

Valiant efforts saved Lakers

By Kevin White
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Co-pilot Harold Gifford pulled his frosted head back into the cockpit. His ears stung and his eyes needed a break from straining out the window into the wind-whipped snow, trying to make out the dark Carroll County landscape.

The DC-3 twin-engine airplane he was helping to guide that night 50 years ago had lost its lights, heat and ground communication, and the crew had no way of knowing how much fuel remained. The windshield was so iced over by blizzard conditions that the pilots were forced to hang out small side windows to see.

This plane had to land somewhere, soon.

While warming, Gifford suddenly was jolted back to reality. "We're losing altitude!" came the cry from Jim Holznagel, who was in the cockpit that trip training as a co-pilot. Using the only flashlight still working — a small penlight — Holznagel had it fixed on the altimeter, which was showing a rapid drop.

The plane was headed for a grove of trees.

"I instinctively grabbed the control column, pulled us back up and straightened it back out," Gifford said. "We were just moments from plunging into that grove. It would have been like being hit in the face with a baseball bat, and that would have been it."

Said Holznagel: "If I hadn't noticed that altimeter, we wouldn't be here today."

Soon, the plane circled to an area where Gifford had seen an unharvested cornfield shrouded in deep snow. Unable to locate the airport, the crew decided it would land the plane there.

Less than a year after "The Day the Music Died" — the plane crash that killed music stars Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson near Clear Lake, Iowa — another airplane, just 150 miles away, in that cornfield north of Carroll, Iowa, was close to making more tragic news.

Among the 23 people on the plane that night were nine players from the Minneapolis Lakers pro basketball team.

Thanks to the quick thinking of the crew — headed by now-deceased Capt. Vernon Ullman — the crisis is now just a footnote in NBA history.

“I felt probably the most elated that I've ever felt in my life,” Gifford, now 86, said of the landing in the snowy cornfield. “Especially when the passengers cheered back there. I heaved a sigh, and I realized that we were alive.”

Gifford will speak Monday in Carroll in a ceremony marking the 50-year anniversary of the landing.

On Jan. 17, 1960, the Minneapolis Lakers lost a road game to the St. Louis Hawks, 135-119. Minutes into the flight home, Gifford pushed the button to respond to the control tower and instantly lost all electricity, including fuel gauges.

Unable to return to the St. Louis airport because of heavy air traffic, the plane — built in the 1930s and retired by Western Airlines before being bought by Lakers owner Bob Short — proceeded. For three to four hours it was able to fly above the massive winter storm, but because of the air pressure and lack of a fuel gauge, among other factors, the plane dropped into the storm.

“That's when everyone became a little anxious,” said Dick Garmaker, a four-time NBA All-Star with the Lakers.

The plane gradually veered off course and the pilots realized they were going to have to find a place to land. Cruising just a couple of hundred feet off the ground, they flew past a water tower. The snow had covered most of the letters, leaving only the last two, “L-L,” Gifford said.

As the plane circled the town after midnight, searching for the airport, Carroll resident Jim Herzog heard it fly directly over his house on the north edge of town. Having flown planes himself, he went outside and watched it. He knew something wasn't right.

“My wife said, ‘What are you going to do?’” Herzog said. “I said, ‘I don't know, but those guys are in trouble.’”

Word spread as the troubled plane noisily circled low over the town. House by house, Carroll residents flipped on their lights in hopes of aiding the crew. Herzog followed his neighbor, a fireman, to the fire station.

In the air, Gifford identified the cornfield he had seen earlier as the best option, and the others in the cockpit agreed. He had been a crop-duster for a time and was a pilot in the Air Force, logging thousands of flight hours. He was accustomed to landing in unconventional places.

After doing one fly-by run to make sure everyone was comfortable with the decision, Ullman and his crew lowered the plane into the cornfield.

“I think we hooked a tail wheel on a barbed-wire fence along the road on the end of that field,” Gifford said.

Said Garmaker, now 77: "The landing was terrific because we had such a head wind. When we landed in the deepest snow, it was rather cushiony. They did just a tremendous job."

Instantly, the ballplayers were overcome by a mix of relief and jubilation.

"We started yelling like we'd won the world championship," said Rodney "Hot Rod" Hundley, a two-time All-Star who would go on to a 42-year Hall of Fame broadcasting career, the final 35 with the New Orleans and Utah Jazz. "We were the happiest campers you've ever seen when they opened that door and we got off."

Elgin Baylor went on to become the most decorated player on that team. In 1960, the future Hall of Famer was in just the second year of a 14-year NBA career.

When the plane first encountered problems and lost the lights, the card game that had been started broke up and Baylor went to the back and lay on the floor. Garmaker said Baylor told the team that if he was going to die, he wanted to die comfortably.

Hundley said that in various speaking engagements over the years, he's had some fun at the expense of Garmaker, who sold life insurance in the off-season.

"I say he was going around the plane having everyone sign these things and then throwing them out the cockpit window," Hundley said, chuckling.

Herzog, the Carroll resident who had headed to the fire station after seeing the disabled plane, jumped in the car of a local mortician and they followed a firetruck out to the landing site.

One of the players, Tom Hawkins, told the New York Post's Peter Vecsey, in a story about the landing published last year, that he had a conversation with the mortician that night.

"The guy remarked, 'Thought I had some business tonight, boys.'"

The passengers — nine players; coach Jim Pollard; a flight crew of four; five other adults, including the team doctor; and four children — were taken to the Burke Motor Inn in Carroll. Unable to sleep, they stayed up all night reliving the ordeal. The team returned to Minneapolis by bus the next day.

While at the motel, Herzog had one of those small-world moments.

"The team doctor's wife kind of kept looking at me from across the room," he said. "I could kind of feel it. Finally she walked over and said, 'You're Jim Herzog, aren't you?' I said 'Yeah.' It turned out I'd dated her once in Minneapolis."

Ullman was determined to fly the plane out of the cornfield, so a bulldozer plowed a makeshift runway by removing the cornstalks and packing down the snow.

The generators were repaired and the batteries were recharged. According to an account in the Carroll Daily Times Herald, a local sheriff estimated that 1,000 people returned two days later to watch Ullman fly the plane out of the field.

"They had more people out to watch that than they had at our next game," Hundley said.

Ullman used about half of the 2,000-foot runway before lifting into the air and returning to Minnesota without incident.

More than 20 years later, Garmaker and a partner were buying some apartment units in St. Paul, Minn. In finalizing the details, Garmaker was asked to call the owner, Hilbert Steffes, at his home in Carroll, Iowa.

“When I got him on the phone and we got through with our business, I said, ‘Hey, do you remember 20-some years ago, that airplane going in?’

“‘Oh, hell yes!’ he said. ‘It landed right in my cornfield!’”

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Time: 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Place: Harold Bierl Community Room, Depot Plaza, Carroll

Program: At 6 p.m., co-pilot Harold Gifford will speak, along with residents who will give their accounts. A monument commemorating the landing will be unveiled.

People on the flight

Coach: Jim Pollard

Players: Elgin Baylor, Rodney “Hot Rod” Hundley, Dick Garmaker, Tom Hawkins, Alex “Boo” Ellis, Bob Leonard, Frank Selvy, Jim Krebs, Larry Foust

Flight crew: Vernon Ullman, Harold Gifford, Jim Holznagel, Eva Olofson Ullman

Team doctor: Dr. Benjamin Bofenkamp

Other team personnel: Frank Ryan, Cliff French

Wives: Kathy Bofenkamp, Virginia Ryan

Children: Jack Pollard, Mike Ryan, Mary Ryan, Pete French