



ACCESSSM

NEWSLETTER

ISSUE V VOL I

AirCraft Casualty Emotional Support Services

Tragedy, suffering and pain are facets of life that we will unfortunately meet during our lives. With events as recent as Crossair Flight 3597 outside Zurich, American Airlines Flight 587 and the tragedies of September 11th in New York and Washington D.C., ACCESS has been called upon to help the families and friends of victims seeking help.

Being new to the board of ACCESS, and being an active volunteer for ACCESS for almost a year, I am proud to be part of ACCESS. ACCESS helps heal. Our volunteer grief counselors, often, once counseled themselves, have then come to help others in need. ACCESS provides comfort, inspiration, understanding and most of all someone to listen.

Our fundraisers on August 7th, at Oliva and on December 3rd at the Tenth Street Lounge helped us raise over \$10,000. These funds have given ACCESS the ability to fund the cost of the increasing number of requests for support. ACCESS has been a guiding light to many. I want to thank our 250 plus volunteers and offer my heartfelt wishes and prayers to all who trust ACCESS's care and compassion.

Jack Karamanoukian, lost his brother, Serge Karamanoukian, age 35, aboard Swissair Flight 111, September 2, 1998.

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ACCESS provides comfort to friends and families of air disaster victims and survivors. ACCESS helps people cope with their grief and pain by connecting them to grief mentors who have also survived or lost loved ones in an air tragedy.

ACCESS is there for as long as the grieving need support.

REFLECTIONS BY A DISASTER PSYCHIATRIST

I use the word "disaster" in general terms when I write and speak publicly about aviation disasters I have been involved with directly (on-site) or indirectly (counseling). However, what I truly mean (and I take great pains to clarify each and every time) is that a loss of a single loved one in a small aircraft incident in war or in peace is a disaster to that family; a loss of each person in a "larger" incident is a disaster for each family as well.

An aviation disaster directly caused by intent-to-harm (terrorist group whatever the motivation or guiding principle, criminal individual or individuals, severe psychiatric illness impairing of reasoning) which kills innocent victims can far outweigh other types of disasters (accidental due to design or negligence, act of nature) in the emotional and mental impact it has on survivors and loved ones left behind. The intent-to-harm disaster strains credibility and trust in basic human understanding: "How could [he/she/they] do this?" and "What kind of person[s] could do this?"

Can justice ever truly be served? Even when the individuals responsible are found and taken to court, even if they are executed or sent to prison forever, there is often no justice for those who point a finger and say "You took my life from me when you took away my [...loved one...]." There is no gold standard for subsequently choosing forgiveness, charity, rationalization, retribution, isolation, or other coping methods, positive or negative. It is done as often as not by stumbling as it is by choosing. One only does as best as he or she possibly can.

There is a proverbial "hole in the world" in the life of any loved one who has lost someone to any type of aviation disaster. In many, but I would say the real minority, that hole can be made smaller over time so that person finds a way to cope and to reinvent an emotional life despite the loss. But the intent-to-harm aviation disaster leaves a hole, which I believe grows wider over time or at the least, never shrinks and never closes.

From the September 11, 2001 terrorist acts. Back to Pan Am 103. Or to Air India 128. And others before. Anonymity is a cruel twist of fate for those who perish in aviation disasters. I do not mean anonymity of name, because these are invariably given in passenger lists published by the print media. I mean anonymity of life/lives led.

There have been non-aviation terrorist acts and acts of nature and accidental disasters where the media world has ensured we see photographs of faces, bylines, even paragraphs about individual lives underneath the photos. But I do not recall this happening with aviation disasters. Perhaps where a small crew is involved, there have been such biographies. But in large disasters every victim is not given a testimonial.

I wish that the media could provide for every victim, a photo, a name, and a life. A life of loves and successes, a life of important accomplishments, a life of hobbies, a life of dreams, a life of important relationships, a life of work and basic contributions to the lives of those around him or her. No matter how long that life spanned. I want to know about each and every one of them. Because they are my fellow man collectively. I did not know them in life. But I care to know about them, in death. And those they left behind. [The ACCESS Newsletter does this so well. I am grateful.]

The "Holiday Season" is upon us. This one. Past ones. Future ones. The vast majority of losses from aviation incidents happen outside of the Holiday Season, statistically speaking. But some major aviation disasters occurred around the Holiday Season, such as Pan Am 103 and the Gander, Newfoundland military charter crash. Smaller disasters, smaller aircraft, even solo pilots have perished in incidents during past Seasons.

