

Radio Warning Keeps Jetliner From Hitting Mast on Trade Center

By RICHARD WITKIN

An Argentine airline jet, flying in clouds 1,500 feet lower than its assigned altitude, came close to crashing into a television mast atop a World Trade Center tower in downtown Manhattan last Friday at 10:05 P.M., according to Federal officials here.

The Boeing 707 plane was about three to four miles south of the Trade Center — less than a minute and a half away — heading toward it about 200 feet below the top of the North Tower mast, when an automatic alarm buzzed in the Federal Aviation Administration's traffic control facility, the F.A.A. said.

Simultaneously the controller responsible for guiding the plane recognized from data on his radar scope that the jetliner was flying too low, according to the agency account.

Instantly the controller radioed the plane and ordered the crew to turn around and climb to 3,000 feet. That was the altitude the crew had been assigned to fly at, the F.A.A. said. The plane was later guided back into the regular traffic flow and landed safely at Kennedy International Airport.

The Aerolíneas Argentinas plane, carrying 49 passengers and a crew of nine, was approaching Kennedy on a flight

Continued on Page B16, Column 1

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Continued From Page A1

from Guayaquil, Ecuador. A spokesman for the airline said none of its officials here "knows anything about any incident" last Friday. They have received no report from the F.A.A., he said, or from the plane's crew.

Details of the incident were provided, in response to queries, by the chief of air traffic operations for the F.A.A.'s Northeast region, Dick Marakovits.

Asked if there had been a real chance of the plane hitting the tower, he said: "Yes sir. No doubt about it. Especially since he was on his way down to 1,400 feet."

The official added that, from initial studies made of the radar records, "it looked like he was headed right toward the North Tower, or the west corner of it."

The plane was reported to have been at 1,500 feet when the danger was recognized at the control center and the emergency radio message sent. The twin North and South Towers of the trade center are 1,350 feet high. But the North Tower has a sturdy steel television mast on top that rises to more than 1,700 feet.

In July 1945 a twin-engine B-25 Army bomber crashed into the Empire State Building at a point 915 feet above street level. Fourteen persons were killed and 25 others injured.

The close call last Friday marked the third time in four years that Aerolineas Argentinas had been involved in a hazardous incident in the New York area.

In January 1977 one of the airline's Boeing 707's came within about 100 feet of smashing into the heavily populated Woodmere-Cedarhurst area east of Kennedy Airport after taking off from Kennedy in a driving snowstorm. Last March the pilot of an Argentine cargo plane, making a sharper left turn than he should have on a Kennedy takeoff, began overtaking a jumbo jet ahead of him. When a controller radioed urgent new traffic directions to the jumbo, the Argentine pilot thought the instructions were for him and complied at least twice. The two planes came close to a collision before matters were sorted out.

An F.A.A. spokesman, Irving Moss, said there was a possibility that the controller who handled the Argentine plane last Friday would receive a commendation if final evaluation proved he had averted a disaster.

The controller was said to have been responsible for controlling seven other planes at the time. This was cited by officials as the probable reason he did not notice immediately when the Argentine jet strayed below 3,000 feet.

The facility from which the planes were being guided is the recently commissioned Tracon (for terminal radar control) center in Hempstead, L.I. The alarm system that sounded has been in operation for about a year.

The system is called Minimum Safe Altitude Warning. The computer memory holds data that divides the area's terrain into a grid, with squares measuring two miles on each side. The computer also contains data on the height of the highest terrain or man-made structure in each square. When radar shows a plane at an altitude within 500 feet of the highest obstruction and 30 seconds away, a buzzer sounds repeatedly in the Tracon. At the same time the letters LA (for low altitude) flash on the radarscope next to the plane's radar blip.

This is what happened last Friday. Simultaneously the controller noticed the 1,500-foot altitude reading in the data block next to the blip. The emergency radio call then went out.

The F.A.A. said it did not want to disclose the controller's name at this stage of the inquiry.