



Offbeat Oregon History: Oregon's worst plane

By Finn JD John
For the Sentinel

When a commercial airliner crashes, it's very rare to have absolutely no idea what happened. Even if the cockpit voice recorder is destroyed, usually there are enough clues left at the scene to piece together a picture of how the disaster came about.

But every now and then, a crash happens that offers a complete mystery — the aviation equivalent of one of those derelict barnacle-crusting sailing-ship hulls that used to drift ashore, empty and lifeless, on the Oregon Coast, the story of its crew's demise forever unknown.

Such is the case with the worst airplane crash in Oregon state history, as measured in lives lost: The Oct. 1, 1966 crash of West Coast Airlines Flight 956, a brand-new Douglas DC-9 that apparently drove, on autopilot, straight into the side of a ridge near Mount Hood with 18 people aboard.

There are a few theories that have been put forward about what happened that night, and we'll look at them. But none of them can claim much more than a 50-50 chance. In the end, the story of Flight 956 remains a mystery.

West Coast Airlines was a small regional airline, best known for making short hops around small airports like Bend and Eugene and Klamath Falls using Fairchild F-27 turboprop planes. But Flight 956 wasn't one of those; it was a genuine jet airliner, a Douglas DC-9, one of the flagships of the West Coast fleet; and it was brand-new. The airline quite literally bought it on Monday and crashed it on Saturday. It had less than 170 hours

on it.

As was fitting for one of the airline's flagships, Flight 956 was making one of West Coast's most prestigious runs: from San Francisco to Seattle, with stops at Eugene and Portland. It had left San Francisco at 6:44 p.m.; touched down at Eugene at 7:34; and was scheduled to land at PDX less than an hour later.

At 7:52, pilot Donald Alldredge took off from the Eugene airport and flew the jet up to 14,000 feet for the short flight to the outskirts of Portland. Then, having been cleared to come to 9,000 feet, he started a descent.

It's at that point that the mysterious part happens. Because rather than leveling off at 9,000 feet as instructed, the jet continued its descent — down to 4,000 feet, and below. But no one seems to have noticed. The airplane continued following directions from the tower, making turns and getting ready for the approach as if it were cruising along at 9,000. According to the flight data recorder, nothing changes until two seconds before impact, when suddenly the plane starts a sharp climb — either the pilot grabbed the yoke and pulled back, or the autopilot (which was found to be still engaged at impact) was reacting to something.

Five minutes later, having fruitlessly tried to get the pilot on the radio several times, the tower initiated accident notification procedures.

"I had him on my radar about 30 miles southwest of Portland, and he was on an 080 course (flying almost due east)," said air traffic controller W.R. Gibson, according to the Oregonian's front-page story on the crash. "I estimated his speed at between 300 and 350 knots. I looked away from the screen a minute while expanding my range to

50 miles, and I never saw him again."

The jet lanced into the side of a ridge about four miles south of Welches at full cruising speed — close to 400 miles an hour — shearing off the tops of trees before hitting the ground and disappearing into a giant fireball. The wreckage was 3,830 feet up a 4,090-foot ridge, and had probably been as low as 3,500 feet.

So: What happened? Your guess is as good as the National Transportation Safety Board's.

"A correlation of communications with the flight and the flight recorder trace reveals that all clearances and instructions were received, understood, and complied with, except the altitude restriction of 9,000 feet," the accident report notes, with almost palpable puzzlement.

The cockpit voice recorder was melted in the fire, so there can be no help from that quarter. The flight data recorder shows nothing but calm, unhurried preparations for a routine landing — every detail professionally and competently executed, but at an altitude 5,500 feet below the assigned one.

"The board concludes that the reason for the aircraft being permitted by the crew to descend below the assigned altitude is unknown," the report concludes.

There are a few guesses at what might have happened; but none of them are more than speculation.

One theory is that the crew overheard an instruction to another flight coincidentally also numbered 956, coming into Seattle, to descend to 4,000 feet, and complied. But this theory can literally be dismissed out of hand. There is no record of the flight crew acknowledging an instruction to drop to 4,000, as there is of every other instruction

given to them that night; and with three veteran jet pilots in the cockpit — all of whom were familiar with the terrain around PDX, which gets very steep very quickly on the eastern perimeter — there is just no way such a dangerous order would have been complied with without at least a request for clarification.

