

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Tom E. Sulpizio (TS)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM), Kim Besom (KB)

Subject: Tom Sulpizio recounts the loss of his father, Thomas J. Sulpizio, an Electronics Engineer working for Rheem and traveling on United Flight 718 with Ray Lasby, another Electronics Engineer. Tom recounts how the loss of his father impacted him, his mother, and other family members.

Date of Interview: June 30, 2014

Method of Interview: In person at the Shrine of the Ages at Grand Canyon National Park

Transcriber: Grayson Kelmer

Date of Transcription: April 15, 2021

Transcription Reviewers: Tom Sulpizio, Tom Martin

Keys: Tom/Thomas E. Sulpizio, Tom/Tomas J. Sulpizio, Ray Lasby, Neal Newby, Mike Nelson, Dan Driscoll, Tony Hillerman; 1956 Grand Canyon mid-air collision, Grand Canyon National Park, Shrine of the Ages, United Airlines/United Flight 718, Trans World Airlines/TWA Flight 2, Douglas DC-7, Lockheed L-1049 Super Constellation, Rheem Corporation, Western Union, RAND Corporation; Los Angeles, Santa Monica, Philadelphia, New Jersey, Flagstaff; electronics, engineering, aerospace, flying, airplane crash, aviation, photo, telegram, lawsuit, settlement, corporation liability, monument

Note: Tom Sulpizio reviewed this transcript and added comments on April 24, 2021, shown as footnotes in the transcript text. According to Tom Sulpizio: "I know so much more about the accident and its circumstances today than I did at the time of the oral interview seven years ago. When I sold my mom's condo in New Jersey, I cleaned out her stored items and archive materials pertaining to the 1956 Crash. I had not looked at them carefully prior to our interview in June 2014."

TM: ...start this all over again. Today is the 30th of June 2014. This is the Shrine of the Ages at Grand Canyon National Park. Today is the memorial for the 1956 air crash between United and Trans World Airlines, and today we are with –

TS: Thomas E. Sulpizio, Tom Sulpizio, and I'm the son of Thomas J. Sulpizio who was a passenger on the United Flight 718.

TM: My name is Tom Martin. So, where should we start?

TS: Well, I was 17 months old when the event occurred. Exactly 17 months because I'm January 30th born, and my mom and I were living in an apartment in suburban Philadelphia in Southern New Jersey. He was an electronics engineer along with another passenger whose family is here, the Lasby family. He and Ray Lasby were electronic engineers and project managers for a company in Philadelphia called Rheem.

There's a lot of mystery surrounding the nature of their trip. There's a lot of mystery surrounding the project work they were on, but based on previous projects and materials I have, not with me today but in the collection of mementos back in New Jersey, it's clear that they were working on defense-related or military-related projects in the area of avionics, either pilot simulation systems or pilot enhanced performance systems. We don't know, but we do know that the work was classified, and my mom never knew what he was working on. He kept that pretty much top secret.ⁱ

So, to this day in fact, here, with this ceremony here, in the 30th of June at the park, I've been able to speak with the Lasbys and others and find that perhaps there was more to their trip than we know. That it might have been classified, and that they may have been – because computers didn't exist, everything they had would have been hard copy, papers, blueprints, schematics, diagrams, so it's possible they were carrying classified information that had to be retrieved. This could be a very interesting investigation moving forward. That's an interesting side twist to this whole tragedy is that we had the occasion of some national defense projects that had to be either covered up or at least the materials retrieved. So, that's something worth pursuing.

What's been an interesting enigma over the years has been this photo which has been on display in my mom's house for years and years of my dad and Mr. Lasby, and there's actually three photos. I'm going to try to find the other two, but this one we framed, and I have the original from the Rheem Corporation which came with a letter I sent to I believe to Kim, and it just indicates that they're in Santa Monica, California.ⁱⁱ

One of the things I'm going to do as a homework from this meeting here today is find the exact spot today where this photo was taken just to show what it looks like today, and I'll either reach out to the Santa Monica Historical Society or the Santa Monica Library. I live about 80, 90 miles from Santa Monica, so I can do this maybe as a little side project. Not urgent, but something worthwhile pursuing. It's just kind of fun from a family history point of view to know where this photo actually was taken. I don't have – oh, go ahead Kim.

KB: Just about the photo, if you haven't said already, who sent it to you? How did that come about?

TS: They came from the employer, Rheem Corporation. How and who took it is a mystery. Obviously, they had a photographer take it or a photographer took it. It obviously wasn't in a camera on the flight. That film wouldn't have survived, so this was taken on the ground and kept in Los Angeles.ⁱⁱⁱ

TM: Did Rheem have an office in LA?^{iv}

TS: I don't know, and we don't know the exact nature of the meeting, whether it was with an aerospace company in Los Angeles, Lockheed, Douglas in Long Beach, Lockheed is in Burbank, or RAND in Santa Monica. So, knowing who – he was there Monday through Friday. He and Ray were there Monday through Friday. Knowing whom they met would be an interesting – would be part of this mystery as to what was the reason for their trip and whether they were carrying classified information back on the flight.

Knowing who took the photos would be an interesting piece of that puzzle, and the fact that it came from the employer means that the film was developed, the prints were developed on the West Coast and sent to Philadelphia. I think the date of that letter is in July, well, sometime in July. I have to pull up my computer which is – well it's actually on my Blackberry, but we don't need that right now. So, those are the things that kind of are of interest to me. I do want to catalog a lot of materials that I have in a box in New Jersey. Mom kept them, but she refused to look at them after a while, so I haven't bothered looking at them for a long time.

TM: Did she ever talk with you about how this event impacted her?

TS: Well, it hit her very hard because she lost her mother at age 51, just a few months before, so when the Western Union telegram arrived the day of July 1st, that's how we learned of the crash. The family mobilized, and she then moved in with her father who also was widowed because of his wife, her mom, having died. So, we pulled together as a new family unit, and the three of us lived in a house then in suburban Philadelphia, New Jersey side of Philadelphia, from '56 until I moved to college in '77. So, a good 20 years.

