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Union man killed in Pellston plane crash

Accident or conspiracy?

by **Richard A. Wiles**

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ACCIDENT or CONSPIRACY? – The death of Walter Reuther

By Richard A. Wiles

May 9, 1970, was a dreary day in all of Michigan. The state was covered by low-hanging clouds producing light rain and thunderstorms. At 8:38 p.m., a six-passenger Lear jet departed Detroit-Wayne County Airport on a routine flight north to the Emmet County Airport. The small, rural airport was located near Pellston, Michigan. The airport's weather instruments reported that, as of 9:33 p.m., there were scattered clouds at 400 feet with a ceiling of 800 feet, an overcast sky, with a 10-knot wind out of the east-southeast. Just five minutes prior to those readings, Lear jet LJ23-056 N434EJ had crashed into a wooded hillside, southwest of the No. 5 runway approach. No one on board survived. Whatever caused that aircraft to go down has been a subject of rumor for 45 years.

The Emmet County Airport in Pellston, Michigan, opened for business in May of 1936. It had been constructed by more than 200 WPA (Works Progress Administration) workers who started it in the spring of 1935. One of the goals for the Depression-era federal works program was to build or improve at least 800 local airports across the

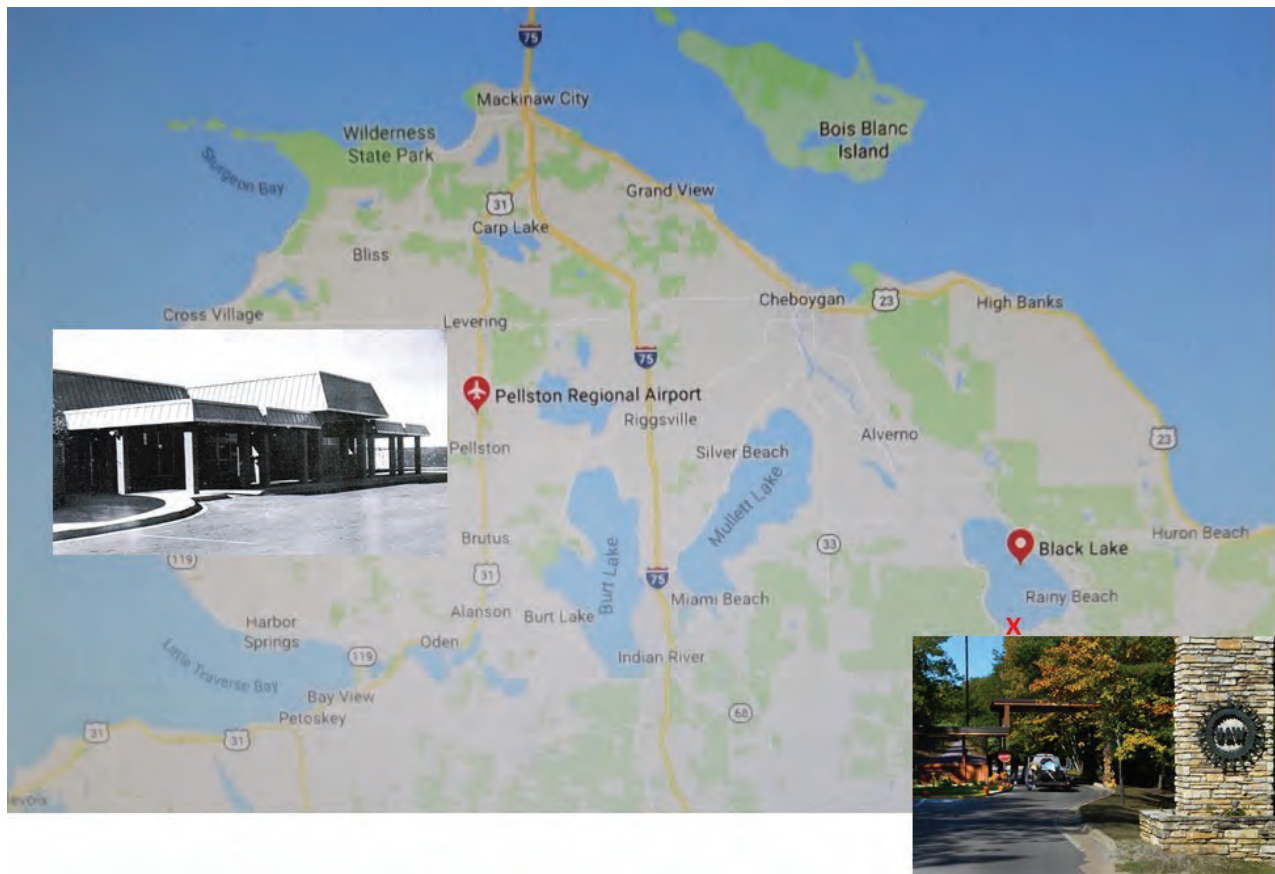


nation. In Michigan, the WPA airport projects included Cheboygan, Indian River, Sault Ste. Marie, Petoskey, Rogers City and Pellston.