By the same token, we can safely assume that the pilot would not have flown into PDX at 4,000 feet on purpose. If we make that assumption — and if we set aside the "X Theories" such as a hijacking, a super-precise lightning strike, an alien abduction, etc. — there are really only two possibilities: Either a piece of equipment malfunctioned (such as the altimeter or the autopilot); or the crew was distracted from it by some unknown crisis in the cockpit and failed to pay attention to the altimeter.

But, of course, we'll never really know.

This plane crash was the worst in Oregon history, with a total death toll of 18 souls — 13 passengers and five crew members. It could, of course, have been much, much worse; the basic DC-9 can hold up to 109 people, although more typically they seat 70 to 90 plus crew.

It was the first fatal plane crash in the 20-year history of West Coast Airlines — although, unfortunately, not the last. It was also the first DC-9 crash in all of aviation history; the first DC-9 had gone into service with Delta Airlines just 10 months before, in December 1965.

The crash site is remote and rugged, but can be reached on a day hike. The plane is broken into tiny fragments, some of it still melted and discolored by the heat.

Dr. Fuhrman: Is protein the key to weight loss?

By Joel Fuhrman, MD
For The Sentinel

We are all taught that protein is a super nutrient that will make us lean, strong and healthy. We do need protein, but more is not necessarily better, and high-protein foods are not always healthful.

In every cell in the human body, the DNA contains a code that tells the cell which proteins to make. Proteins have a lot of different roles in the body; some provide structure like collagen, some facilitate contact or movement, and others act as enzymes, signals, receptors, or transporters. In order to make all of these proteins, we have to consume protein and break it down into its constituent amino acids.

High-protein foods do tend to be low in glycemic load. This is what the high-protein, low-carb diets get right. They avoid dangerous high-glycemic refined carbohydrates—sugar, white rice and white flour products. In the process, they also limit dangerous trans fats. It is important to remember though, just like excess carbohydrate and fat calories, if you take in more protein calories than your body can use right away, those calories get stored as fat.

Refined carbohydrates are empty calories that are absorbed quickly, and they lead to overeating. Foods that are higher in protein, fiber, and/or resistant starch provide the satiety factor that is missing in refined carbohydrates and help to prevent blood glucose spikes, so we are not driven to overeat. High protein diets can be

successful for weight loss in the short-term, but because they are so focused on animal foods, they are dangerous in the long-term. Low-carbohydrate/high-protein diets have been linked to increased risk of heart disease, cancer and premature death.

Although plant protein is often described as "incomplete," it has been known for many years that all plant foods contain all of the amino acids. Different plant foods may be low in a certain essential amino acid, but as long as you are eating a variety of plant foods and taking in an adequate number of calories, you will get adequate amounts—but not too much—of all the essential amino acids.

Animal protein and plant protein both provide us with adequate amounts of all of the amino acids, but animal protein is more concentrated in the essential amino acids, and for this reason animal protein increases the body's production of a hormone called IGF-1, which is associated with aging and an increased risk of several different cancers. One interesting study followed over 85,000 women and 44,000 men for more than 20 years, (26 years in women and 20 years in men) recording over 12,500 deaths. This research team found animal protein-rich diets were associated with a 23 percent increased risk of death from cardiovascular disease and cancer, whereas plant protein-rich diets were associated with a 20 percent decreased risk. In addition to animal protein, a diet high in animal products delivers additional harmful, pro-inflammatory or pro-oxidant substances. Animal foods are higher in arachidonic acid, saturated fat, carnitine and choline, heme iron, substances linked to

disease pathologies, which should be minimized for good health.

The number of grams of protein humans need in a day has been estimated at .8g/kg/day (about 36 grams of protein per 100 pounds of body weight). However, it is not important to count the number of grams of protein in the food you eat to make sure you reach this number. If you are eating adequate calories and a variety of foods, it is almost impossible to consume too little protein. For a typical day, a Nutritarian menu of 1700-1800 calories provides approximately 60-70 grams of protein. The point is that when you eat an anti-cancer diet to promote longevity, you strive to consume more colorful plants, reducing animal protein considerably. It is both these features that lead to the dramatic disease-protective lifespan benefits. Eat a high-nutrient (Nutritarian) diet, and forget about protein, you will automatically get the right amount.

