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Bad weather blamed for putting jet off the run

Poor runway conditions and strong crosswinds "certainly were factors" when an Air Canada DC-9 skidded off a runway at Regina while landing during a freak blizzard Thursday afternoon.

As the flight from Vancouver landed, visibility at the Regina Airport was down to 800 metres in snow and blowing snow, according to the airport weather office. Winds were gusting from 33 to 52 kilometres per hour, and about four centimetres of snow had accumulated on the ground.

Two of the aircraft's 57 passengers

received minor injuries and were taken to hospital for observation, said Steve Perris, sales manager at Air Canada's Regina office. The remaining passengers and the aircraft's five-member flight crew were not hurt.

Perris said this morning the bad weather certainly was a factor but couldn't say exactly what caused the aircraft to swerve off the runway. He said Thursday there were no indications of mechanical failure.

"Based on what we can see, it would appear that the aircraft was pulling to the right," he told a news conference Thursday.

With the airport's main runway closed because of the accident, strong crosswinds and poor visibility Thursday night and earlier this morning forced several Regina-bound flights to divert to Saskatoon, Perris said.

The airport's main runway will remain closed until the damaged jet is moved, but flights, which were to resume late this morning, will use the secondary runway.

Air Canada safety and maintenance crews from Montreal and Winnipeg were flown to Saskatoon last night and were coming to Regina by bus this afternoon to make arrangements to get to 50-ton aircraft moved.

Removal crews using two 25-ton cranes were to start work later today or Saturday, provided investigators from the airline and the federal Transport Department are finished their work.

Flight 234 went off the runway about one kilometre northwest of the airport terminal after touching down in heavy snow at 2:46 p.m. Thursday.

Perris was unable to estimate the jet's speed when it skidded off the runway, but said braking from the aircraft's 160 miles-per-hour (260 kilometres-per-hour) touchdown speed appeared to be almost complete.

The jet came to rest with its left main undercarriage collapsed and the left wing tip buried in the snow. There was

also some damage to the left wing flap.

The aircraft was evacuated according to "normal emergency procedures," Perris said.

Passengers, many dressed for Vancouver's balmy weather, left the plane by jumping into snowy, zero-degree temperatures and onto inflatable emergency chutes. The evacuation was completed in a matter of minutes, with all passengers in the airport terminal

building within 15 or 20 minutes, Perris said.

The flight was diverted to Saskatoon about two hours before the accident when its pilot, identified only as Capt. J. Proulx, decided weather conditions at Regina were too severe to try landing at the scheduled time of 12:43 p.m., Perris said.

After refueling in Saskatoon, the airliner again took off for Regina.

Perris said the pilot thought the runway was in good enough condition to land safely when he got back to Regina.

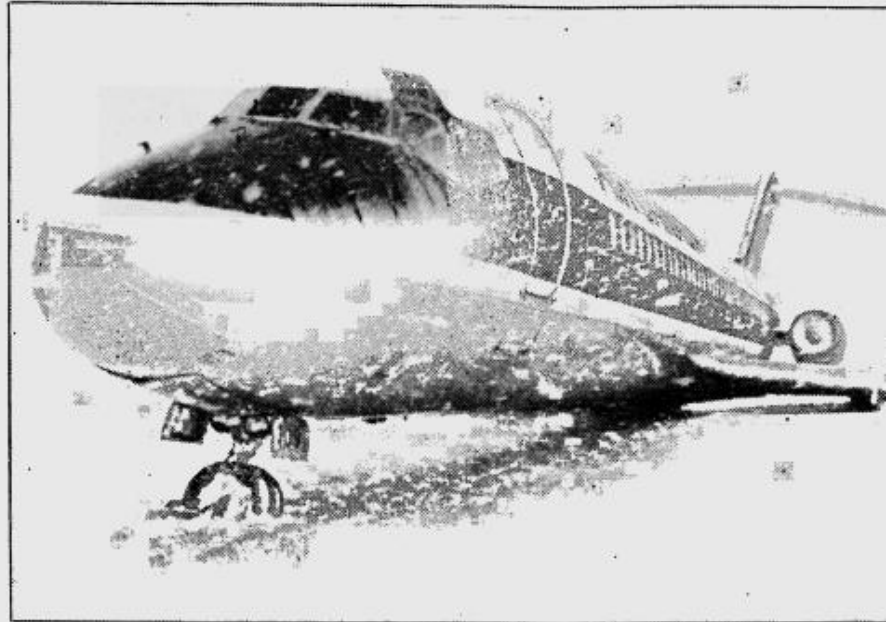
Passengers on the flight said there was little panic, but some were startled when the aircraft slid off the runway.

"As soon as we touched down, you could feel the plane wasn't solid," said Lorne LeBel, a passenger from Richmond, B.C.

"It was kind of scary."



Linda Nicholson



An Air Canada DC-9 and its 57 passengers had an unceremonious end to the trip from

inway

Linda Nicholson of Surrey, B.C., said she was caught unaware by the accident.

"The guy beside my mom said we were going to crash," she said. "I didn't think he was serious, but the next thing I knew we slid off the runway and everybody was yelling to get out."

"It was pretty scary, but I don't think it was that serious."

(Storm stories and pictures - A3)



Leader Post photo by Ian Caldwell

from Vancouver on Thursday