At first, there was no paved landing area at the airport, only a 3,000-foot, east-to-west, grassy runway which often turned to dirt and mud. It was paved by the end of 1943. In 1944, the Pennsylvania-Central's commercial service was replaced by Capital Airlines. In 1959, North Central Airlines took over providing commercial air service. This lasted until 1979, when

the company merged with Republic Airlines.

Prior to the May 9, 1970, crash of Lear jet LJ23-056 N434EJ, there had been a P-38 airplane crash at the Emmet County Airport in May of 1947. The *Traverse City Record Eagle* reported in its May 12, 1947, edition that the plane's owner and pilot, Donald D'Arcy, vice president of Airborne Incorporated of Pellston, died when the plane, "exploded and crashed shortly after takeoff at the Pellston Airport on Sunday ... the plane plunged into a group of trees."



Emmet County Airport, Pellston



Black Lake UAW Center

In May of 1968, four people, including the pilot, died in a crash when their twin-engine Apache was in its approach to the fog-shrouded airport at 10:40 p.m. The pilot, Al Phillips, was the owner of Phillips Flying Service, and a veteran of flights into and out of the Emmet County Airport. The Apache wreckage was found a half-mile from the approach end of Runway 23 (running northeast to southwest).

The Lear jet that was involved in the May 9, 1970, crash was a chartered aircraft by the United Auto Workers Union. It was chartered to bring UAW President Walter Reuther, his wife, May, bodyguard, William Wolfman, and renowned Philadelphia architect Oskar Stonorov, to northern Michigan for a final inspection tour of a new union facility at Black Lake, near Onaway. The facility had just been named the Walter P. Reuther Family Education Center.

The Black Lake facility was located 40 miles east of the Emmet County Airport. In 1966, Reuther had proposed building a union worker education center and retreat to be located at the former hunting/fishing lodge of Detroit ad agency millionaire Louis Maxson. By January 1967,

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the UAW had purchased Maxson's 1,000 heavily wooded acres along the southeast shoreline of Black Lake. Reuther envisioned the center to be aligned with nature. He asked his longtime friend, Oskar Stonorov, to design the new buildings at the proposed center. Reuther and Stonorov both decided they wanted the facility to be a lesson on how to build without destroying nature. It is said that Reuther personally examined and tagged practically every tree on the site as to whether it stayed or was sacrificed for the center's buildings.

By May of 1970, Emmet County Airport had two paved runways with four separate approach areas. One runway ran southwest to northeast, with four separate approach areas. One runway ran southwest to northeast with the southwest end known as Runway 5, and the northeast end known as Runway 23 (All airport runways are given numbers that correspond to the compass alignment of the runway—Runway 5 has a 50-degree reading). The runway was 5,400 feet in length and 150 feet wide. The approach end of Runway 5 involved surrounding terrain as much as 300 feet higher within a quarter mile of the approach.

On Saturday evening May 9, 1970, the four passengers and two pilots were flying LJ23-05 6 N434EJ to northern Michigan to allow Stonorov to give the newly created Black Lake facility one final inspection. The plane was one hour behind its scheduled arrival of 8:30 p.m., due to Stonorov arriving late in Detroit from Philadelphia. The Pellston-area temperature at 9:30 p.m. that evening was 45 degrees with no rain and the wind at 8-15 knots.

The Aircraft Accident Report File No. 3-0125 (adopted on Dec. 22, 1970) stated the probable cause of the plane crash "to be pilot visual illusions produced by the lack of visual cues during circling approach over unlighted terrain at night to a runway not equipped with approach lights or other visual approach aids. These illusions made the pilot think he was higher than his true position, and were made more acceptable to him because of a strong possibility of an erroneous altimeter reading." The ground elevation at the approach to Runway 5 was 720 feet.