KB: Have you seen that telegram?

TS: I have it, yeah.

KB: What does it essentially say?

TS: I don't want to trust my memory, but it confirmed that the flight was missing, and it was suspected to be a crash.

TM: And did that come from TWA or United?

TS: I believe it came either from United or Rheem. Yeah, it came either from the employer or came from United. Remember, there was no email. Telephones were still rather primitively or hesitantly used. Telegrams were still the mode of communication in the '50s.^v

TM: If you're willing, a museum collection be really great to get.

TS: Oh yeah. That would be phenomenal to have. I think that would be just a piece of history that captures the era, so I'll definitely pull that together. I mean I have three types of materials. I have materials related to his employment at Rheem and RCA as an electronics engineer for about seven or eight years because he graduated age 22. He was 30 when he perished, so eight years. I have that collection, and some of it at the end of course would capture the work he was doing which would have been the reason for the trip.

The second set of mementos, memorabilia, would be related to published materials concerning the crash, so materials that you have perhaps already. We have a few more clippings. We have local Philadelphia newspaper clippings. I saw these people had Oklahoma newspaper clippings. We have local hometown clippings. Those would be nice to make sure they're preserved, and you know, I should put them in plastic, and then they can be scanned. You don't need more *Life* magazine displays. You have those.^{vi}

KB: Right, those local ones, and they have obituaries and things like that.

TM: That'd be great.

TS: Yeah, and so that public information, and you know, is either a microfiche, or I have it in, you know, clippings. The third would be communications related to the period of the of the crash, so letters from my dad to my mother while he was traveling either on a previous trip or even on this trip. So, you know, cross-country mail would have been one week, so I think he may have dispatched a letter. Since he arrived on a Monday, he probably dispatched the letter, maybe dispatched the letter midweek. I don't think he would have dispatched a letter on the day

leaving because he was going right to Philadelphia. This is important, this photo, because it was taken, let's say, somewhere between 12 and 18 hours before the flight took off at 8 am. This was taken on June 29th, let's say, in the afternoon. This is a photocopy.^{vii}

TM: And the photo is showing two gentlemen. They're both in suits. They've got nice shoes on. Your dad's wearing a nice sort of lighter-colored tie.

TS: Mm-hmm. No hats because it was California. That was the only acknowledgment of casualness is that they didn't wear their fedoras, but they both wore gray, probably gray flannel suits – no, they're not flannel. Just gray suits and white shirts, and then as you say, a light tie on my dad.

TM: Yeah, dad's got a nice silk tie. Both have their top buttons on the jackets done but not their bottom buttons.

TS: Yep.

TM: As if they'd been sitting maybe. That's nice.

TS: My grandfather, my dad's father, was a tailor, so he had impeccable suits. It looks like it was cuffed, but this photo – there are similar scenes in Palisades Park in Santa Monica. So, you know, on a Thursday before leaving – I believe the 30th was a Friday that year. On a Thursday before leaving, why would they just casually meander into Santa Monica Palisades Park unless they had free time? And okay, it's a nice spot in the '50s.^{viii}

TM: And the gentleman they're with is the person from Rheem who's going to take them to the airport or to their hotel. You know what I mean? Just throwing in some what-ifs.

TS: It couldn't be the day of the takeoff because that was 8 am in the morning. I wouldn't think this would have been – you would have had –

TM: On the way to their hotel maybe?

TS: You know, looking at the shadows here it's a pretty – you know, I'm not an investigator, but that's a pretty steep shadow, but the mornings would be would be foggy in Santa Monica typically this time of the year. They wouldn't be bright sunshine, so this was perhaps later in the day. I would say this might be about this time. [See Endnote ii]

TM: After the meeting was done, then?

TS: Yeah, after the meeting

TM: Somebody came out. Went outside. Took a picture maybe. [See Endnote iii]

TS: Correct, yeah, so I'm gonna research where RAND Corporation was. I know they're in Santa Monica because I knew somebody that worked there, and it's a think tank. It's a defense contractor. They've been in business since the '40s, but that's just a guess. That's just strictly a shot in the dark. But Santa Monica was, you know, it captured the glamour of LA, Hollywood, Santa Monica. I mean you hear somebody today talk about Hollywood and Los Angeles quite a

bit. Dad had been to California. I think this was his second trip if I'm not mistaken. May have been his first trip. I'm not sure. That, I'll have to research, but it was his first or second trip.^{ix}

A trip out West was a big deal. People were still taking the Route 66. To take an air trip to the West Coast was, you know, with these latest – what was it called? The Constellation and the DC-6 was the United. Was probably doing about 300 miles per hour, so with connections, it was a 12-, 13-hour trip. So, you get back three hours, so it was a 10-hour trip. So, they probably spent all day Monday traveling to California, and then Friday would have been, let's say, leaving at 8 am, they would have gotten back 10 at night into Philadelphia.

So, when he didn't show up – and this is my mom who's now deceased. She just passed away six months, seven months ago. She said when he didn't show up, it wasn't totally unusual because I guess he was going to take the train, or I don't remember how he was going to get from the airport. It's 35 miles to where we were living, but it didn't surprise her initially that he didn't arrive, but then she had the evening – I just remember she had the late-night news on, and there was a certain broadcaster who did the Philadelphia news for about three decades, and he announced that there had been an airline crash, and this was on the 11 o'clock news.

So, the crash occurred early in the day, I believe. It occurred, let's see, if they left LA one hour and a half out, they left, took off at 8:30, it would have been 10 am here local time. So, at 11 or 10 o'clock news it came on. Again, she was not surprised he had not arrived home yet, but she heard there was an airplane crash, and there was a little bit of doubt, and then family members started calling and asked, "What flight was he on?"

