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EASTERN AIRLINES FLIGHT 401

Survivors unite, seek public memorial

Those who lived through the crash of Eastern Flight 401 in 1972 have come together to create a public memorial.

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Thirty-seven years after they huddled together in the Everglades waiting for rescuers, survivors of the horrific crash of Eastern Airlines Flight 401 have reunited for another common mission:

They want to build a public memorial for the 101 passengers and crew who died in one of South Florida's worst air disasters on Dec. 29, 1972, a crash that occurred within site of Miami International Airport.

After years of privately honoring the dead, a handful of the flight's 75 survivors say they have become consumed with leaving behind a remembrance of those who died in the first crash of a jumbo jet.

The victims of another Everglades crash, that of ValuJet Flight 592 in 1996, have a memorial in their honor on the edge of the famed swamp.

"Why not a memorial to our horrible crash and our victims?" said former Eastern Airlines flight attendant Beverly Raposa, 62, of Sunrise, one of the survivors eager to see the memorial built.

The group of survivors already have contracted two local architects, Bruce Brockhouse and Associates and partner Al Naranjo, who have designed a walk-through memorial and museum exhibit, which the group hopes to place on the grounds of MIA. (Go to www.flight401.com or ealflt401.blogspot.com to learn more of their plans.)

"We want to see this become

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a reality in our life time," said Ron Infantino, 63, of South Miami, a surviving passenger and memorial group leader who lost his bride of 20 days, Lilly, in the Flight 401 crash.

Besides Infantino and Raposa, the core of the Eastern Flight 401 Tribute Group is made up of Jan Coviello, 61, of Pembroke Pines, a passenger who lost her 4-year-old son, Nicky; Miguel Junco, 37, of Miami, who was 10 months old and lost both parents in the crash; and two other flight attendants, Mercy Ruiz, 65, of Miami, and Patricia McQuigg, 59, of Plantation, who still works as a flight attendant.

The group of survivors reconnected last year following a Miami Herald retelling of the crash and an event honoring the first rescuer on the scene, the late Robert "Bud" Marquis, an air-boat pilot.

Caught in harsh economic times, the group knows they must get creative. To finance the memorial, expected to cost five figures, the group is considering offering paid tours to the site of the crash — for years a fascination for aviation buffs around the world and the topic of two television movies, several documentaries and even speculation that a crew member who died in the crash later haunted other Eastern planes.

MAKING THEIR PITCH

For the past year, the group has met almost every weekend at homes, restaurants and borrowed offices and have spoken of their ordeal at luncheons and in front of airline industry groups. The goal is to promote their planned memorial that would allow visitors to walk into an enclosed area to hear the story of how the L-1011, flying from New York to Miami, crashed into the Everglades after the crew became distracted by a burned-out, landing-gear light and failed to properly fly the plane.

JOE RIMKUS JR./MIAMI HERALD FILE, 2008

A MISSION: Eastern Flight 401 survivors, from left, Patricia McQuigg; Jan Coviello; Mercy Ruiz; Miguel Junco; Beverly Raposa; Ron Infantino.

STARS FOR VICTIMS

The memorial would feature 101 stars on a ceiling, with the names of all the dead glowing inside.

Two days before New Year's Eve, Flight 401 took off from New York's JFK airport at 9:20 p.m. with an all Miami-Dade crew in the cockpit: Capt. Robert Loft, 55; First Officer Albert Stockstill, 39; and Second Officer Donald Repo, 51.

The two-hour, 40-minute flight was uneventful — until it approached MIA.

Loft ordered the landing gear lowered. But an indicator light failed to confirm it was down and locked. He decided to circle west over the Everglades at 2,000 feet so the crew could try to determine if the gear or the light were malfunctioning.

In the process, a crew member accidentally bumped the automatic pilot throttle, switching it off. And the jumbo jet began slowly descending in the darkness, but no one in the cockpit noticed.

At 11:41 p.m., Capt. Loft, satisfied that the problem was a faulty bulb, advised the tower they were coming in and returned his attention to flying the plane. Recordings from the cockpit's black box captured his chilling final words.

"Hey, what's happening here?" said Loft, frantically pulling up while banking left in a futile attempt to avert a crash. But the jet's left wing hit the ground and slammed into into the Everglades, breaking into several large sections, each spinning across the swampy terrain just 18 miles west of MIA.

For those who survived, the horror wasn't over.

"I was still strapped to my seat, but I was in the open air, in the middle of nowhere. There was no plane around us, " said Coviello, who was traveling to Miami for the holidays to visit her mother. Her son Nicky was no longer next to her; rescuers recovered his body the following day.

Coviello today still remembers hearing Raposa's voice in the pitch darkness of the Everglades: "If you can hear me, come toward my voice. I'm a stewardess!"

Raposa and Ruiz had ended up together near the torn-off tail end of the plane.

Ruiz was the most seriously injured. Raposa went to work. She has long been credited with comforting survivors by singing Christmas carols as they waited for help.

Nearby, Infantino was lucky. He survived; his bride didn't. But he found himself naked in neck-high swamp water, unable to move, his arm half torn off. He remembers trying to keep his head above water as Everglades critters floated past him.

He was eventually rescued, but the physical recovery was an ordeal for Infantino. He was among the injured who developed gangrene; so did McQuigg, another surviving flight attendant who spent months recovering from her injuries. Two other flight attendants, Pat Ghyseels and Stephanie Stanich, died on impact.

DUTY-BOUND

Today, all consider themselves lucky to have survived, and feel duty-bound to honor those who didn't.

They admit they were forever changed by the crash of Flight 401 — and so was the airline industry.

Because of how the crew of Flight 401 became distracted, techniques were born called Crew Resource Management, or CRM, which now regulate behavior on every plane in the sky.

"That's why we feel so strongly about leaving behind some sort of history behind of what happened to us on Flight 401," said flight attendant Ruiz.

How to help

- What: Memorial for victims of the crash of Eastern Airlines Flight 401 in the Everglades
- Information about the Eastern Airlines Flight 401 Tribute Group: Call Ron Infantino at 305-726-5614 or visit their websites at www.flight401.com or ealflt401.blogspot.com
- Donations: Tax-deductible donations to the memorial can be sent to Eastern Airlines Historical Foundation (please write Flight 401 in the memo line). Mail: P.O. BOX 140401 Coral Gables FL 33114

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