

Ventura County

Los Angeles Times



MARILYN WEISS / For The Times

Gary Dunham of Moorpark describes ordeal on USAir Flight 1493. Dunham works for Farmers Insurance and was returning from business trip. Related stories appear on A1, A3 and A28-31.

Moorpark Man Survives Crash of Flight 1493

By JAMES E. FOWLER
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Gary Dunham is not superstitious about sitting in Row 13 aboard USAir Flight 1493. The Moorpark resident feels fortunate to be one of the lucky ones to walk away from the fiery crash at Los Angeles International Airport Friday night.

Dunham was sitting just three rows from an emergency exit when a "big thud" shook the Boeing 737 and he saw a flash of fire.

After the plane scraped along the ground for about 250 yards, he escaped out the emergency

door with inky smoke billowing around him.

'I was a little concerned about passing out due to the smoke. But I knew that, if I didn't pass out, I was going to get out of that plane.'

GARY DUNHAM

He got away with just sore ribs and a pulled muscle.

Dunham's wife, Linda, also feels lucky.

She learned from a television report that her husband's plane had crashed, and she had several hours to worry before learning that he was OK.

Dunham, who works for Farmers Insurance Group, was flying home from a business trip in Columbus, Ohio.

"We had a good flight," said Dunham, who estimates he flies 10,000 miles a year on business. "The plane was about two-thirds full, and we were making good time."

The plane seemed to be landing normally when suddenly Dunham heard a thud and saw a flash of fire outside the left side of the plane.

"I initially thought the left engine had exploded," he said. "There was a violent movement to the plane."

Dunham said people were rising from their seats when he heard a voice yell for everyone to get down and stay seated.

Dunham assumed an emergency position—bent over in his seat grabbing his ankles.

The plane skidded and fishtailed "for several long seconds," Dunham said. But he did not think his time had come.

"I was thinking where the exit was," Dunham, an Air Force veteran, said, "and how I was going to get out of the plane."

Dunham, who was three rows back from the emergency exit, said he knew he would reach the door.

When the hatch was opened, the cabin filled with black smoke within seconds.

He said he couldn't see farther than 12 inches.

"I was a little concerned about passing out due to the smoke," Dunham said. "But I knew that, if I didn't pass out, I was going to get out of that plane."

"I took a couple of deep breaths and climbed over the seats," Dunham said.

Dunham ducked through the emergency exit and pulled his business associate, Paula Garavaglia of Pasadena, onto the wing.

He said he could feel the heat of the plane.

Please see SURVIVOR, B6.

VENTURA COUNTY



MARILYN WEISS / For The Times

Gary Dunham says he felt "big thud," saw flash of fire and fled through billowing smoke to plane's

emergency exit. Wife Linda learned of crash while waiting to pick him up at a Van Nuys bus terminal.

SURVIVOR: Man Feels Lucky He's Alive

Continued from B1
through his shoes.

They jumped eight to 10 feet to the ground, he said, and he landed running.

He pulled a muscle in his leg in the jump, he said, but was not treated at the scene. After arriving home, he began to feel soreness in his ribs and went to Los Robles Regional Medical Center in Thousand Oaks for treatment.

Dunham fled from the right side of the plane, and most of the fire was on the left side, he said.

He didn't realize how bad the accident really was until he saw some pictures on television, he said.

Linda Dunham, meanwhile, didn't know her husband was in danger as she waited to pick him up at the Fly-A-Way Bus Terminal in Van Nuys.

She said her husband wasn't on the bus she expected him to be on,

and the bus driver looked upset.

He told her a plane had crashed at LAX.

From a small television set in the lobby, she learned that it was her

'I initially thought the left engine had exploded. There was a violent movement to the plane.'

GARY DUNHAM

husband's flight.

"My eyes crossed, and my legs went limp," she remembered Saturday.

She frantically tried to call a crash-information phone number broadcast on television, but the line was always busy.

"I was so angry, because I was full of fear," she said. Not really,

knowing what to do or where to go, she decided to go home. "I was in a trance," she said. "I was in God's hands, as he was."

Later, Linda Dunham got a telephone message that Gary was safe, but it was several hours before he arrived home.

She said this experience has reaffirmed her life, "the bonding in the family unit and that we are powerless in the outcome of our lives."

Gary Dunham didn't sleep much Friday night because of the soreness in his ribs, he said.

But Linda Dunham said her husband was also bothered by nightmares and thoughts of the crash.

Dunham's Moorpark home was besieged Saturday by phone calls from distant relatives and members of the media.

"I feel very fortunate about getting out of that thing," Dunham said.