And maybe she didn't know the exact flight number, but she knew it was United, and at that point, she was getting very troubled as she put it. I just realized, I told somebody she woke up the next morning with the telegram, but she was actually distraught all night, and the telegram arrived probably at the crack of dawn. Western Union actually would deliver a telegram in those days. Bring it to your house, and that's when the grieving started for her.

I was too young to grieve, so I told someone, "You know, actually it's a little bit like learning a language." If you're in a country at the right age, you can learn another language or multiple languages effortlessly. If somebody passes away before you knew them and got to love them and got to be dependent upon them, it's very abstract. It's very abstract. It'd be like somebody that was born maybe – or in pregnancy and was born after their father perished, so I was in that stage where I was able then to be adopted into our extended family.

My grandfather like I said made it home for us, so you know the three of us were in that new family unit, and mom, she didn't like me to tell this, but she did remarry in 1970ish for a couple years, but it didn't work out, so she only remarried very briefly. So, that was getting back to the events that unfolded. We have about, I think I said today, about 100 family members, extended family members in the region, and that's also a tremendous support group.

So, when you have a tragedy of this type, you want to make sure that family steps in and fills the gap, and I think some of the first, second-generation immigrant families from Europe especially or now from Latin America, I think that exists. And it's not as strong with people that have moved away from that European immigration, especially among Italians, Irish, Germans, maybe

less so the Scottish or British, but now with the Hispanics, you have that strong family sense. Even though there's a tragedy, the family knows how to step in.

TM: Did you have any uncles that sort of came in and spent some more time with you?

TS: I had three uncles, and they definitely spent time with me. One just around, just living, you know, my grandfather's son, so living right around the corner, and two uncles in the Philadelphia area. And something noteworthy, I will try to interview the – my dad has one surviving sister left. She's 91, so she's the only one surviving now who would have been close to this event, and I will see her this weekend, and without upsetting her too much, I will try to discuss gently with her the events.

TM: That'd be great.

TS: Yeah, so she's pretty sharp, and I spoke to her on the phone about a month ago, so she's still very sharp at 91. So, she may fill in some of the gaps that I don't know because I'm only going by what my mom told me and by what's in our box of memorabilia or mementos and a little bit of stories that I've picked up over the years.

TM: So, a simple digital recorder, 40, 50 bucks makes a WAV file. Makes electronic files on a thumb drive.

TS: Okay.

TM: You can send it to Kim, and we can give you one of these to you as a gift.

TS: I wonder if my computer would work as well. I have a –

TM: Audacity.com. You can download that.

TS: Yeah, okay.

TM: It's a free download.

TS: Okay.

TM: It's kind of hard to work, to program, but it's very –

TS: Because I have a mic on the computer.

TM: Absolutely. Absolutely, you can do that.

TS: And it should then go right to a thumb drive easily once you form a video – once you form an audio file.

TM: That's right. That's exactly right.

KB: And some people use their phones.

TS: I think that's trickier. I'd have to have her talk into like my voicemail to do that, and I think there's a limit of two minutes. I'm not sure I want to I want to open up old wounds for her because for her this is going to be very painful.

TM: Absolutely. Understood.

TS: And, you know, that was her brother, and uh she's 91, and when I had come to the Canyon in '88 and I brought pictures, photographs we had taken here of the shrine or the cemetery next door. I mean, his two sisters, my other aunt was alive at that time, we all were in tears, so it's not an easy thing to do for an immediate family member like that.

TM: I've seen a lot of tears today. I've cried myself, yeah.

TS: So, I'd prefer to do a little bit of a just a free – rather than an audio, maybe I'll do just a – take some notes and fill in some of the gaps that I don't have.

TM: That'd be great.

TS: Be good to know when she found out. How she found out.

TM: You might mention to her, just if it helps, that historians are a little slow, but we finally figured it out, and she has an amazing story that history would like to capture and take forward if she's willing to help with that. It is not going to be easy. It doesn't make it any easier.

TS: Yeah, she's pretty stoic though. My Aunt Marie is pretty hard nail. She's as hard as nails. She can handle it.

TM: Okay, but just so she knows that this would be for historical – now for you as a family, yes, of course, to learn more about your father, absolutely.

TS: Well, I'm going to show her the photos from today of the plaque, and I'm going to show her, you know, some of the receptions. I didn't take the best pictures in the world, but they're good enough to explain to her what is going on. She's still sharp as can be. She has no dementia at all. I mean this is a lady that could easily live to mid-90s, maybe even a hundred.^x

TM: See if she's willing. I think that'd be great.

TS: We'll see if I can take some notes. I don't need that waiver because then I'll just – I'll use my waiver as the interpretation of what she's telling me.

TM: That'd be great. Thank you.

TS: I'll be the reporter.

KB: So, after that initial telegram, do you know if that's how they kept in touch with you all? Do you have other telegrams?

TS: I'm gonna have to search to see what other communications we have. I'm sure we got some phone calls from Rheem at that point. I mean, come on, the phone system was in business. You could do – there were area codes. We definitely – from Philadelphia to New Jersey, you know, this wasn't the middle ages, so there were phones, and I'm sure she got phone calls.

What happened is we had a couple of relatives on her side who were very intelligent, college-educated. One was a dentist. He stepped in right away and became her advisor, and he happened to have a relative on his wife's side who was a lawyer, and we started discussing immediately. I know that they started discussing finances, and settlements, and insurance policies, and things of that sort within a matter of a few days.

I do remember the lawsuit was a bit contentious. My mother was very innocent in these matters. So, you know, to sue a company was very unprecedented in the '50s. To sue a company for damages for loss of life that was not related to product liability or to criminal intent was also very unprecedented.

We had a different justice, different jurisprudence system in those days where the company, the corporation was viewed innocent until proven guilty, or if they in other words if they caused – if there was an event such as an airplane crash, you had to show there was malintent. There was mismanagement of maintenance. That there was inappropriate action by an employee which would've been the pilot. So, I think that what they use is – I'm not a lawyer, but what they use was to show that the pilots used poor judgment.

