

Plane Crash off Runway into water at LaGuardia Airport September 20, 1989 (Lt. Albert Warta)

With receipt of Queens Box 33-0037 Hazardous Materials Co #1 responded to LaGuardia Airport for a confirmed Aircraft down in the water. Upon arrival at the scene Lt Warta ordered all ropes and life jackets to be brought to the edge of the runway and went to that location himself to size up the situation from the right side of the plane Lt. Warta could see a Boeing 737 in the water and broken in three pieces with heavy damage to the tail section. Seeing no emergency personnel in the water currently. Knowing a Life hazard is the top priority and even though he had no protective gear for the water available to him other than a life preserver Lt. Warta felt that it was imperative that someone get out in the water and survey the scene for trapped and injured passengers and crew.

Lt. Warta ordered three men from Hazardous Materials Company 1 to follow him into the water and four

men to stay on

the runway for

support. t. Warta

tied a rope to the

pier, lowered

himself to the

water and started

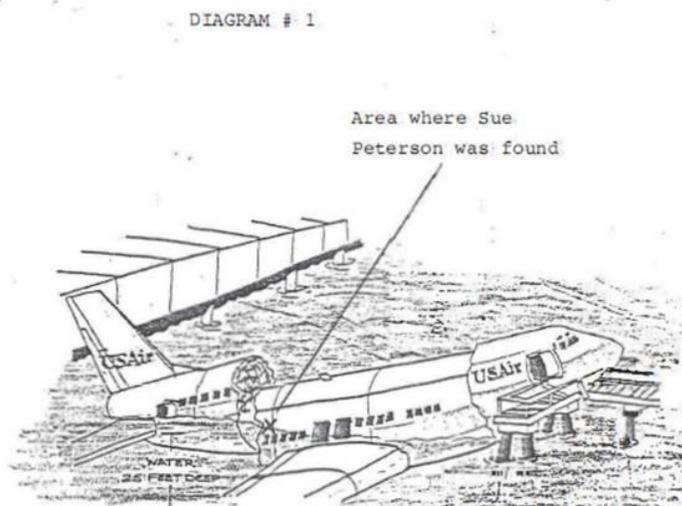
swimming out

through a strong

current followed

closely by FF Smith. The numerous passengers and flight crew on the wing directed them to

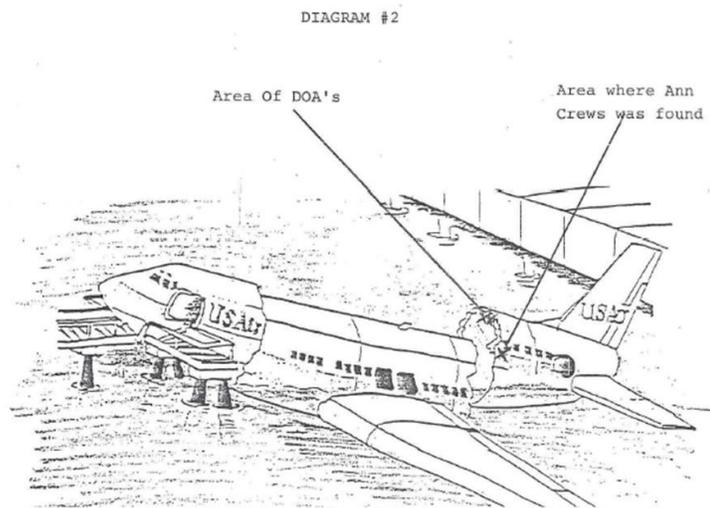
the damaged fuselage area saying that there was a woman trapped. See Diagram #1) FF Smith



made physical contact with the victim Sue Peterson through the damaged skin of the plane. Being the only room for one person to work at that location, Lt. Warta swam back and entered the plane through the rear door at the tail section and moved up and forward only to find that it was impossible to reach her from that location. Lt. Warta then swam to a forward door in the plane and made entry. There he was able to reach Sue Peterson and team up with FF Smith Haz Mat 1 and FF Feilmoser of Rescue Liaison. Lt. Warta climbed over the wreckage and into the water inside of the plane and took up a position behind Sue Peterson.

There was no time in Lt. Warta's judgement to go for tools. Sue Peterson was in the water and trapped in the wreckage with her face only inches from the water. The tide was coming in and the rear of the plane was very unstable and sinking. After a short period of heavy work, in almost total darkness except for a flashlight, under extremely arduous conditions and with only their bare hands the three managed to free her. At that point Lt. Warta continued the search for other victims and heard another voice and saw a hand from above but had no way of getting up there from inside of the plane. He swam out of the plane through the damaged side and found a portable ladder that had been lowered by Ladder 163 and secured. Lt. Warta climbed the ladder to the top of the fuselage where he again met FF Smith, who was checking two victims in the wreckage. In confirming the victim's condition for FF Smith and observing their position Lt. Warta concluded that the voice he heard was not from them and went back below for another check. He called and again heard a voice and saw the tip of the hand wave through a small hole in the opening in the overhead of the tail section. At that time another emergency worker in a rubber boat was just outside of the split in the skin of the aircraft. When requested by Lt. Warta he eased the nose of the boat through the opening.

Lt. Warta climbed into the boat, stood on the spray tube and eased up into a small, confined area with his upper body. (See Diagram #2)



With a flashlight he could see a woman trapped in the wreckage. She reached down with her left hand, took his hand, and said, "Please get me out of here." Lt. Warta realized that there was no room to work in the very confined space and nothing stable to stand on, so he asked her name, to which she replied: "Ann". Lt. Warta then told her that he was going for help and would be right back. He went to the rear section by boat and met members of Rescues 3 and 4 where he confirmed that they were in contact with and moving toward a trapped victim named Ann. Lt. Warta went to reassure Ann that help was on the way. The boat was then used to get a stokes stretcher to be used for Ann. Upon placing Ann in the stretcher, it was handed back out by FF Murtha of Rescue 3 who also entered the boat and helped transport Ann to the wing of the plane and awaiting rescue boats. By this time one body had already been recovered and FF Feilmoser was about to free the second body. Lt. Warta and the other emergency worker in the boat went back and positioned the boat to recover the second body when she was freed. They then transported her to the plane wing, helped place her in a stokes stretcher and move her up on the wing to await a pickup boat. By this time Lt. Warta had been operating for close to two hours and had been in and out of the water and the most damaged part of the aircraft many times. The entire aircraft and the sharp metal and debris all around. The plane was constantly moving and shifting due to the many rescue boats and a helicopter operating in the area. At one point Lt.

Warta had his leg tangled in some electrical wiring while in the water inside of the plane. The entire time Lt. Warta was experiencing a - terrible burning sensation of his body- caused by jet fuel and hydraulic fluid in the water coming in contact with his skin as he had no protective equipment on. He had been splashed with **hydraulic fluid in the eyes and was experiencing severe burning of the eyes**. Lt. Warta at this time was feeling the effects of exhaustion and cold. Despite his injuries Lt. Warta operated under extreme personal risk due to the fact that during this entire operation the aircraft was not stable and in danger of sinking. There was a constant danger of the moving and shifting aircraft and debris. This act was also conducted with knowledge of fire due to jet fuel and hydraulic fluid in the water. Lt. Warta also conducted himself as a leader in taking the initiative to direct his men in this unusual operation due to the life hazard involved. Lt. Warta_ also would not quit until he was sure that all the survivors were safe and all of the bodies were recovered.