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A Night To Remember



A little more than a week ago, much attention was paid to the original “Night to Remember” in observance of the One-Hundredth anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic. Long-time followers of open-wheel racing will also take note that thirty-four years ago tonight was another night to remember – the plane crash that took the lives of eight USAC officials on their way back to Indianapolis from a race in Trenton, NJ.

It was a Sunday night on April 23, 1978. USAC was just seven months removed from the death of its founder, Tony Hulman. There was unrest in the sport and later that fall, CART would be formed. The opening of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway was less than two weeks away. That day, the Trenton 200 had just been won by Gordon Johncock at the old, unique and now defunct Trenton International Speedway. The one and a half mile paved oval featured a right-handed dogleg turn on the backstretch, since it was expanded into its “kidney bean” shape in 1968. CART would run one more year at Trenton before the track would close and eventually become a housing development.

As USAC officials boarded the flight aboard a chartered Piper Navajo to return to Indianapolis early that evening, there was no indication of the typical spring thunderstorms that were brewing in central Indiana. Unfortunately, severe weather popped up quickly as it can do at this time of year. The pilot tried to get underneath the weather, but to no avail. The plane went down in a cornfield in Arlington, IN – about thirty-five miles southeast of Indianapolis.

Aside from the human tragedy, the crash created a huge void in USAC leadership. Dick King, USAC President at the time, was to have been the tenth person on board the ten-seat twin-engine aircraft, but decided to stay over on business at the last minute. Still, there were key USAC personnel aboard the ill-fated flight that were counted on to run USAC as

well as their multiple duties at IMS in the coming days – including the chairman of the USAC tech committee, the assistant technical chairman, the chief registrar for USAC, the chief starter for USAC, the VP of public affairs, the supervisor for USAC's sprint-car division, an assistant USAC staff doctor, a graphic designer for USAC's newsletter and the pilot.

In racing, no matter what the circumstances – the show must go on, and that was certainly the case then. USAC was reeling. Many of these individuals had been involved with racing for years. The IndyCar world is a tight-knit community. Although the outside world had heard of few of these people before that fateful night, they were very well-known, respected and loved throughout the racing community. But regardless of the personal loss everyone was feeling, opening day for the Indianapolis 500 was less than two weeks away. There was much work to be done that was to have been done by the victims on the plane.

Donald Davidson tells the story of first seeing sketchy reports on television that night that a plane had gone down. Then there were the dreaded phone calls speculating that the plane may have been carrying the USAC officials. Then a call came that a credit card of one of the victims had been found at the scene. The USAC employees in Indianapolis, including Donald, devised a plan to wait until 6:00 am to start knocking on doors of relatives of the crash victims. Donald says that that morning, he did something he had never done before or since – and that was to tell a young woman that her mother was never coming home again.

Donald says the ensuing next few days were surreal. Most of the funerals were staggered so that they didn't overlap, but on one particular day he went to three separate funerals on one day. All the while, there was work that still had to be carried out in the USAC offices as well as at IMS in anticipation for the quickly approaching Month of May.

I was in the process of wrapping up my sophomore year in college. I still followed racing from my childhood days, but my interests had mostly been replaced by beer and girls. Still, I remember hearing a blurb about the crash on the news. In Knoxville, TN in 1978; it's a wonder I heard anything at all. I knew that some of the drivers I followed in my earlier years had gone to work for USAC after their retirement. I remember wondering if they were among some of the victims.

As we all know, the 1978 Indianapolis 500 took place without any noticeable glitches. According to Donald Davidson; as people are inclined to do at such a time – everyone pitched in and somehow pulled it off. The same goes for settling the shockwaves within the walls of the USAC offices. Incredibly, before the funerals even took place – the USAC office was receiving resumes in the mail to apply for the jobs of the deceased. Dick King instructed everyone to throw them away immediately.

Some say that the formation of CART would not have happened had that plane not gone down. To that theory, Donald Davidson says "Baloney! – It would have happened anyway". But the void of top leadership at USAC probably made things a lot easier for CART to be formed that fall. The formation of CART had already been announced when Tom Sneva clinched the championship for Roger Penske, who was one of the founders of CART. Many wondered out loud whether Penske would use the opportunity as a

grandstand moment for CART. Instead, he was gracious in accepting the trophy and immediately endorsed the championship check over to the fund set up for the survivors families.