Now the government cannot be sued, so the government was held harmless, but the airlines did not want this to open the flood gates for every single incident to cause a lawsuit. So, I have to check whether I went to a jury trial or whether it was a settlement. I believe was a settlement with all the passengers that signed up for each of the two aircraft, either TWA or United.^{xi}

TM: I think that's right. Yeah.

TS: It was a settlement, so we got "x" dollars, and they used different crazy formulas about what his life earnings would be, and they threw a little bit of, you know, premium on there for loss of life and that kind of stuff. It was a joke. You know, by today's standards, it was really quite small, but what is noteworthy – and I tried to get my mother to expand on this.

We were in – it's a fairly republican town in a fairly democratic state. New Jersey's fairly democratic, but there are republican sections, especially around the affluent suburbs of New York and around the affluent suburbs of Philadelphia, and people were kind of surprised. They were a little surprised that she was suing a company for loss of her husband's life when the airline didn't cause that life to be lost. It's just, remember, you have to put your mind back in the '50s. They were asking, "Where was the intent?" It was an accident. It was an act of God. It was an act of God.

So, again, how we've changed as a society. That also was one of the first major lawsuits coming out of an airplane crash. Another first as a result of this crash. So, that's something worthwhile that has not been discussed very much. What we got was, you know, was a token, but it would help her raise me, help put me to college, and so forth.

- TM: And we heard a hundred thousand dollars was one settlement award today. When you think about it, you know, okay the average earner, earning 1956 –
- TS: He was at 12,000 a year. So, you know, you take that times, say a career, at that point 30 years old, say 35 years, you're looking at \$350,000. I mean, we didn't even get his life salary.
- TM: Right. That's right. That's right. Yep.
- TS: It was a discount. Today, it's multiples of one's life salary.
- TM: And did your mother have to go to work?
- TS: No, she was the talk of the town of being, you know, the rich lady, that she got paid so much money.
- TM: This is a common thread.
- TS: Yep, she got paid so much money. She used to always be – she used to dress me very well. She looked really sharp, and she was a very tasteful lady. She used to drive nice cars, so everyone assumed she had gotten a million dollars, or the equivalent of a million dollars in those days which might have been a quarter of a million, and in fact she only got 100,000.

The insurance was actually pretty generous. He took out I think a hundred. It was a policy that paid double because of accidental loss of life. So, it was probably a 160- or 165-thousand-dollar insurance payout. And then she had – the company had a life insurance policy for employees that might have been one year of salary. So, you know, you roll that all together, and it made for a very comfortable living, by no means rich, but comfortable.

And so, there was a little bit of jealousy, and I think that's why people were clucking their tongues, saying, "Well how can you sue a company? It was an act of God." You know, that's just normal small-town discussion. It's kind of like this movie called *Nebraska* that was an Academy Award nominee last year with Bruce Dern. He made the story up that he won the lottery, so everybody in Nebraska was trying to get dibs on his money when it was actually a fabricated story. He didn't win the lottery. Very good. Almost an Academy Award winner, and he's a good actor, so that's –

- TM: Did that trickle down to you as a child? Was there any, you know, did that come down into your level on the schoolyard?
- TS: No. No because I made it a point of being just the opposite of my mother. I'm extremely frugal, and I have still the first nickel I earned as a teenager. I'm saying that, you know, jokingly, but that's true, and that's not because of this incident. That's because of my father's side. They are very, very, very cautious with money, and that was my dad's side of the family. That's just the way they were, and it came to me genetically, I guess.

And I was not too nurturing because my mother was very liberal with spending. She bought the best of everything, so no, I never had any comments about money when I was in the school here. I went to very good schools. Went to a private school for high school, college prep. I went

to a private college outside Philadelphia and paid my tuition from the money that came about as a result of the accident.

TM: Apparently there was a third set aside for dependent children.

TS: Right, it was thirty-eight thousand dollars, and then went to grad school with other people's money. Used other people's money at that point, so I actually have been managing – I took my mother's portfolio away from the bank. She had it in trust. When it was paid by the airline, went into a trust fund, and I took that away when I was 21 or 22 and started managing it on my own, ever since I was 21 or 22, and got rid of all those fees. The three percent a year fees, got rid of all that. That's so 1970s, and fired the lawyer who was getting a retainer at that point. It was ridiculous.

TM: Still?

TS: Still getting a retainer, 300 dollars a year. Oh yes. This was the '60s and '70s, big companies, big banks. Lawyers were gods in those days. This accident occurred in a different era. You've got to put yourself in that '50s, '60s, and '70s era, you know. CNN has a great series on right now called *The Sixties*, and that so captures – I'm a, you know, I'm a child of the '60s. It so captures the mood at that time.

So yeah, this accident is almost a turning point in a lot of ways. It was a turning point for aviation. It was a turning point for corporation liability, and it was a turning point for 128 families, but for society, it was much bigger than the 128 families. And I've gotten over it. You know, quite frankly I've never shed a tear for my father. I mean, he passed away when I was an infant. It's just because I don't have that recollection.

KB: Now today, we heard somebody talking about how her mother never told her, that all she would hear was that her father would be back shortly. It sounds like your mother was very open from the start.

TS: Oh yeah, well you can't hide the fact you don't have a father. You know, you become cognizant or self-aware at age three or four, and you know, "Where's Dad?" "Well, dad passed away in an airplane crash." That's it. What's there to say? I mean it's –

TM: But she was forthcoming with you at an early age with that.

TS: Yeah. Well, we had these lawsuits going on. We had this money flowing in. I mean it all – there was nothing to hide. She kept the amounts confidential, but the fact that he passed away and was, you know, over the Grand. That will ever be my recollection of the Grand Canyon until I visited here in '88 is the Grand Canyon is where Dad passed away.