Dr. Fuhrman is a #1 New York Times best-selling author and a family physician specializing in lifestyle and nutritional medicine. Visit his informative website at DrFuhrman.com. Submit your questions and comments about this column directly to newsquestions@drfuhrman.com. The full reference list for this article can be found at DrFuhrman.com.

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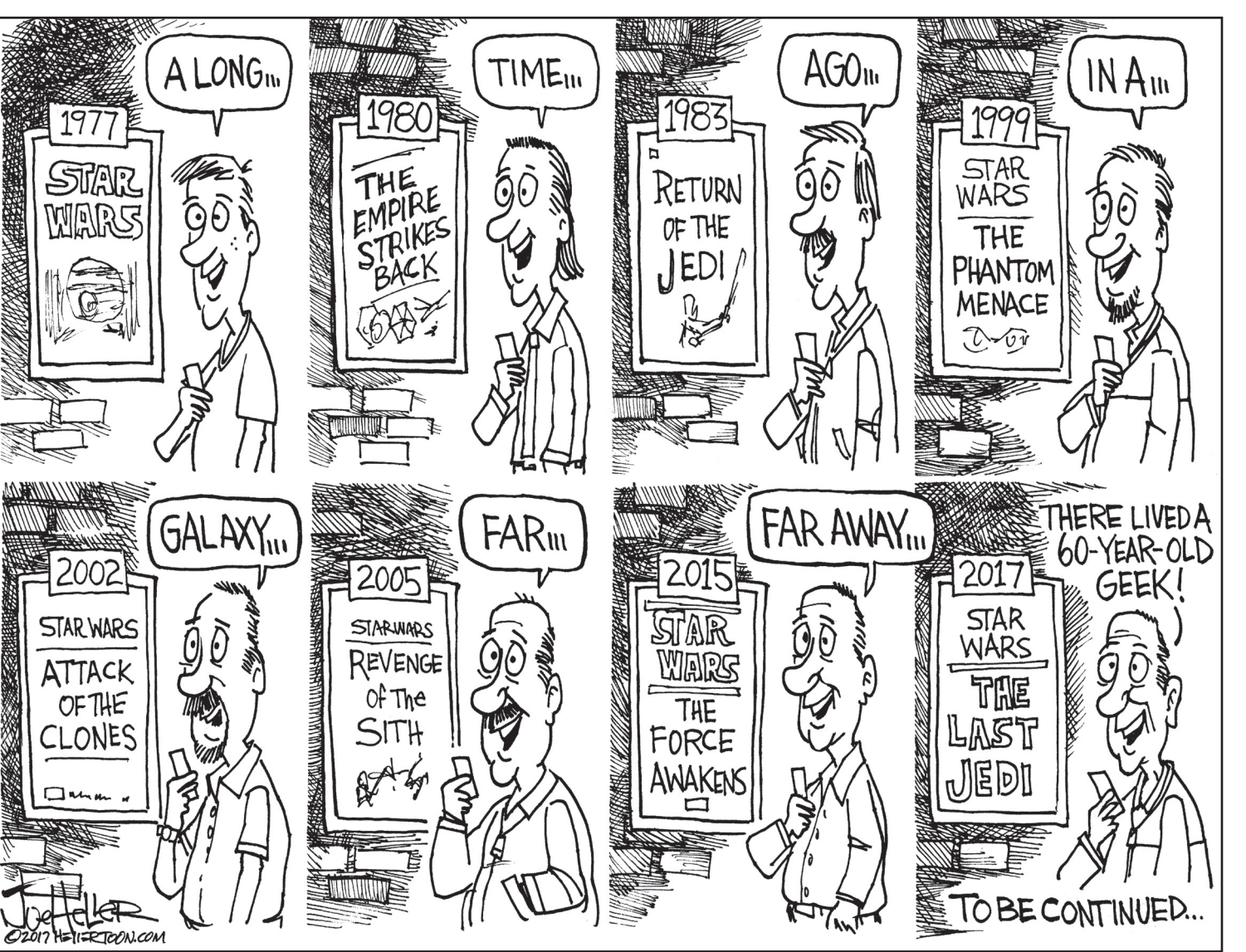
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