and rain that sent the plane off the runway and over an embankment, where it snapped in half in a fiery crash.

As they were approaching, the pilot, Richard Buschmann, came on the cabin intercom for an announcement.

"Off to your left, you'll see a light show," Buschmann said about the "electrical storm," recalled passenger Randy Hill of Arkadelphia.

The plane circled once, said passenger Velda Williams of Russellville, and started to descend fast — too fast.

"I just knew it was going to have trouble landing," Williams said.

"We all knew."

Heading northeast into Runway 4 Right, passengers said the wind made the plane bounce and sway as it came closer and closer to the ground.

"It was foggy, and we could see more streaky lightning," said passenger Evelyn Soo. "The landing gears were down, and I started to panic."

After the churning and rocking of the approach, passengers said the hard thump of the rear landing gears hitting the runway was a relief.

But after coming down hard once, the plane went back up, they said, and came down hard again. Some passengers said the hard landing was nothing they hadn't experienced before, but something else worried them.

They weren't slowing down.

The plane kept going down the runway, barely slowing despite the pilot's attempts to stop using the brakes. Along the way, passengers said they could feel the plane sway, then it started to rumble: They had gone off the concrete, they would later learn.

But the plane got back on the runway, shortly before reaching the end of the 7,200-foot stretch of concrete. After that, only a stretch of muddy grass, landing lights on poles, a 50-foot levy and a 125-yard-long gangway holding landing lights that extended onto the Arkansas River, stood between the plane and the swollen river.

The first damage to the plane came behind the nose, in the first-class section, where the gangway sheared a hole in the left side of the passenger compartment.

"The whole first-class section was gone," said Ann Simmons of Hot Springs. "We were in Row 7, Seats E and F, right behind the wall that separates first class and coach."

"The wall was there after we hit, but the people in the seats were gone."

A piece of the gangway broke loose, creating a hole where the rest of the fuselage came through. Near the middle of the plane, forward of the wings, the plane struck a concrete and metal support for the gangway, breaking the plane in half and causing the rear section to burst into flames.

"Metal was pulling away from metal, and the fire came up from the back," Julia Ferganchick-Neufang said. "The seats crumpled. Pieces of the plane fell away and there were tiny openings in the fiberglass."

Sharon Angleman said the plane shrieked as it was torn apart.

"The whole left side was gone. The man on the end of Row 15 was gone," she said. "The seats crumbled and the ceiling caved in. The aisle was ripped up, and we had to climb over the seats. If the body of the plane hadn't come apart we would have been trapped inside."

The sudden stop threw the passengers to their left side, bruising and battering and breaking passengers. Of the 139 passengers and six crew members, 86 were injured and nine were killed. Some seats separated from the wall.

With no electricity, a fire toward the back of the plane provided enough light for some passengers to make their way toward a large crack on the right side of the fuselage near Row 10. The crack was large enough for most of the passengers to squeeze through. They jumped about 10 feet to the ground by the window on the right side.

Joyce Garrison of Conway said a man jumped out of the crack in front of her, and she called to him for help, but he yelled back, "I can't. My shoulder's broke."

Williams, 70, said she had never jumped so far in her life.

"I didn't care, I just had to get out."

Information for this article was contributed by Erin Schulte, Erica Werner, Jim Brooks, Doug Peters, Shareese Kondo and Kim McGuire of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

The flight's final moments

AFTER A SMOOTH FLIGHT FROM DALLAS, passengers said the turbulence around Little Rock caused them to start worrying. The plane bounced and swayed in the winds from the thunderstorm, they said.

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THE PLANE, COMING FROM THE SOUTH, bounced hard not once but twice on the runway, which some passengers said wasn't any harder than other landings they had been through. They said they could feel the plane wasn't slowing down.

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NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD INVESTIGATORS said that as the plane went northeast down the runway, it skidded off into the grass, then came back on before coming to the end of the 7,200-foot runway. Passengers said they could feel the plane shudder when it went off the concrete.

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UNABLE TO STOP, the plane struck rows of landing lights before going off a 50-foot levy. The plane, angling east, struck a more than 125-yard metal gangway that holds landing lights and extends onto the Arkansas River. The gangway sheared a hole in the first-class passenger compartment and broke away. The plane came down through the hole in

the gangway and struck a support pole, causing the plane to snap in two near the middle of the fuselage. The rear half, which included the wings and engines and was now facing south, burst into flames. The roof of the rear section burned, and surviving passengers escaped through holes in the fuselage created by the crash.

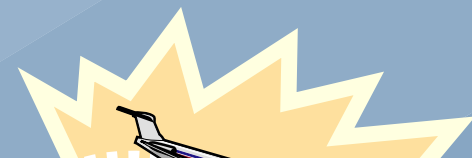
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Arkansas River