But, you know, I think it was special coming here in '88, coming here with friends in '89, and then coming back here quite a number of years later for this more focused event. Yeah, the Grand Canyon changes from being just this abstract place out West where a dear, you know, a dear parent regrettably, the aircrafts – hey, they could have fallen over Winslow. They could have fallen over the volcano. They could have fallen into, you know, any place.^{xii}

TM: That's right. They could've had a mid-air over Kansas.

TS: Exactly, it's like Shanksville in Pennsylvania where the 9/11 attacks were. It just happens that it occurred there. You know, that was just chance. Falling on Desert Tower [Desert View Watchtower] was chance. That was not something – there was no, you know, there was no terrorist involved, so the fact that it came crashing down in the National Park was completely chance. It could have just as easily been on Navajo. It could have been on, you know, reservation ground. Actually, I understand from somebody during the discussions who went to visit the site, it is an Indian reservation to get to the site.

KB: Well actually, what that was, was that was in '76 when they were hauling some of the bigger pieces out, they took them to the reservation, and then from there they were hauled for scrap metal or whatever, but some of it never – so that's what they visited.

TS: But the only way to get out of that part of the Canyon is to pass through – was it Hopi?

TM: Navajo.

TS: Navajo. I said it correctly when I said Navajo.

TM: Yeah.

KB: Yes.

TS: Yeah, so I –

TM: Yeah, very remote site, and yeah just, you know, you could assume that, you know, they were maybe doing some sightseeing over – maybe they weren't. Maybe they were simply, you know what, it's hard to say.

TS: I know.

TM: But there we are.

TS: I think it was the Cooks, the gentleman that spoke. Is that his name?

KB: Yes.

TS: Ray Cook, yeah. It was his wife that mentioned it. So yeah, I'm not into this event anywhere near as much as some of your top 10 percent people that have really made it an advocacy to investigate it further. In fact, my mother would say, "What do you care about that for? It's over and done with. Why relive it? Why relive the past? Why go back there and open up a wound?" She said that with the '06 commemoration.

And then when I showed her the letter last summer – we were going to have the dedication of the – or the national historic site was started. She said, and I mentioned this in the reception, "What does this mean to me? Why did we have to bring this up?" And I said, "Well, it's just a very nice gesture by the National Park Service to make this something more important." And she

said, “Well that’s old.” And of course, my mother was old at the time. “That’s old, and it’s not something we’re going to talk about.”

My aunt’s a little more, might be a little more interested in this. His sister would be, I think she’ll be more interested in it, just because, to her, this is something that she probably – first of all, she’s in better health. Secondly, she’ll be interested in the actions of the National Park Service.

TM: But I would also, if I may –

TS: Sure.

TM: In defense of your mom, she’s trying to heal.

TS: Yeah.

TM: She’s trying to sort out her life and move forward with this, to someone that she was very near and dear and loved dearly.

TS: Right.

TM: So, for you as a 17-month-old, trying to get on with your life is, “Okay, this happened. I understand this. Let’s move forward.” The tracks are different, so I can really appreciate your sensitivity to that.

TS: It’s tragic, right. Now she didn’t mind – she liked coming here in ‘88, and she was absolutely thrilled to see the shrine, this site next door, which was part of our tour. And then we took close family, close friends of the family, here the following year, and their comment was, “What a very peaceful place for your dad to rest.” Because you’ve got the ponderosa pines. We came here in February. It was cold, and you had the wind whispering through the pines, and all I could say is, “This is a very peaceful place for Tom to rest.” So, I thought that was nice.

KB: Well, did they fly you out after for this initial ceremony? I mean, you might not remember, but –

TS: When?

KB: In ‘56, afterwards to –

TS: Oh no. No, my mother wouldn’t get on an air – no one in the family would get on an airplane for 10 years. I didn’t fly – my first flight was in ‘73. It was an international flight by the way to France. My grandfather who traveled a lot back to Italy, I think he took his first flight in the late ‘60s or ‘72, and my mom took her first flight in ‘74. So, we waited 16, 17 years before we boarded an aircraft. And I think what moved us to go on air – well, for me it wasn’t as big a deal because I was born in the jet age, or I was brought up in the jet age.

I think what moved my grandfather, my mom and her father, to travel by jet was the fact that the safety record really did improve after this event. And, you know, the 707 was the first really reliable jet, then the L-1011, DC-8, all these – some of them are still flying today! So, that’s how good they are. So, they felt comfortable to travel by air in the ‘70s. You know, I travel by air for a

living practically. You know, 125,000 miles a year. I mean, to come here for a weekend trip is nothing.

KB: And so, she had never been out for a ceremony?

TS: She had never been out here until I moved to San Diego, and we made the trip in the '80s when I was living in San Diego because it was – it's a long drive from LA or San Diego to here. It's not short. It's 500 miles, 550.

TM: Right, a day trip. Yeah, it's a long day drive.

TS: It's more than that. It's a good full day.

TM: Yeah, that's right.

TS: We – cross-country – we drove cross-country from San Diego in '86, and we tried – we were on Interstate 4^{xiii} – we didn't want to go north to the Canyon. It was way, much out of the way on a cross-country trip. We were trying to make time. But she – we had family members that had said that "The cemetery is in Flagstaff. You need to go check out the cemetery in Flagstaff." We didn't know it was TWA's, that was a TWA site. We didn't know 'till later that the United site was here in the park, and TWA was the citizen cemetery.

So, we actually looked around Flagstaff. It's not a big town, so we looked. We drove around for about a half an hour. We finally stopped at a place for dinner maybe a quarter of a mile from the cemetery. We didn't even know. Now, I know it from remembering the restaurant and then seeing the cemetery this morning. I said, "Oh my God, we were just a quarter-mile away." But we would have wasted our time. We would have just seen the monument for the TWA flight, so that was okay that we didn't catch – we didn't stop there.

