

Survivor Says Goose Seemed To Split Open

SAN JUAN, P.R. (AP) — A survivor of a Friday plane crash off Puerto Rico's east coast related Saturday how the plane sank just a few minutes after it hit an ocean swell "that was like a brick wall."

Dr. Richard Patt, a 25-year-old physician from Boston, Massachusetts, told how the plane bounced once, then seemed to split open when it barreled into a wall of water.

"The force of the collision,"

Patt added, "forced him out of the splintering plane while still seated.

"I went flying right through the bulkhead between the captain and myself," the doctor related. Then, Patt continued, he found himself out of the plane and "under two or three feet of water — still in my seat."

"It was like an ejection," he said.

Patt, and his wife Athea, were
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Goose

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two of the ten passengers aboard a Grumman Goose, belonging to Antilles Air Boats, that ditched into the Atlantic about four p.m. Friday. The twin-engine plane developed engine trouble en route from St. Thomas to Fajardo.

All but two of the passengers survived, reportedly without serious injuries.

The two other passengers, Hipolito Castro and Julio Ortiz, are presumed drowned. The Coast Guard has called off the search for the two men.

A few minutes after impact the wreckage of the amphibian plane sank beneath the choppy waves. The two missing passengers, Dr. Patt related, "refused to leave the plane. They wouldn't go away from it."

He said the victims had on life jackets, but persisted in clinging to the wreckage.

Some of the survivors, Patt continued, remained floating in the water entirely supported by their life jackets. The others kept a grip of pieces of wreckage that still remained on the surface.

The power failure that apparently preceded the crash came about ten minutes after the plane had left St. Thomas. "The purr of the engine suddenly changed," Dr. Patt recalled. "It started sputtering."

"The pilot grabbed at a

throttle," the survivor added, "and in about five seconds got it (the engines) going again." But after another about 15 seconds the power failed again, the doctor added, and the pilot shouted, "Grab your lifebelts. They're under your seats."

The plane quickly lost altitude and ditched, the doctor stated.

The survivors, including pilot George Hubschman, were in the water more than two hours before they were rescued by a Coast Guard helicopter. The pilot suffered a broken right leg, but other survivors had only minor injuries.

One big concern of the struggling survivors, was that darkness would fall before rescue planes spotted them. Dr. Patt related how a number of small

planes passed in the general area without seeing them.

The pilot is not believed to have had time to get off a disaster signal. The plane was down about an hour before authorities were aware it was missing. The first word of trouble apparently came about five p.m. when the Federal Aviation Agency tower in St. Thomas reported the plane more than one hour overdue in arriving in Fajardo.

The first planes that passed in the area, it is assumed, may not have known of the accident.

Finally a small plane spotted two of the survivors who had drifted away some distance from the main group of swimmers, the plane then began to scour the area for other survivors, Dr. Patt explained, and eventually located

all of the survivors.

The plane started making a figure eight," the doctor said. He and his companions interpreted this as a sign they had been seen.

Shortly afterwards a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter came on scene, and picked up the swimmers in what the doctor called "an astronaut's chair." Six of them, including Patt and his wife, were ferried to nearby Culebra island where the Navy has a firing range and a manned observation point.

From there the group was transferred to the hospital at the U.S. Navy Base at Ceiba, on the Puerto Rican east coast. The base is near the El Conquistador Hotel, a luxury resort where the Pattes are vacationing.

The Pattes were released Saturday from the hospital.