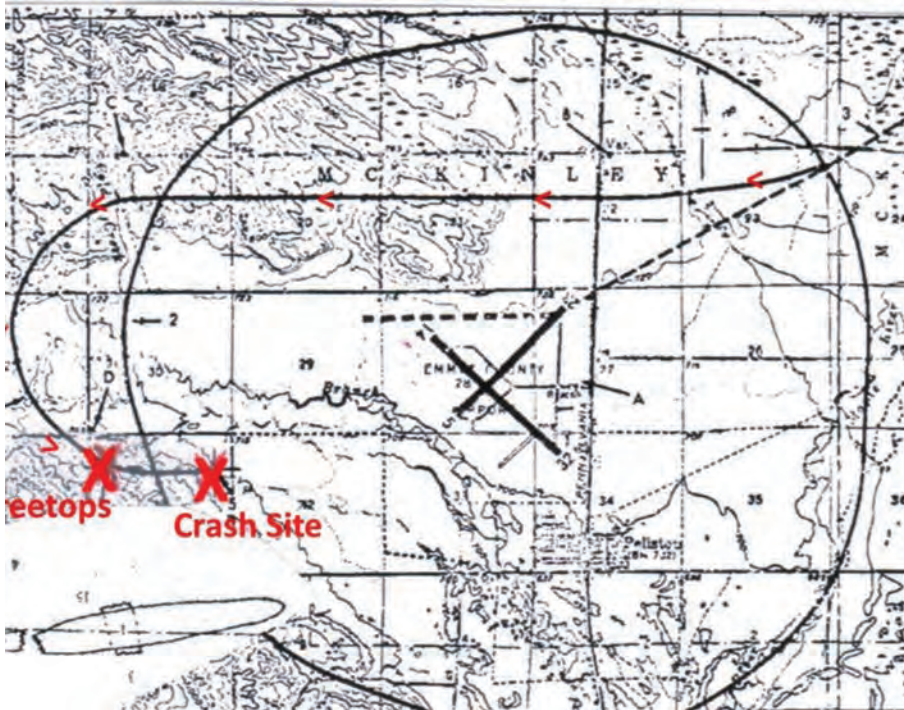
The aircraft was almost completely destroyed by its impact with the ground and the subsequent fire. All

bodies were burned beyond recognition. The plane's first impact was evident by a path of tree damage 255 feet in length and 45 feet wide. Small parts of the plane, including the nose cone, were strewn on the ground under those trees. After the impact with trees, the plane continued airborne for another 15-to-20 seconds (one-half mile or 3,000 feet) before striking the trees once again, and crashing to the ground. This second impact was thought to be caused by the flaming-out of the jet's two engines. That was the result of the ingestion of wood pieces from the tree-line impact at 800 feet. The ground elevation at the airport's Runway 5 approach was 720 feet, the elevation at the point of the aircraft's first impact with trees was 809 feet.

The plane's second, and final impact, destroyed several pine trees on a hillside as the plane cut an easterly swath approximately 270 feet in length. Most of the plane remained intact with the "avionics compartment, after fuselage, and empennage (tail) ... in the upright position."

This impact site revealed the plane's wreckage to be contained to an area

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130-foot-by-50-foot wide, 1.75 miles west of Runway 5 approach, the pilot's chosen landing runway.

The twin-jet aircraft was owned by Executive Jet Aviation of Columbus, Ohio, and was valued at \$400,000. It had been manufactured in 1966. In

May of 1970, the company was operating 13 Lear jets in its domestic air taxi service. The captain and pilot, George Evans, 48, had been with the company since May of 1967. Evans' flight proficiency record showed him to be considered, "a highly qualified pilot." He had previously made six landings at

Pellston, however, none of them were during nighttime hours.

Co-pilot and first officer Joseph Karaffa, 40, had been employed by Executive Jet Aviation since April 6, 1970. His flight proficiency report stated that "he was thorough and meticulous in following instructions and completing procedures." Both pilots had level-3 instrument ratings. The landing that night into the Emmet County Airport was to be instrument-guided due to the low ceiling of clouds.

The Aircraft Accident Report stated:

"The aircraft was properly certified. Examination of the maintenance records revealed that, with one exception, all required entries had been recorded and signed off. The one exception was the altimeter test conducted in September of 1969. The entry was not in the aircraft log. It was, however, recorded on Form M-11, which is a maintenance discrepancy record."

