

City shook as plane hit Empire State Building

AT 8.44am on July 28, 1945, Lieutenant Colonel William Smith, deputy commander of the US 457th Bomber Group, took off in his 10-ton, twin-engined B-25 Mitchell bomber on a routine flight from Bedford, Massachusetts, down to Newark, New Jersey.

With him were Staff Sergeant Christopher Domitrovich, 31, of Granite City, Illinois, and a "hitch hiker", Navy aviation machinist Albert G. Perna who was racing home to Brooklyn, New York, to be with his family after the death of his brother in the Pacific war.

Colonel Smith had not been long back from the war in Europe, where he had flown over Germany through a bombardment of anti-aircraft guns and swarms of enemy fighters.

Compared to the conditions there, this day's flight was the proverbial kid's play, despite the forecast of fog over New York City. But an hour later, the plane went down in one of the most spectacular aviation disasters in US history.

As fog closed in, Colonel Smith became trapped in the city's concrete canyons and the catastrophe which had long been predicted by the city's Cassandras was realised when the B-25 plunged into the side of the Empire State Building.

It hit the 102-storey building between the 78th and 79th floors with an impact that shook practically the whole of Manhattan. The flames that tore up the side of the building reached the observation level on the 86th floor and could be seen through the dense fog several blocks away. When the plane's petrol tanks exploded, debris and fuel rained down the side of the building to 34th St below.

Since the time the building had been proposed and all through its construction there had been predictions that such a disaster would happen, that thousands of people either inside the building or on the teeming streets below would lose their lives in the horror.

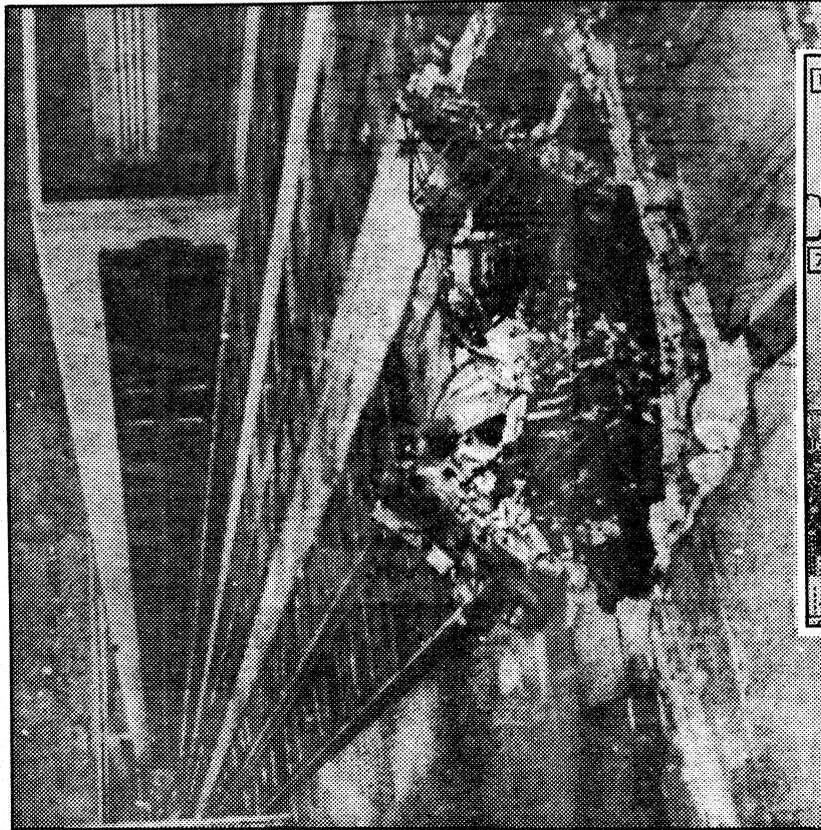
Despite the steady increase in air traffic above New York, the warnings had been ignored and the edifice slowly rose above the city to be claimed as the eighth wonder of the world. Then Colonel Smith ploughed his ten-ton missile into its side.

The miracle was that only 13 people died, three of them the plane's occupants, and only 26 people were injured.

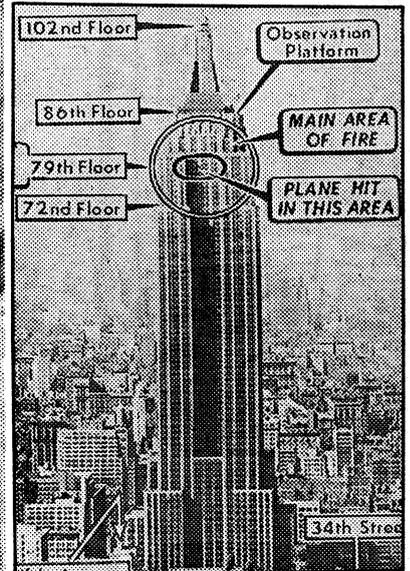
This was because it was early Saturday morning. On any weekday the building would have housed more than 25,000 workers as well as the hundreds of tourists who daily stepped into the lifts to speed more than 300m up to the observation deck.