So, as we go through our mundane routines this evening; take a moment to remember those that lost their lives on that stormy night in central Indiana on April 23, 1978 – thirty-four years ago tonight;

- Frank DelRoy, chairman of the USAC technical committee
- Ray Marquette, USAC's vice president of public affairs
- Stan Worley, chief registrar for USAC
- Shim Malone, starter for various USAC races and the midget division supervisor
- Don Peabody, supervisor of the USAC sprint-car division
- Judy Phillips, a graphic artist who supervised production of USAC's newsletter
- Ross Teeguarden, assistant USAC technical chairman
- Dr. Bruce White, assistant USAC staff doctor
- Don Mullendore, Pilot

Aside from the obvious loss felt by their families and friends; their losses were evident throughout USAC for years.

George Phillips

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6 Responses to "A Night To Remember"



JB Says:

April 23, 2012 at 7:38 am

You forgot to post the poll, but here it is:

- a) Roger Penske
- b) A Tony Kannan hat
- c) Japan
- d) Double-file
- e) RC cola

Reply



Ron Ford Says:

April 23, 2012 at 9:02 am

Thanks for the research George. I only have a vague memory of this tragic incident and knew nothing of the details.

Reply



Wally Says:

April 25, 2012 at 12:54 pm

Being a track rat at the Speedway during 60's and 70's, You were always aware of drivers dying in a race car. When this plane crash happened, it touched a lot a people in the Indianapolis area. Donald was right, the spilt had already started. This plane crash and Tony's death just pushed it along. I don't think open wheel racing has ever recovered from this. The family lost it's father figure.

Reply



Matt Graham Says:

May 12, 2016 at 11:42 pm

I stumbled on this while thinking about the death of my father 8 years ago today. This hits close to home. My Dad was Art Graham, Director of Timing and Scoring for over 2 decades. All those that perished that night were close friends of ours and I ran around at many of the races with all their kids. My father was supposed to be on that flight as well but gave up his seat to Ross Teegarden to stay behind and pack up the timing equipment. I was very young, but I know that time deeply effected my father and the USAC family as well and was bad period in USAC history. He told me years later that things were never the same after the crash. It was a huge loss and without a doubt enabled CART to grow much quicker than it would have. Thanks for writing this up. I had never seen the comments from Donald but he reminded me at my fathers funeral that I was fortunate to not have lost him 30 years ago...

Reply



Steve Says:

July 28, 2016 at 6:37 am

What a tragedy!! Being a lover of racing, attending Milwaukee Mile events since my Dad took me to my 1st Champ Car race in August of 1964. I drove down to The Indy 500 for my 1st race there in 1976. (Gave up Senior Prom for it). As much as I followed Champ cars, Im surprised I never knew this. My condolences go out to all involved in this sad occurrence. I'm curious to know is this why Duane Sweeney became the Indy 500 starter, Duane was the starter at a local Milw, third mile dirt track where the USAC Midgets use

to run twice a year. While CART began promoting races the fan interest was still there. From a fans point of view it was creation of the IRL years later that ruined fan interest. The Golden Age as I call it vanished. But this years 100th running of the Indianapolis 500 brought the fans back to the Speedway, looked like the old days, a packed house. Going back to Road America brought out a huge crowd, why did they ever leave R.A.? The other thing I noticed was the small crowd for the Brickyard 400. After a thrilling Indy 500. NASCAR stocks moved like giant dinosaurs moving around the track. Maybe just maybe things are looking up.

[Reply](#)



Jay Malone Says:

March 23, 2017 at 11:58 pm

This the last year that Pat Vidan would start an Indy 500 race. Tom Binford knew that Pat was thinking about retirement and the plan was to have Shim (my father) be the new Indy starter. Indy was the ONLY USAC Indy car race that dad had NOT served as starter. With his death, USAC had to scramble to find a replacement starter and they gave the job to Sweeney.

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