But then we made it a point, at that time in '86, driving across, you know, I said, "Well, you know, we're going to go to Grand Canyon next, as soon as possible, when you're back in San Diego, and we'll make the day, we'll make the trip." So, we did it in a November time frame when I had a little bit of time, free time on my hands, and then we came back in February '89 a little bit later with some friends that were in the wedding party. They were actually part of my mom and dad's wedding. They were the ones that commented, "What a very peaceful place it is," next door here.

So, I haven't been back here since '89. I've had friends from Europe, colleagues, business associates who know me, and I have given them this location. Go to the Shrine of the Ages. You'll find the monument. You'll find, I mean, you know who I am, so just look for the name, and I've had two or three people say they found it with ease, and they felt it was very special having such a monument.

KB: Is there a monument for your father anywhere else?

TS: No. No, we don't have – we didn't have any of the remains, so we didn't have any other place for burial.^{xiv}

KB: And was that hard in any way for your mother?

TS: I don't think so, no.

KB: Okay, it wasn't.

TS: No, I don't think so. It was not. It wasn't hard. Yep.

TM: It's interesting though, the – I had a chance to interview – and Kim has this interview too – Neal Newby who ended up on a little raft in August in '56, and went from Lee's Ferry and showed up at Phantom Ranch and stopped the trip there and was interviewed by the –

TS: That's on the river.

TM: That's on the river.

TS: Yeah. Yeah, that's on the river. Yeah.

TM: So, they went right through the site. Went right through the crash site.

TS: What's the elevation of the crash site? 2000 feet?

TM: It's a little higher.

TS: Well, let's say the United portion.

TM: Three, six, oh United is atop of the Red Wall, so that's a little higher.

TS: Oh, so that's even higher.

TM: Yeah. Yeah, and he was interviewed by the head of the law enforcement here, and then the FBI came, knocked on his door, and they told him that they were looking for five million dollars in unsecured negotiables.

TS: When was this? This was immediately after the crash?

TM: This was in the fall of 1956, the spring of 1957.

TS: So, considerably later. Not just a few days, but literally months later.

TM: Well, these two guys kind of showed up, and they were like, "Why are these two guys down there? What are they looking for? What are they after?" And so, there was an attempt to find –

TS: So, it might have been a banker on the – there might have been some bankers on the flight. I remember that all negotiable instruments in those days were not electronic. They were paper. Bonds were paper. Treasury bills and notes were paper. There was no electronic version.

TM: And they were all being transferred on planes.

TS: They were all being transferred. Usually, you had a courier or an Air Marshal or something, but typically a courier, and you know, that might be why the Swiss climbers were looking. I mean, it's a little bit of a folklore that Mr. Lasby and my dad were defense projects. They were low-level guys. My dad was, you know, three years with Rheem, not even a project director. He was a project manager.

TM: You know, one of the things they were looking for was the mail because the mail has to go through.

TS: Yeah, the mail would have been the cargo section.

TM: Yeah, so there was – there was a look for that.

TS: Sure.

TM: And didn't actually they find some mail? And it was actually then delivered on, burned around the edges.

KB: I don't know.

TS: Interesting.

KB: But when we talked to a guy from the 1976 cleanup, he said that they found money.

TS: Okay.

TM: Yeah. Yeah, so that, I mean, I just wanted to mention that because you're interested in, "Hey, what was going on?"

TS: Yeah.

TM: There was definitely some interest in this afterwards and at the time to try to recover some of this stuff on the plane.

TS: Also, how many flights were there a day from Los Angeles? Which, at that time, was the fourth biggest city. It was New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, maybe LA. LA might have been the fifth biggest city in the '50s, so how many flights would there have been? None were non-stop, but how many flights would there have been from LA to Chicago or LA to Kansas City? There might have only been the morning flight. There might have been one flight a day and none to New York. There was no capacity to go non-stop to the East Coast, so this was it. This was the courier flight for all commerce from LA to the East Coast.

TM: So that would make sense.

TS: Yeah.

TM: That there was material that these guys were looking for.

TS: Now, I'm sure my dad was doing – he was just doing regular engineering work. He was not involved in anything, just that –

TM: And I'm not saying he wasn't, but there were other reasons to be interested in that as well.

TS: But these two gentlemen from the same company being on this trip suggests they were either at a conference or involved in a project that involved one of these other companies, so I'll find that out. I'll try to find that out. The Lasbys don't know any more, and Rheem has long since gone, changed business models. They are now making hot water heaters.

TM: Yeah, I was going to say that that's a name I know, yeah.

TS: Yeah, Rheem Fury. It's called Fury. I actually have a Rheem hot water heater which I find really amusing, and they moved from Philadelphia. So, you know, without reviewing the materials – I like to work with facts and not too much with memory, but you know, I have to go by whatever I have in my mementos collection to fill in any of these gaps, and one thing is the fact is we have this photo, and we know they were out here. So, I'll try to find out whatever I can about their call, about what it was, their mission, or their reason for being here.

TM: And definitely pass stuff to Kim.

TS: And I'll pass that along.

TM: That'd be great.

KB: Yep, that sounds good.

TS: Because you could build a little, you know, what you could do is for all hundred and twenty – is it 126 or 128?

KB: 128.

TM: 128.

TS: 128 passengers. Build a little biography of why they were on the – why they were traveling.

TM: Have you seen Nelson's book?^{xv}

TS: No, I haven't.

TM: Okay, and I don't know if he's done that or not. I haven't seen the book either. I know that Dan Driscoll was trying to do that.

TS: Okay.

TM: Was basically write up biographies of why these people were on this plane. What were they doing?

TS: What brought them here?

TM: That's right.

TS: The other one, as I mentioned it in the reception, is a piece of fiction that a relative has written which was inspired by the crash of my dad. And it was very much fiction because it was about changing history and changing, you know, a little bit about movement in time and changing history à la the Kennedy assassination thing. Changing that. What would history have been without the crash?