Below, where the building took up a one-hectare block in midtown Manhattan on Fifth Avenue and 34th St, many more thousands would have been going about their business.

As it was, the building was still a hive of activity that Saturday morning with many businesses and organisations open. One was the National Catholic Welfare Conference on the 79th floor where 20 workers were or-



Catastrophe . . . the hole in the skyscraper's side. INSET: the site of the crash



ganising aid for war refugees. These people were in the direct line of fire when the B-25 hit the building between the 78th and 79th floors.

They had no warning, unlike other Saturday workers in other buildings who stared out of their windows in amazement at the sight of a plane flying beneath them. Others on the ground looked up in sheer horror as they saw the huge plane loom out of the grey, swirling mist and weave its way through the maze of concrete pinnacles.

Visibility was so poor and the plane's speed so great that a tragic accident was inevitable. Then, as the plane wobbled a bit after one near miss, it lined up to head straight for the Empire State Building.

At the last moment, it looked as though the pilot was trying to bank away from the landmark, but then as though pulled by a magnet it plunged into the side.

There was a muffled explosion, then an eerie silence, made more intense by the thick blanket of fog. This was shattered by another explosion that sent people reeling from its intensity, and then flames ripped up the side of the building.

One engine crashed down a lift shaft, the other tore straight through the building to come out the other side and tumble on to the roof of a penthouse. Other debris from the plane tumbled onto the street below, sending dozens of pedestrians scattering.

On the 79th floor, the workers at the National Catholic Welfare Conference were immediately blasted by flaming petrol and six young women were incinerated where they sat. Another three had enough time to flee

from their desks but were overtaken by flames before they reached the door.

One of the men leaped from the window. The drop wasn't 78 storeys to the ground — just to a ledge a couple of storeys below. But it was still enough to kill him.

On the 78th floor there were no offices as the area was used for storage. But this required a janitor and he was trapped in his room where he died.

The three men in the B-25 were burned beyond recognition in the raging inferno.

On the 80th floor, two men were putting in some extra Saturday morning hours when the plane hit. After being hurled from their chairs by the blast, they crawled to the door but were beaten back by flames and smoke.

As they headed back they found a young female lift operator who was badly burned and hysterical from the shock and pain. But the men also found a hammer which they used to smash their way through a wall to another fire escape. They then carried the wounded woman down the 80 flights of stairs to safety.

Another young lift operator had just opened her doors on the 75th floor when the blast hurled her from her car and down the hall. She was given emergency aid by two other women who then put her back into another lift with another young operator.

The doors had barely closed when the cable snapped and the car began its out-of-control, 75-storey plummet. On the ground floor, 17-year-old

Coast Guard apprentice Donald Maloney heard the women's screams as the lift sped past him. He rushed to the basement with firemen who hacked a hole through the wall big enough for him to squirm through.

He had expected to find both women killed, but the car's safety measures had been triggered at the last moment and its fall slowed. They were badly injured, covered with dust and debris, but alive.

There were other miracle escapes. An 17-year-old student, Herbert Fabian, took charge of an abandoned lift and rescued 20 people trapped between the 30th and 40th floors.

Up on the observation deck, the 60 fog-bound tourists who had been frustrated by their lack of a decent view over the city, which on a clear day would stretch 65km, were suddenly staring at a sheet of flames licking the glass.

Through the ventilation system, thick acrid smoke filled the tourists' lungs. The glass doors which led to the open-air balcony were locked and in the panic no one could find the key so the guard smashed the glass to let in the relatively fresh air.

He then led the 60 terrified tourists down the fireproof stairway, an awesome journey of 86 flights.

As they were on their nerve-wracking trek down, Donald Maloney and other rescuers were on their way up. They had no idea where the plane had hit so from the 50th floor they had to open every door to check. By the time they got to the 70th floor, heat and scorched walls told them they were nearing the disaster.

On the 79th, they were confronted with a charnel house of horrors — the horrific sight of the charred bodies of the nine young women and a bit further on the still-flaming wreckage of the B-25.

The most spectacular building in New York, the tallest building in the world, the architectural masterpiece of glistening limestone and granite and sparkling stainless steel, had become a tomb for 14 people.