Perhaps losses from incidents at the Holiday Season are more poignant and bittersweet, as plans for family reunions were replaced by family funerals. And the cyclical nature of the Holiday Season serves as a painful anniversary reaction with memories of sudden phone calls and media reports of incidents and disasters and the numbing realization of loss, all the while with "joy" and "Happy New Year" and "Holiday songs" and "gifts" and "Norman Rockwell scenes" swirling around.

But, in truth, no matter the time of year of a loss from an aviation incident, dreams and bedrooms and stockings and chairs at dinner tables and photo albums remain empty. Each family and friend copes as best as possible and tries to find meaning in the external world. Perhaps it is a realization that at the same instant, others around the world are experiencing the same sadness. Perhaps it is a sense of appreciation by family or friend that the lost person was recovered in a sufficient way to be given a burial and site to be visited---whereas others have not been as fortunate. Perhaps there was established a memorial fund or a bank account or a scholarship or even an endowed seat in a house of worship, so that others who are so privileged to use these are able to find a good life... despite another's being taken. Perhaps it is a realization that individual efforts to establish a bill or legislation that promises to reduce the possibility of future aviation incidents have been successful in passage.

And in a small private way, perhaps individuals in a family however scattered can come together at this Season, forget differences, break bread, toast each other in life and loved ones in death, hold each other, and provide comfort unselfishly to all who need it at home.

Mark L. Dembert, M.D., M.P.H., resides in Norfolk, Virginia and is a U.S. Navy Captain and staff Psychiatrist at the Naval Medical Center, Portsmouth, Virginia.

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My Michael

On September 11, 2001, I got two phone calls from my husband, Michael Patrick Iken who worked in Tower 2 on the 48th Floor, for a company called Euro Brokers.

The last time I saw you, I was half asleep, you came to kiss me good-bye. You said, "I love you. Have a nice day." And those words soothed me back to sleep.

Not long afterward, the phone rings and I'm startled to hear your voice. You said you were all right, not to worry, turn on the news. I said "Okay" and turned on the news, in horror. You call again to assure me that you were safe and to call the family. You told me you were safe and I wanted to believe you. I never dreamt those would be last words I heard from you.

I never thought I would be without Michael. He was the best husband (which I told him everyday). From the moment I met Michael I knew there was something about him. I was drawn to his "soul." He had a way of looking deeply into my eyes and pulling me in. We were all drawn to him-he had that special something that made you want to be near him. He was always smiling. I was blessed to have had him in my life for two years. We never spent a night apart; we were together all the time. We made a great team, "M&M." He made me his whole life and I will always treasure that.

I will miss his wonderful voice, his big blue eyes, his laugh and his smile. I loved everything about him. He was compassionate and always willing to help others. He lived his life to the fullest; he didn't have a fear of dying. I was proud to be his wife and I know that he was as happy and in love as I was. I wanted to grow old with him and I looked forward to starting a family.

Everyday I ask myself, "How do I go on without my husband?" It's so hard to be strong. I know he is with me and he would want me to go on with my life. My faith in God and spirituality keep me going. I believe God has a plan for me, I know I have to do something to remember the people that lost their lives that beautiful September morning. This mission keeps me very busy and motivated to go on. I know Michael would be proud of me. He always supported me in whatever I wanted to do.

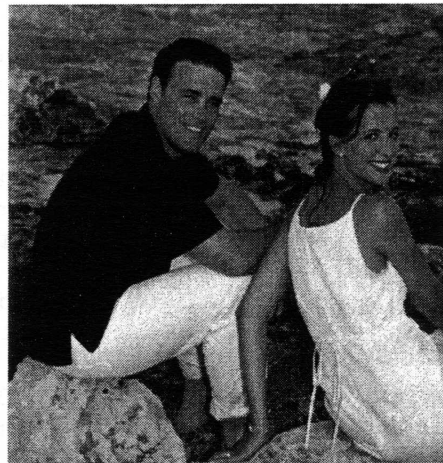
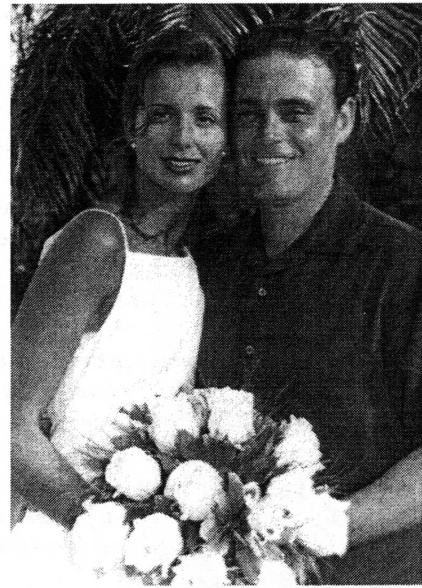
I know he will be waiting to greet me in the next life-where we can spend eternity together. Until then, I will rejoice in his memory. I am blessed to have a wonderful guardian angel at my side. I know that he is at peace and surrounded by family and friends as he was here on earth.