Flight Station Specialist Sorrick contacted the incoming Lear jet at 9:28 p.m. He was advised by the pilot that the plane was circling to make a final approach at Runway 5, instead of making a direct incoming approach at Runway 23. That message was the last communication with the approaching aircraft. According to archival records written May 27, 1970, by UAW attorney and Reuther's top adviser Stephen Schlossberg following the plane crash, "the pilot (Evans) contacted the Flight Service Attendant and was told the wind was shifting from 80 degrees to 120 degrees (easterly) and varied in intensity from 8 to 15 knots and that there would be a strong tailwind if he

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(Evans) continued in on Runway 23 ... The pilot answered ... he would land into the wind rather than a tailwind. The circular approach the pilot took seemed to the experts to be the best approach ...”

At 9:33 p.m. the jet aircraft clipped the top of a large elm tree, its engines taking in debris made of limbs and branches. That caused a flame-out at 145 miles per hour. The aircraft sailed on another half a mile in the air before it crashed into a pine forest, bursting into flames on impact.

Emmet County Airport's Runway 5 approach was not equipped with approach lights but was the only runway lighted by Sorrick during the Lear jet's approach. The Aircraft Accident Report read, "The approach area to Runway 5 was without visual cues at night except for a few lights from widely scattered homes. The area is heavily wooded in the

hilly regions. This runway has no approach lights." Executive jet pilots were trained to maintain 300 feet from any ground-based obstructions when in a circling approach pattern. During such a maneuver, one of the two pilots on board was given the command by the captain to monitor the plane's altitude, air speed, and angle of bank, making sure the plane maintained a 300-foot obstruction clearance. Obviously, this did not happen. And Lear jet LJ23-056 N434EJ was not equipped, nor was it required to be, with a flight or cockpit voice recorder.

The only information as to why the aircraft's approach was well below the mandated 300-foot clearance altitude was obtained from the wreckage. The captain's altimeter and the two jet engines survived the fire. The engines had burned free of the aircraft structure. Tree debris was found inside both. Damage in the right engine was found on 26 of

the 21 compressor blades. No operational abnormalities, other than the wooden material, was found in either engine.

The captain's altimeter was the main source of information used for the determination of the cause of the Reuther airplane crash. Disassembly of the altimeter by the accident investigation technicians revealed that:

"... an incorrect pivot was installed in one end of the rocking shaft ... an end stone was missing. A ring jewel within the mechanism was installed off-center. A second rocking shaft rear support pivot was incorrect. An incorrect link pin ... was installed. An end stone ... was installed upside down."

With both jet engines flamed out, the 11,000-pound aircraft (with its landing gear down) would have been traveling (according to information provided by Lear Jet Industries) at 135 miles per hour to travel onward



FEDERAL INVESTIGATORS from the National Transportation Safety Board are sifting through the wreckage of the jet at Pellston in which labor

leader Walter Reuther and five others were killed. (Photo courtesy AP.)



COCKPIT OF THE jet which crashed at Pellston killing six.

the 3,000 feet to its final impact site in the forest of pines.

The Aircraft Accident Report's analysis of the data determined, "no indication of pre-impact system failure or malfunction, except for the captain's altimeter." The cause of the crash therefore had to primarily be involved with the operation of the aircraft during the execution of its circling approach. Pilot error? or altimeter malfunction? Or, was it sabotage — a planned murder of the UAW leader?

Prior to his death on May 9, 1970, Walter Phillip Reuther (born 1907 in Wheeling, West Virginia) had survived two known assassination attempts. One occurred in 1938 when shots through his kitchen window shattered his right arm. A second attempt took place in April of 1948 when a shotgun blast came through his front window wounding his brother, Victor.



Internet rumors speculate that a third attempt had been made in October of 1968. That was when Reuther and Victor survived a hard landing in their chartered Executive Aviation Lear jet LJ-23 -N430EJ at Washington, D.C.'s Dulles International Airport. The weather that October 6, 1968, in the nation's capital was foggy with light rain. The temperature was 55 degrees with a cloud ceiling of 2,000 feet and visibility of two miles. The Aircraft Accident Report on the mishap at Dulles

stated the plane came in unexpectedly too low resulting in extensive damage to the jet's nose structure, left gear well, radome, radar and navigation units in the front of the plane. That accident occurred at 11:45 a.m. The hard landing was blamed on a faulty altimeter. When Victor was interviewed many years after the May 1970 crash, he said, "I and other family members are convinced that both the fatal crash and the near fatal one in 1968 were not accidental."

