



TWA Flight No. 891/26 – June 26, 1959 Athens (Greece) – Chicago, Illinois (USA)

Reconstruction of the flight up to the moment of the crash Summary of witness testimony

Excerpts from *Civil Aeronautics Board* (CAB) report made public in the United States of America in 1960.
(Times are referred to UTC)

Reconstruction of the flight up to the moment of the crash

TWA Flight No. 891/26 began at Athens (Greece) at 10:15 a.m. on June 26, 1959 by Lockheed 1649-A plane No. 8083-H, stopping at Rome at 12:15 p.m.

At Rome there was a change of plane and the flight was resumed on the Lockheed 1649-A plane No. 7313-C. The originating Crew remained the same except for a Cabin Team change at Rome. The flight originated at Athens with a Cabin Team consisting of Purser Petiot and Hostesses Talbot and Leadley. This cabin team per schedule pattern was changed at Rome where Purser Edmond Mouchnino and Hostesses Marguerite Fay and Jacqueline Jaussen boarded as replacements.

Capt. Jack Davis, who boarded the plane at Rome as ACM (accompanying crew member), was not on duty during the flight but was returning to Chicago for his rest turn.

The plane left Rome at 2:00 p.m. and reached Milan Malpensa Airport at 3:36 p.m. after a normal flight.

Flight operated routinely Rome to Milan with no maintenance items written up requiring correction on the ground at Milan. The only non-satisfactory item pertaining to the aircraft was the non-operation automatically of the Cabin pressurization system, necessitating manual control. As this is not an item on which correction can be made Overseas and as manual operation was satisfactory Rome to Milan, no corrective action was taken at Milan.

At the Malpensa Airport Capt. Grade, F/O Ellis and ACM Capt. Davis went, accompanied by the TWA representative, Mr. G. Moreo, to the Weather Station and the Operations Office for the clearing operations pertaining to the Malpensa-Paris flight. At the Weather Station the information on weather conditions was given to Capt. Grade by the technician on duty, Lt. Vincenzo Vacirca.

Upon completion of their duties, the Crew Members proceeded directly to the customs area. The Captain advised Mr. Moreo that the 15,000 pound release fuel was adequate and no top off would be necessary. The crew left the terminal and boarded the aircraft.

Mr. H.B. Chambers, Milan District Transportation Manager, exchanged a few words with the Crew at the foot of the steps prior to their boarding.

Passengers were loaded, ramps were removed, the engines were started and the flight departed from the blocks at 16:11 after receiving taxi instructions.

The history of the flight from the Malpensa Airport up to the time of the crash was reconstructed on the basis of the flight plan, the exchange of messages between the plane and the Malpensa tower and between the plane and Milan Control, and on the basis of the distribution of the wreckage on the ground and the testimony.

The plane's positions, with the time of each, were as follows:

Time **Events summary**

4:05 The plane asks the Malpensa Tower for authorization to start the engines.
Authorization is given.

4:09 The plane asks for authorization to taxi.
Authorization is given: runway 35L - QNH = 10 14.3 Mb.

4:16 The plane communicates that it is ready for the take-off.
It is authorized to get in line.

4:17 Malpensa Tower gives the plane the clearance from Milan Control:
"Malpensa-Paris, via NDB Saronno and Biella. Above Saronno at 4,000 ft. Climb to 10,000 ft. or more above Saronno following the waiting circuit. Approach Biella at 18,500 ft. and maintain that altitude".

4:19 The plane repeats - Malpensa Tower specifies: "approach Saronno at 4,000 ft. and no higher". The plane confirms.
Malpensa Tower authorizes the take-off - turn to right wing calm.

4:20 The plane takes off.

4:21 Malpensa Tower communicates: "Take-off at 20' - report on reaching 4,000 ft. and Saronno".
The plane confirms.

- 4:23 Malpensa Tower asks the plane to report its altitude.
The plane communicates that it is 2,300 ft.
Malpensa Tower: "Contact Milan Control on 125.3 Mc/s".
The plane confirms.
- 4:24 Contact is established between the plane and Milan Control (Linate), but the communication is uncertain because the electricity is off at the Milan Control station.
- 4:26 The plane communicates that it is on the Saronno circuit at 6,000 ft.
Milan Control: "Roger, report on leaving Saronno".
The plane confirms.
- 4:32 The plane reports to Milan Control that at 32' is leaving Saronno at 10,000 ft. and is proceeding toward Biella.
Milan Control: "Roger, report on reaching 18,500 ft. and estimated time for Biella".
- 4:32:30z The plane replies: "Wait one moment - I estimate Biella 45' - Four Five".
- 4:32:40z The plane: "Roger...Roger".
- 4:35 On the basis of the statements made by the witnesses and the time shown by the watches of the victims, the plane crashed to the ground at about 4:35 p.m.
- 4:45 Milan Control attempts to communicate with the plane, repeating its call letters without success. The First Officer of a SABENA Airline DC-6B plane, which at that time had taken off and was over Mt. Ceneri at 16,000 ft., joined in the call, twice.

Summary of witness testimony

The taking and evaluation of witness testimony was handled by a Committee headed by Mr. Robert Myersburg of the FAA *International Engineering Section*. Additionally witness testimony was gathered by the Carabinieri and received in the form of letters and calls.

According to statements made by reasonably reliable witnesses, at the time of the crash, 4:35 p.m., it was raining slightly in the vicinity of Olgiate Olona and the ceiling was estimated at 600-700 meters.

Essentially, all witness reported they saw the airplane initially underneath the clouds at between 2,000 and 2,500 feet. Then it was reported going in and out of the clouds and then when in the clear was soon struck by lightning and to explode and fall in 3 pieces with the right wing trailing flames. This was incompatible with a known elevation of 10,000 over Saronno and some 8,000 feet of solid overcast between.

This was finally resolved when it was found that a SABENA flight departed Malpensa at 16:32 made a right turn after take-off, and proceeded toward Saronno beacon, placing it directly over the area at 16:35, just as the wreckage of Flight 891 fell out of the overcast: SABENA's Flight 648 took off from the Malpensa Airport on a DC-6B plane, entered from the clouds at about 2,600 ft. QNH, more or less in the same area and at approximately the same time, with a variation of plus or minus 30 seconds.

It was this airplane the witnesses saw as it disappeared into the overcast and it was the explosion of the right wing just as it cleared the overcast which they construed as seeing the airplane explode. It is quite evident that not only did we have an accident but a very close near miss as well.

Much digging finally uncovered witnesses who confirmed the course and SABENA aircraft type and completely nullified the testimony of the highly imaginative main group of witnesses. In essence then all that witnesses, including the reliable ones, actually saw was the wreckage falling out of the overcast in 3 main pieces and the right wing explode after coming in view, plus witnessing the various major component impacts.

None actually saw the accident happen at altitude and in consequence could contribute nothing as to the cause of the accident.