When I close my eyes I still see him smiling at me and telling me to have a good day, I love you, as he did on our last morning together. I will try Michael. Until we're together again, I will try.

A Special Message to "My Angels": I want to thank all the "angels" who are helping me to accomplish my mission. I also want to thank my loving family and wonderful friends who are helping me get through this difficult time with their love and support.

Monica Iken, lost her husband, Michael Patrick Iken, in the World Trade Center, Tower 2, 48th Floor on September 11, 2001.

Photo's above (right): Monica & Patrick



For Those Lost in the Tragic Attack on the US-Sept. 11, 2001

To those who have fallen
And served our country well
Unbeknownst to you
Was a final farewell

You wake every morning
And never wonder why
Evil hasn't met you
To force a final goodbye

This action will not be forgotten
Nor will those lives that were lost
Our God Almighty has chosen you
What a tragic cost

So we say our prayers and hope you sleep softly
Our American brothers and sisters...
You will never be forgotten.

Submitted by Liz Manchen

My Son, Chad

Our beloved Chad was killed on USAir Flight 427, Thursday, September 8, 1994. Mercifully, things were a bit of a blur as we stumbled through memorial services with no positive identification, attended the USAir Final Commendation Services and then, with aching hearts, came home and faced the holidays. Writing Christmas letters was an agonizing task. Gift shopping was mechanical and joyless. Our family gathering only emphasized the gaping hole in our midst. We were but remnants of a once bountiful and loving family. We'd faced too many deaths. The empty chairs at our holiday table now outnumber the occupied.

As my first journal entry in 1995, I wrote...

The New Year has come and I ask myself, how can that be? How did I, Chad's mom, survive the holidays? How could the New Year come without him? I look in the mirror and I see and feel old. My eyes are dull and faded. My shoulders have rounded and curled forward and in. The bones in my chest have dissolved. My back aches beneath the weight of my heart. What kept my head held high, my shoulders back, my posture straight and upright when all three sons lived? Was it pride? Was it joy? Was it love? Was it all of the above? Why am I deflated, sunken, adrift? Is this self-pity? Grief? Is Chad's life diminished by my despair? Lord, please fill my heart with something, anything! I don't know what I want. Wrong, I do know. I want Chad alive and well upon this earth again. I want to be made whole again.

I would like to tell you that I have been made whole again, but that would not be true. Instead, I have come to the conclusion that that can never be. However, in these past years, I have found small ways to bring comfort and joy into my life.

Each year, I celebrate Chad's birthday by sending off a financial gift to the Chadwick Ethan Morris Chemical Engineering Memorial Scholarship Fund set up by his wife, Jen. He was a mentor to so many wonderful and gifted college co-op students. In honoring his birthday I feel I am perpetuating his joy in mentoring and even communing with him.

Chad's father planted an Autumn Flame maple tree that fall of 1994. It has thrived in our yard, growing steadily upward. I watch from the kitchen window as cardinals and robins barter for homesteading rights within its branches. The Robins have won. Each fall the leaves turn flame red. I collect a few and press them in my memory book. The leaves have grown larger and redder.

I've made a special place, something beyond cardboard boxes and plastic storage containers, to store our memory books and mementos of Chad. A beautiful rosemalled Norwegian trunk all cedar lined is now filled with the joys and tragedies of our son's life.

Past Christmases, I've lit a candle in Chad's memory and given thanks for the thirty-five years we shared. On New Years eve we've poured him a glass of Champaign or beer, depending on our mood, and toasted the New Year in with him. He's frozen in my memory at age 35 while his younger brothers age beyond him and I become a senior citizen.

