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# St. Charles pilot who helped save 184 dies

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St. Charles resident Denny Fitch became a hero in 1989 when he aided the crew of United Flight 232 to land in an Iowa field.

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By Marni Pyke

As a trained pilot, Denny Fitch knew instinctively everyone aboard United Flight 232 could die in a matter of minutes.

"I was 46, I had the world ahead of me, I had a beautiful healthy family, and at 4 p.m., I was trying to stay alive," he said in a documentary interview.

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As the DC-10 thrashed, he took a second to think of his wife and three kids and what their last words had been that day back in 1989. "My wife said, 'I love you, hurry home.' And with that knowledge and that peace, I was ready to die that day if I had to."

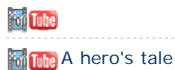
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Fitch and 184 others survived, due in large part to his troubleshooting from the cockpit floor, pulling every aeronautical trick out of the book to control the plunging jet.

But the man hailed as a hero couldn't stop the aggressive brain cancer he was diagnosed with in 2010.

The 69-year-old St. Charles resident died Monday with his family around him.

"Denny had a strong faith, and that helped him in the end," his wife, Rosa, said Tuesday.

"He fought the disease as valiantly as he fought to save our lives in 1989," said flight attendant Jan Brown of

Schaumburg, who was on board the fateful trip.

Fitch was a United pilot and DC-10 flight instructor who happened to be a passenger aboard Flight 232 when it lost all hydraulic power July 19, 1989, flying from Denver to Chicago. The jet crash-landed into the Sioux City, Iowa, airport and veered into a cornfield, killing 111 people, but Fitch's and the flight crew's resourcefulness in bringing the aircraft down became legend in the aviation world.

"People studied it and used it to demonstrate the need for cockpit resource management," said United pilot Mike Hamilton, who flew with Fitch. "It became a case study in how a crew could work together in an emergency."

Fitch had his choice of two planes but chose the DC-10. "It was to be," he told film director Errol Morris in a 2007 interview.

It was a quiet flight until a turbine blade came apart, sending shrapnel into the engine and disabling the hydraulic system, used for essential flight controls such as landings and takeoffs.

Fitch signaled to a flight attendant and told her he was a DC-10 instructor, "If there's anything I can do to assist, I'm happy to do so," he said.

He walked into a scene of cockpit chaos as pilots wrestled manually with failing controls. Fitch took charge of the throttles, desperately trying to ease the plane down. "I thought, 'Dear God, I have 296 lives in my hands,'" he recalled.

Flight attendant Susan Callender tried to stay calm outwardly, but inside she panicked. "I was picturing headlines about death and thinking of my parents and how they'd feel," she remembered. "I kept thinking. 'Am I going to live? Am I going to die?'"

As the DC-10 streaked for the Sioux City airport, "I was hoping to pull the nose up and at the last minute arrest the sink rate so it wouldn't hit the runway that hard, but there just wasn't time," Fitch said.

The cockpit broke off on impact, compacting the pilots and spinning out into the cornfield.

"Nobody had a right to walk away from that," Fitch told the Daily Herald after the crash. He recalled crying for three days because of the casualties.

"He had survivor's guilt after the crash because people died," Rosa Fitch said. "It haunted him that he didn't save everyone."

But Fitch came out stronger from the crucible of the accident, becoming an international motivational speaker who inspired thousands and a consultant who worked with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. He was commended by President George H.W. Bush and by the Senate.

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"It gave him the platform and exposure to share his life lessons," son Brian Fitch said. "By the end of his speeches, he had grown men crying."

Fitch also turned his skills to volunteering with Lifeline, a service where pilots donate their time to transport critically ill patients to medical facilities. He became personally involved with some of his passengers, Rosa Fitch said.

"He was a big hugger," she said. "Even if he didn't know you, he'd put his arms around you."

Now, in the midst of their grief, the family is celebrating Fitch's life — just as he wanted.

"He was doing exactly what he wanted, didn't want anyone to be sad when he was gone," Brian Fitch said.

In his 2007 interview, Denny Fitch recalled how his mother made a joke about how he said, "plane" before saying "mommy" or "daddy."

"I love it," he said. "It's what I was meant for. I've never gone to work, I've only gone to fly."

Callender, who has since become a family friend, spread the news of Fitch's death to United staff at a training event Tuesday. "It was a hard day of crying," she said. "Everyone loved Denny; he was larger than life. And his laugh ... he had a deep hearty laugh."

But she agreed his death should be a celebration.

"Having Denny on board was such a blessing," she said. "I feel he was put there to play the role he did."

Visitation is from noon to 8 p.m. Sunday at Yurs Funeral Home, 405 Main St., St. Charles. A funeral Mass is set for 10:30 a.m. Monday at Resurrection Church, 30W350 Army Trail Road, Wayne.

For more information, visit [http://web.me.com/brianfitch/Denny\\_Fitch\\_Sr/Welcome.html](http://web.me.com/brianfitch/Denny_Fitch_Sr/Welcome.html).



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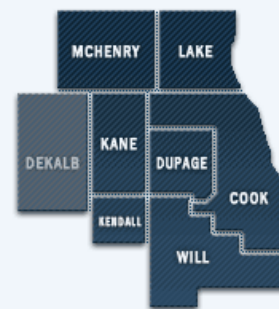
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