



2000

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Recommended Citation

Aaron, Bob, "Bob Davis: Forensic Chemist A&E Network Documentary Probing Airliner Crashes Features IWU Alumnus, Trustee; Telecast Set for Sept. 6" (2000). *News and Events*. Paper 977.
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Sept. 1, 2000

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Bob Davis: Forensic Chemist
A&E Network Documentary Probing Airliner Crashes
Features IWU Alumnus, Trustee; Telecast Set for Sept. 6

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--Why are Boeing 737s--the all-time best-selling jetliner--falling from the sky?

Investigative Reports, the A&E network's documentary showcase, will try to answer that question on Sept. 6 (Wednesday), in part, by turning to an Illinois Wesleyan University alumnus and trustee.

Robert E. Davis, a forensic chemist and a 1955 IWU chemistry graduate, is among a bevy of experts featured on the nationwide telecast, "Investigative Reports: The Planes That Fell to Earth," hosted by veteran newsman Bill Kurtis. The 10 p.m. ET/9 p.m. CT telecast will be available in 77-million Nielsen TV-rating homes in the United States.

Faulty rudders have been dubbed the culprit in several 737 crashes. However, why the rudders have failed remains a mystery.

One hypothesis zeroes in on the aircraft's hydraulic fluid.

Davis, an A&E Network news release pointed out, was commissioned to research the fluid. Davis, president of the Oak Brook, Ill., R.E. Davis Chemical Corp., "discovered that when heated, the hydraulic fluid turns into aluminum-eating acid--the very aluminum that many plane parts are made from," according to the A&E Network statement.

In one 1994 accident, a U.S. Air 737 crashed outside of Pittsburgh, killing 132 passengers. A five-year probe by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) cited the rudder's uncommanded movement as the "probable cause" for the loss of control of the airplane, according to the A&E Network.

"Meticulously examining past accident and crash inquiries," the A&E Network said, "Kurtis reveals several overlooked possibilities that could provide critical answers to the baffling mystery.

"In so doing," the network added, "he unearths possibilities that even the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) didn't touch upon during the longest investigation in their history. Is it indeed a malfunction of the rudder, the chemistry and fluid within the plane's hydraulic system or something else entirely?"

In addition to Davis, the Investigative Reports telecast features Art Wolk, a lawyer for victim's families who discusses the jamming potential of the valve system, which failed on Flight 427. Pilot John Cox, representing the Airline Pilots Association, also is interviewed on the program,

demonstrating how the valve unit might jam. Chemist Paul Knerr--who ran tests on Flight 427's hydraulic fluid and found it 10 times dirtier than most--also is featured on the hour-long program. Additionally, Kurtis talks to the NTSB and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to get their reactions and discuss courses of action.

Boeing, according to its web site, is the world's largest aerospace company and the largest manufacturer of commercial jetliners and military aircraft, as well as the nation's largest contractor for the federal space agency. The company has more than 11,000 commercial jetliners in service worldwide.

Over the years, twin-engine Boeing 737 airliners have carried the equivalent of the world's population--6.1-billion passengers. Boeing describes current models as "the most advanced single-aisle airplanes in the market today." The 737 program began in 1965 when Boeing launched the short-range airplane to complement the larger 707 and 727 jetliners. The first 737-100 was delivered to an airline in December, 1967, and went into service on Feb. 10, 1968. The 737-800, one of several models now in service, has a maximum range of 3,383-statute miles and cruises at a speed of 530 miles-per-hour at 35,000 feet. The plane can carry up to 189 passengers.

Investigative Reports, which airs weeknights, is A&E's award-winning, in-depth look at the stories behind today's headlines. The series won the 2000 Governor's Award from the Television Academy of Arts & Sciences and five Emmy Awards in 1999.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls more than 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium. A \$26 million library and a \$6 million student center are under construction.