One of the things I've done each Christmas for the past years is to search for just the *right* Christmas Tree Angel ornament to put in our Christmas Care Packages. I call it, Chad's Memory Angel. This Angel's has two specifications; it must be masculine and it must have an attitude. Searching for this angel is a wonderful task and somehow eases the pain of his absence. His Angel is included in the packages to his brothers, cousins, aunts and friends. Each year I write a poem to enclose with the Christmas Care Package.

Excerpts from 1999...

Now hang up the Angel somewhere on your tree, and whisper sweet prayers in our Chad's memory. May your holiday season be blessed with God's love. May your new year be filled with his Grace from above. May your lives fill with joy as you walk in his way. May you know you are loved with the dawn of each day.

Excerpts from 1998...

Hang up the sweet Angel some where on your tree, and remember our Chad with a prayer. For each dear memory, keeps him with us you see. In this life we are so blessed to share. So hats off to the old year, hello to the new, God's blessings be with us, whatever we do. And guide us all safely through life's rocky days, with love in our hearts, joyfully singing his praise.

I know that I will never be whole again. I also know that I never have to give up Chad or his memories. He is forever a part of my life, my family. To let go, to try and forget, is far more painful than celebrating his life and cherishing his memory. Thanksgiving is almost here and I'm still searching for this year's Angel, masculine and with a 'tude.' If you see such an Angel, please think of our Chad.

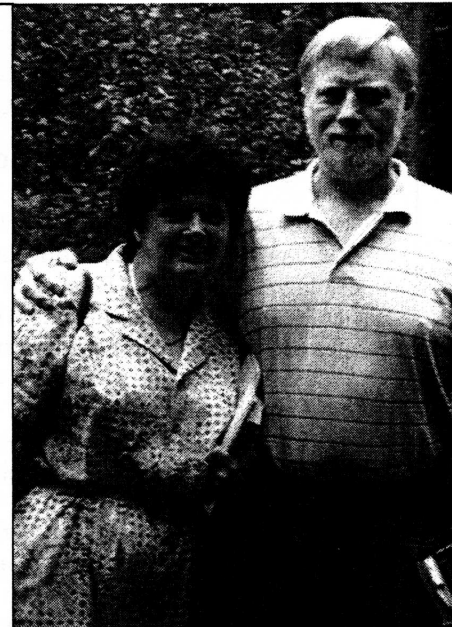
Oh God, please bless and comfort all, whose holiday tables have an empty chair and the holes in their hearts seem too great to bear and they sometimes feel there's no one to care. Please let them know you are always there.

My Parents

Caryl and Jerry were my parents.
They were the best "Nana" and "Grampie" to our three-year-old daughter.
They were supportive in the most difficult times.
They were the ones who were always proud of what I did.
They were friends to anyone, who put effort into being a friend back.
They were lovers of dogs, especially Dobermans.
They were avid readers of all types of literature.
They were avid listeners of classical music.
They were quiet people who loved the solitude of their home on 5-wooded acres.

Caryl was my best friend and mother.
Jerry was a brew-meister, and a good one at that!!!
Caryl was fine craft collector.
Jerry was the all around best fix-it-man of anything.
Caryl was the official "Miss Manners" of the family.
Jerry was a baker of the very best rye bread.
Caryl was an award winning (and published) burger chef.
Jerry was a quiet man who had to get to know you, before he opened up.
Caryl was a woman with strong opinions.
Jerry was a man who always tried to do his best.

My parents are wonderful, caring, loving people.
My parents are missed
My parents are in my thoughts everyday, in everything I do, and everything I see around me.
These words give only a small idea of who they were. I could easily fill several volumes.
I really loved them and I really miss them!!!



Stephanie Schneiderman, lost her parents, Caryl and Jerry, aboard Egypt Air 990, Nantucket, MA., October 31, 1999.

(Caryl & Jerry Shown Above)

Steps to Recovery: In Memory of Darinda

On January 9, 1997, I lost a beautiful 26-year-old woman who wasn't supposed to die. Flight attendant Darinda Ogden-Nilsen, my wife of four years, perished on ComAir 3272 when it stalled and plummeted in the winter sky. There was no preparing me for this sudden turn of events. My life changed instantly and nothing would ever be the same again.

