

Gene Kelly's Brush with Death

***It was his first jet flight—and almost his last—
as the huge plane plummeted 30,000 feet
toward the black, icy waters of the Atlantic.***



In this dramatic article, written especially for Family Weekly, actor-dancer-director Gene Kelly relates in his own words the terrifying moments of a near-tragic flight from Paris to New York several weeks ago. This exclusive interview was obtained by Peer J. Oppenheimer, Family Weekly's Hollywood correspondent.

THE OFFICIAL COMMUNIQUE blamed a malfunctioning automatic pilot for causing the jet I was taking from Paris to New York to suddenly plunge from 35,000 to 6,000 feet before the pilot's heroic efforts pulled it out of the dive. I wouldn't know about technicalities. All I know is that to me, and I'm sure to everyone else on the nearly ill-fated Pan American Jet Clipper, it was a very personal matter of life or death.

It's amazing how alone you can be at a time like that, even in a huge plane carrying 124 people.

I wasn't even supposed to be on the flight, and my initial reaction when I thought we'd crash into the sea was one of anger and frustration that I was.

It all began a few hours earlier at the Pan Am office in Paris, when I reconfirmed my return flight on a conventional, piston-engine plane after spending the Christmas holidays with my daughter Kerry, who's in school in Switzerland.

By coincidence I happened to run into Harry Kurnitz, a writer-friend, who told me he was reconfirming his flight back to New York on a jet. He talked me into joining him. I didn't think I stood a chance, but there was space available, and I took it.

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Kelly, pinned to his seat, saw the pilot thrown to the floor of the plane, then slowly pull himself toward the cockpit with a superhuman effort.