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Author Michael Parenti, in his book, "Dirty Truths" (1996), echoes the conspiracy murder ideas. There are also many internet blogs dedicated to the idea that Reuther's death was not an accident. Culprits listed as possibly being linked to his assassination at the Pellston airport range from the automotive companies (forced to deal with him and his UAW), to the CIA, and or the FBI. Even President Richard Nixon's "Watergate Plumbers" have been implicated in the downing of Lear jet LJ23-056 N434EJ on May 9, 1970. According to one internet source, the FBI has still not released over 200 classified pages related to the Reuther crash or any correspondence between field officers and J. Edgar Hoover.

The information provided by the National Transportation Safety Board's accident report cannot, however, be easily dismissed. Even though "grassy knoll conspiracy types" will never be convinced of the official explanation. It is clear from the report that the pilot, George "Ollie" Evans, made his own decision to circle the plane in order to approach Runway 5. He did that even though that approach contained terrain problems. Experts noting the wind direction and speed say the pilot made the right decision.

The May 27, 1970, letter from UAW attorney Sheldon Schloosberg to UAW Vice President Leonard Woodcock said:

"In view of the fact that no one outside the top officials of Executive Jet could have known the identity of the passengers and there was no chance of ground tampering with this airplane. It appears to me that further investiga-

tion on a private basis is unwarranted. We have to look at this as a tragic accident and nothing more."

In fact, the jet had begun its day at its home base, Columbus Airport. It left there at 5:52 p.m. and headed to Akron-Canton Airport with a passenger. It then refueled and left that airport at 7:35 p.m. carrying singer Glen Campbell to Detroit City Airport at 8 p.m. The plane then landed and was on the ground for 20 minutes at Detroit Metro Airport, loading the Reuther party at 8:44 p.m.

The Accident Board's final report assumed Evan was at the controls and First Officer Karaffa was navigating.



While banking in the circling maneuver, Karaffa probably was leaning and looking to his left while monitoring the pilot's altimeter (not his own) and looking down toward the airport. N434EJ first struck the trees (air speed 145 m.p.h.) at 800 feet, 166 feet above the No. 5 approach elevation. At that point, the flight was doomed.

Veteran pilot Evans had the plane at treetop level when it broke out of the clouds instead of at the level he and his copilot thought they were according to the altimeter reading (a false reading). He also must have misjudged the distance and altitude due to a lack of visual cues in the area of the airport.

The veteran pilot had 2,142 Lear Jet flying hours, and a total flying time in all makes of aircraft of 7,760. He was no rookie. The Lear Jet LJ23 was one of 13 such aircraft owned and operated by Executive Jet Aviation of Columbus. The total flying time by May 9, 1970, for the N434EJ aircraft was 3,531 hours. It had been last inspected on April 1, 1970. At that time the plane had 114.5 less recorded flying hours.

By May of 1972, three separate lawsuits had been filed in federal court seeking damages from Gates-Lear Jet Corporation and Instruments & Flight Research, Inc., both of Wichita, Kansas. Also named in the three lawsuits was Coll-Aire, Inc. of Columbus and the United States of America (Federal Aviation Agency). Those filing the federal district court suits included Federal Insurance Corporation of New Jersey (policy on the plane), Mrs. Martha (William) Wolfman (widow of bodyguard William Wolfman), and the estate of Walter and Mary Reuther.

There are many Tip of the Mitt historical myths that have grown in proportion during the past 50 years. A conspiracy involving the Reuther plane crash is one of them. However, after much thought and study by United Auto Workers officials and their attorneys, their May 1972 lawsuit on behalf of the Reuther estate singled out two causes for the tragedy at the Emmet County Airport on May 9, 1970. The accident was the result of a faulty, rebuilt altimeter, coupled with the pilot's misinterpretation of



Victims of the crash were (from top, left) Walter Reuther; Mary Reuther, Walter's wife; Oskar Stonorov, 64, a Philadelphia architect who was a friend of Walter Reuther; William Wolfman, 29, of Detroit, a Reuther family bodyguard who was a nephew of Mrs. Reuther; the pilots (not pictured): George Evans, 48, and Joseph Karrafa, 41, both of Columbus, Ohio.

the visual cues he was receiving as he was turning into his approach at Runway 5. There was no conspiracy involved in the Reuther airplane crash. All lawsuits were settled out of court with the monetary settlements sealed from public view. 🌿

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Wiles holds a Bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master's degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.

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