With the help of friends and family, whom I can never repay, I am here only a few years later in a position of strength, allowing me to bring support and encouragement to those in need. What follows is a brief summary of advice, based on my experience, to help those now suffering deeply.

Grief is a difficult journey and one that must move on your time schedule. Don't let anyone tell you how you should feel, or how long you should grieve. Grieving will take as long as it has to. Unless your friends and family are going through the same exact situation, they have no idea about your unique grief situation. Spend the most time with caring friends and relatives that lend a listening ear.

This is what I recommend to those in the recovery process:

- 1) **Get Busy/Take Action** – don't let grief paralyze you. Join a support group, get involved at church, start a hobby, take a course at the local college, exercise daily, read a book, etc. Let family and friends help you keep an active life.
- 2) **Rid Yourself of Guilt** – accept the fact that no relationship is perfect. Learn from any "mistakes" you made.
- 3) **Pray** – ask God to help you in the recovery process because you cannot do it alone.
- 4) **Make a list** of the positive things in your life. This could include the beautiful aspects of your relationship with your loved one. Brainstorm and you will come up with many items for your list. Now keep that list handy for future reference; specifically for depressed moments - times when you need to be reminded.
- 5) **Set Goals** – visualize where you want to be in your life six months from now, a year, etc. Although it is very difficult to picture your life without your loved one in it, it is important that you do this.

Understand that there will be ups and downs during the many months of grieving. You may suffer deep depression or encounter a "panic" attack. Of course, these experiences are only normal.

Helen Keller once stated: *"When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us."* Your loved one would not want you to stare at that closed door, but rather to search for the open ones. Make the important decision to choose to live a full and growing life. By doing so, it's the best memorial you can ever give your loved one.

Richard Nilsen, lost his wife and college sweetheart, Darinda Ogden-Nilsen, age 26, January 9, 1997 on ComAir flight 3272 in Monroe, MI.

A Visit to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine The TWA Memorial and Swissair Burial

On a brilliantly sunny, late summer morning last August 2000, two women met for the first time to share an iced coffee and croissant near the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on Manhattan's Morningside Heights. They could have been mother and daughter having a mundane conversation or enjoying a leisurely outing. Instead they were meeting to discuss their mutual losses from two plane crashes: TWA Flight 800 in 1996, and Swissair Flight 111 in 1998. One woman was Heidi Snow who lost her fiancé, Michel Breistroff on the TWA Flight. The other was Nancy Wight, who lost her sole daughter, Rowenna Wight White, in the Swissair crash. Since there is a TWA memorial in the Cathedral and Rowenna is interred in the columbarium, the two women paid a visit to the largest Gothic edifice in the world.

St. John the Divine, still unfinished, is the size of two football fields and has the height of a 12-story building. The nave consists of five aisles and lofty piers, which rise gracefully from floor to ceiling. The chief architect was Ralph Adams Cram from Boston and ground was broken in 1916. The engineering principles he used were 700 years old, but the design was virtually new. Entering this enormous space, one finds the TWA memorial about two thirds of the way down the left aisle just behind the tomb of Bishop Manning. Three brass plaques on the wall list the 230 names of the TWA Flight 800 victims, including that of Breistroff's. An engrave quotation from Psalm 139 reads:

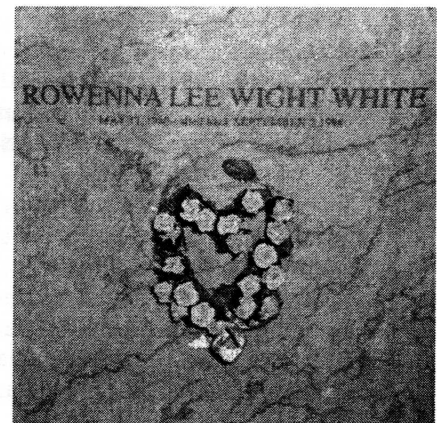
*If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea
Even there shall thy hand lead me,
And thy right hand shall hold me.*