I haven't read the piece. He writes a lot, this guy. He's got 40 publications, so it's a short story. I will see him. I'm going to try to see him this coming weekend. I'm going to see a lot of people this weekend, and I'll try to get an electronic copy. He's an electronic – he's an e-author. He writes all of his books electronically, and I'll try to get a copy of it. That would kind of be neat just as a fiction inspired by the crash.

KB: And there is another one as well, in case you're curious, Tony Hillerman's last book, and he would write mysteries about this area.

TS: I've heard of him.

KB: It's called *Fallen Man*, and it's fiction, and you can't get to the site as easy as these characters seem to be able to, but it's based on people trying to get the securities from the planes.

TS: Okay, I'll definitely look that one up.

KB: And I'm just curious because you said you haven't, you know, you didn't miss him. You didn't because you didn't know him, but you've kept everything, and so there is that important link.

TS: Well, my mom did.

KB: Okay.

TS: I mean I've actually got his – I have most of his engineering books that I wanted to keep because he was a – he had a five-year engineering degree from Drexel. He was going to take some grad school courses at Penn, so I have a lot of his books, and I mean they're perfectly good engineering books. They're a little bit dated. Some of them I lost in some water damage that we had in New Jersey, and we tossed those out, but I still have about, I'd say, about 20 books, college books. So, that I kept because they're, you know, those are good materials to keep regardless of, you know, whether he had passed away naturally or an accident.

But the mementos, I know where they are, and I've kept them, and Mom kept them in a box that we put away in a storage bin in a condo which I've inherited, and I have to get to that bin and clean it out anyway. So, what I'll do is I'll go get the boxed mementos and put it into a shipping box or a banker's box and ship it to my house here in California. This way, I can build up a little binder, a little scrapbook.

TM: And just so you know that Kim's shop is there, and if anytime you're like okay copies, any of that sort of stuff, it'd be great to have there to help keep building this record of this event.

TS: So, what are we going to learn at Ian's presentation tonight? Basically, is it similar to what was presented in '06? I only saw about 20 minutes of that as a DVD.

KB: I can't – I'm not certain, but I think it would be slightly different –

TS: Okay.

KB: In that it would be the perspective of an archaeologist on site. They've been to the site.

TS: Okay. Okay, that'll be interesting to see.

KB: Maybe the journey towards getting landmark status.

TS: Right, well I want to hear that.

KB: Maybe that, but I'm not positive.

TS: Okay, but I do remember he opened up by saying it was Dan Driscoll that maybe presented last time. It was a beautiful day in Los Angeles, a great day for flying, clear skies, great weather, which is typical of Southern California and Arizona this time of the year. And there's no reason for that crash to have occurred due to weather, or there was no weather-related – it was all due to just a random blind spot in the design of their flight path and the fact those aircraft had blind spots. If you looked at the cockpit, it had very limited visibility.

TM: You know what's interesting because I wrote a little book on river runners, and they were actually in the Canyon on the day the crash, and they write in their logs about the weather. There was a weather disturbance over there.

TS: There was?

TM: I was surprised that it didn't say that.

TS: Was it like today? These kind of clouds?

TM: No, it was much worse.

TS: Oh, it was much worse.

TM: It was raining. It had been raining. The monsoon had moved in, and it was it was cloudy, and it was raining, and there was thunder and lightning.

TS: Okay, so it was only in Los Angeles and the desert.

TM: It was only in LA.

TS: In the Mojave Desert there was clear weather.

TM: But it was wet here.

TS: And then when you get over here, across the Colorado River.

TM: That's right.

TS: Across the Arizona border.

TM: That's right.

TS: It was monsoonal, okay.

TM: That's right.

TS: I didn't know that.

TM: I was – and the water came up in the night. It was quite the event.

TS: Okay.

KB: And those monsoons can be local so they –

TM: Absolutely.

KB: Yeah.

TS: Yeah, you get dumped.

KB: So, it could look clear one place.

TS: Well, it's this time of the year there's zero chance of rain in Los Angeles, and the Western Mojave Region, Palm Springs, and so forth. As you move towards the, you know, Arizona Border, you get some monsoon carry over.

TM: It got different.

TS: It gets more of that flow up from the Gulf of Mexico.

TM: That's right.

TS: Not Gulf of – Gulf of California.

TM: That's right.

TS: But yeah, that's interesting. That could have played a role then if they had gone through a cloud.

TM: I believe it did, investigation, because what happened was that the guy that wasn't supposed to be where he was –

TS: Right.

TM: Was rear-ended by the guy that was supposed to be there, so they were both at fault.

TS: One was 21,000-foot vector, and the other one was a 19,000-foot. I thought there was a 2,000 foot of separation which by the way has been increased. I think these vectors are now – the aircraft have to be at three or four thousand foot of separation, maybe five thousand foot of separation.

TM: To cross, yeah.

TS: Yeah.

TM: That would make sense because there was some – yeah, so anyway, it was just interesting to put that together.

TS: Interesting.

TM: Thank you so much for your time with this.

KB: Yeah.

TM: Appreciate it.

TS: Well, I don't know how much I've given you for, you know, your historic mosaic but –

TM: We had zero before this, and now I have an hour. Thank you.

TS: Well, you have at least one person's recounting of the events, partially. I don't have every detail, and I will try to close some of the gaps that exist out there.

TM: That'd be great. Appreciate that.

TS: And then, I think a biography of why each passenger was on that flight would be really a lot of fun to put together. That's a lot of work though.

TM: But you could do it.

TS: Well, your team could do it. It's going to be a project for the entire organization. It's going to be your whole historic group as well as the –

TM: It would be. It would be a big deal. It'll be interesting to put together.

TS: Yeah.

TM: And this would be the way to do it is with family members who would be able to make it happen.

KB: That's the only way.

TS: All right, so –

TM: Great, thank you.

