

Plane crash survivor relives his story

By Tom Hauser, KSTP-TV

For George Lamson Jr., every day since Jan. 21, 1985, is a gift.

Galaxy Airlines Flight 203 crashed shortly after take-off just after 1am that day.

Lamson was the only one of 71 people on board who survived that crash a short distance from the airport in Reno.



George Lamson Jr. will be part of a documentary about plane crash survivors. Photo/KSTP-TV

He's one of 14 people to be the sole survivor of a commercial plane crash.

"What I remember is hitting the ground, waking up seeing the sky, thinking I was dead," Lamson told me recently in Reno. "I feel gratitude for having a second chance to live."

What makes the crash all the more difficult to deal with is the fact his dad, George Lamson Sr., survived just over a week before he died.

The younger Lamson was just 17 years old when he and his dad flew to the Lake Tahoe/Reno area for a Super Bowl trip on a chartered plane. Most of the people on the trip were from Minnesota and western Wisconsin.

Immediately after the crash there were three survivors. Seventeen-year-old George Lamson and his dad both survived along with Robert Miggins of Wayzata. Lamson, Sr. and Miggins later died of their injuries.

In fact, a National Transportation Safety Board report indicates 16 people survived the initial crash impact, but most immediately died in a huge fireball.

George and his dad were sitting near the front of the plane by a bulkhead. The plane broke apart near them and they were thrown about 40 feet from the plane away from the explosion and fire.

The cause of the crash, according to the NTSB report, was a series of tragic events. A ground worker at the Reno airport improperly closed an "air start access door" that came open shortly after take-off.

The small open door beneath a wing caused strong vibrations in the plane. That, in turn, caused a series of pilot errors as they tried to troubleshoot the problem.

The plane crashed just a couple miles from the airport. "When I looked out the window I saw the ground," Lamson recalls about the moments before the crash.

"So our plane was tilted this way, I'm looking out the window and I'm still seeing the ground. I should be looking up at the stars or wherever. Then we knew something was wrong. It got very quiet in the cabin."

Lamson came back to Minnesota and finished his senior year at Cretin High School. About five years later he moved to Reno

and now lives just minutes from the crash site. "I didn't come here consciously to be near my dad," he told me last week. "But I realize that by being here I do feel closer to him."

There's a memorial to the Galaxy plane crash victims several miles from the crash site in a public park. When Lamson is having a bad day, he'll sometimes visit the memorial to remind himself how fortunate he really is. There's not a day that goes by that he doesn't think of his dad and all the others who died.

"I carry them around with me all the time. They're with me 24/7."

George will be in Minneapolis May 30 for the premiere of "Sole Survivor," a documentary film about some of the sole survivors of plane crashes. He admits he was initially reluctant to get involved, but decided it was time to open up.

"I wanted to do something that would explain what I went through and maybe teach somebody that may be going through a difficult time they could learn from my experience."