TS: Time to take a walk over to the – you have a plate of – cafeteria and grab something. We've got another hour and a half.

KB: Well, thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you.

TS: Thank you so much for – thank you listening and asking questions that I could give you something more than, you know, you had before.

TM: I sure appreciate it.

KB: Absolutely.

TM: Thank you, and we'll make a copy of this. Get it to you later tonight if you'd like a copy of this.

KB: Would you like a copy? Tonight, I'll bring it to the program if you like.

TS: I'm just thinking if I would want to play this one hour for my aunt, whether this would be – she's gonna – I know my aunt. "That's not the way it happened at all!" I could hear my aunt saying that. [Kim laughs.]

TM: Great! Then, what happened? [Tom laughs.]

TS: She'll say, "They didn't – we got called by United Airlines. The telegram came after." [Kim laughs.] I mean, those kind of details are nice to know because she was there.

TM: That'd be great.

KB: I'll tell you what, I will bring it, and you can decide, [Tom laughs] and you can just keep it.

TS: Do you want – I'll show you my flash drive. How big is the file?

KB: It won't be that big.

TS: Oh, a flash drive.

KB: I can put them on a CD. Whatever works for you.

TS: Which is the best way for you? To use a USB port?

KB: I can do that. I can do that, and I'll just bring it to the program tonight.

ⁱ Their work was not so secret or clandestine as I may have suggested in the oral interview. Most of the work was in the public domain at the time. I am preparing a separate essay about his work at Rheem.

ⁱⁱ I was able to search the Santa Monica Library digital archives and find the exact location of the photo which was taken at approximately 7:30 pm on Friday, June 29, based on the angle of the shadows at the time of the summer solstice. The restaurant with the word "DINNER" in the background is the historic Lobster Restaurant at the foot of the Santa Monica Pier. I had dinner there three years ago, but they had no records from the 1950s. The Lasby's were thrilled that I had nailed down the exact location in Palisades Park. This would surely be one of the last photos taken of two of the 128 victims of the Collision.

ⁱⁱⁱ There is a letter from his employer Rheem which identified the three photographs taken in Santa Monica on June 29 as being taken by an unidentified engineer from Wright Air Development Center at WPAFB in Dayton, Ohio who was with his business associate Mr. Lasby and my dad on this West Coast swing. The WADC people traveled back to Ohio on other commercial flights or by military transport.

^{iv} Rheem had a manufacturing plant in metro Los Angeles (Downey) which had a different defense industry skill set than the manufacturing plant in Philadelphia. Downey was also home to North American Aviation (an unaffiliated company) one of the leaders in aerospace in the 1950s and 1960s. Another letter from Rheem mentions that my dad was on a one-week business trip to Seattle and to Culver City, California. Culver City is located between downtown Los Angeles and Santa Monica and was the HQ location of Hughes Aircraft at the time.

^v The telegram following the accident came from Richard Rheem, the President and CEO of Rheem, a manufacturing company based in the San Francisco Bay area of California, known to this day for their hot water heaters. The accident and fatalities were already confirmed and so the telegram was a note of condolences and expressing the sentiment that my father was a valued member of the Rheem family.

^{vi} Newspaper archives for many Northeast newspapers are available at [Fulton History Newspaper Archives](#). I have searched and reviewed most of the articles published concerning the accident, plus later articles from our local newspaper in New Jersey related to my mom's lawsuit and settlement.

^{vii} I have a post card letter from my dad to my mom postmarked Seattle, 8 pm, Monday, June 25, 1956. He mentions that the weather is cool enough to be able to wear suits comfortably. He also mentions that the business meetings are going fine. This leads to the conclusion (based on the Rheem letter confirming that it was a one-week trip) that he departed Philadelphia on Sunday, June 24, 1956 for Seattle with likely connection(s) along the way, and then the return trip originating in Los Angeles was on Saturday, June 30.

^{viii} Just to correct - June 29, 1956 was a Friday, and the day of the accident, June 30, was a Saturday.

^{ix} This was his first trip to California (and the West Coast) and my mom gave an interview to a reporter following the accident stating that he was excited to be going to California. According to family friends (since deceased), the trip had been planned for several years but delayed due to my birth in January 1955. Business trips were clearly infrequent and a big deal in the 1950s.

^x My father's sister, my Aunt Marie, passed away in February 2016 at age 93. I saw her three times following this oral history but did not probe too much about her memory of the family at the time of the accident.

^{xi} Our attorney reached an out-of-court settlement with United Airlines in 1960 for \$87,500. This information was published in newspapers at the time.

^{xii} My mom and I made our first trip to the Grand Canyon and the United burial site in the Pioneers Cemetery in November 1986. See the Winter 2019 Issue of the Grand Canyon Historical Society O' Pioneer, page 11 for a brief description and photo of our visit. We visited again in February 1989, along with family friends who knew my father.

^{xiii} Of course, it is correctly Interstate 40 which runs from Barstow, California through northern Arizona and points east.

^{xiv} I visited the Coconino County Health Examiner's office in September 2019 to try to obtain any autopsy or coroner's report because there were no body parts identified for my father. Hence, he is at the United Memorial in the Pioneers Cemetery. They did not have a report to share and had limited archives earlier than 1964. I separately recalled from my mother that my father never wore his wedding band and so there was no identifying item to associate with his remains that did not fall into an inaccessible crevice at the Chuar Butte promontory. I was surprised that the coroner's report did not give an accounting of those persons on the United flight for which there was an identification and those without an identification. There was certainly not enough time for dental records comparison because the coroner issued a preliminary report within the first week of July.

^{xv} I met Mike Nelson at the 60th anniversary of the Midair Collision in June 2016. I have carefully read his book which inspired me to research the crash further, by example as discussed in various endnotes. We then worked together, including an all-day meeting in Iowa in September 2019, to form a crash victim's family's group which has been recently re-launched as The Patrons of the 1956 Grand Canyon Midair Collision.

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