Usually there is a candle burning on a pedestal and even sometimes, fresh flowers. Above the brass names is a small, stained glass window in memory of the victims of the *Titanic*. Continuing further along, one passes the gift shop entrance, contemporary art exhibits, a short stairway, and, with a turn to the left, one comes across a large baptismal font. Finally one enters St. Ansgar's Chapel, named for the great "Apostle to the North," and one of seven chapels that rings the high altar. Here is the columbarium chamber where Rowenna Wight White's limited identified remains are buried. She was one of the 229 victims aboard Swissair Flight 111 crash that, like TWA Flight 800 had no survivors. Had Rowenna's mother had accompanied her as originally planned, the fatalities would have been 230, the very same number as TWA Flight 800. The caretaker of the Columbarium requested a picture of Rowenna, framed it, and attached it to the burial site underneath her dates:

May 17, 1980—called back—September 2, 1998

St. John the Divine is the chief seat of the Bishop of the Episcopal Church in New York, but anyone may be buried in the columbarium, Episcopalian or not. One notes many Asian names, a prominent choreographer, a former cathedral usher, several premature deaths due to Aids, a relative of Jacqueline Onnassis, and baby Antonia, who lived all of one day. Sometimes a violinist plays and the school children of the Cathedral gather on All Saint's Day in October for a discussion of death. The columbarium is a peaceful place where people can visit their loved ones during cathedral hours. For Heidi Snow and Nancy Wight, it was an opportunity to get to know one another and to share a sorrow that only others in their circumstances can comprehend.

Nancy Wight, lost her daughter, Rowenna White Wight, age 18, aboard Swissair Flight 111, September 2, 1998, Nova Scotia.



Photo's Above: Top: Rowenna with her dog. Bottom: Columbarium Memorial at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.



John and Greg Forever Shine

May 21, 2000 was a day that changed my life forever. I lost my fiancé, First Officer Can (John) Bassat, and a very dear Friend, Captain John Mac Vicar and 17 passengers that I had come to know over the years. I met John and Greg at the Atlantic City International Airport where I have worked for the last six years. The date was February 20, 1999, the day after my 28th birthday, they flew for a charter company out of Long Island, New York. We clicked instantly. By June of 1999 John and I were inseparable and Greg had become our "shrink". Greg and his wife, Dawn had everything that John and I wanted. A nice home, a strong marriage and beautiful children. He gave us advice about life and love.

He was an amazing man with an amazing smile. I had never experienced the kind of love that I shared with John. He was an interesting person that brought so much happiness to my life. He was born in Istanbul, Turkey and lived there for nine years before moving to the United States. He liked to teach me about his culture, about Turkish food, drink, music, furniture and other things that I had never experienced. John had planned to take me there but unfortunately we ran out of time. We also made plans on May 20, 2000, the day before the crash, to marry by the end of the year but ran out of time for that as well. We spent our last day together at his home in Manhattan eating at one of our favorite restaurants and walking through the city. It was a wonderful day but for some reason an overwhelming sadness consumed me.

Our last conversation before we went to sleep was that we would be together forever. Less than 12 hours later they were gone and my life has never been the same. I've been told that I'm a strong person. I still work at the airport, which is difficult at times because the charter company that they flew for is still in business. On a weekly basis, aircraft identical to the one that took their lives come in and it breaks my heart. I may appear strong on the outside, but the inside still aches for answers.

September 11, 2001 has brought that ache to the surface for me again. The PA. Crash site has been an eerie similarity to John and Greg's crash site. (John and Greg left Atlantic City). I was going to go for the ride but decided at the last minute to stay behind and have lunch with them when they returned. They never came back. I still remember Greg sitting in the cockpit saying I'll see you later and John blowing me kisses as he closed the door in the plane. They were flying in a 19-passenger prop plane. They lost both engines and crashed in Bear Creek, TWP, PA. John and I were planning our future together. Two days after Greg's service, his wife Dawn found out she was pregnant with their third child. The sadness runs so deep.

I feel so lucky that I had John and Greg in my life. I am a better person for knowing them. They came into my life together and left together. I know that John will always be a part of my heart and soul. I love them, miss them and think of them everyday. My thoughts and prayers go out to every person who reads this newsletter. Together we can handle the days that lie ahead.

Stacy Kisby, NJ, lost her fiancé, First Officer Can (John) Basat, age 38, and her close friend Captain Greg Mac Vicar, age 34, aboard Executive Airlines, Charter Flight in Bear Creek TWP, PA. on May 21, 2000. (Photo's Above: Left: Stacy & John Right: Stacy & Greg).

Ready for Takeoff

Life is like a ride on an airplane
The pleasures of ups and downs of pain.

I always thought of flying as fun and carefree
A way to spend the morning, just my dad and me.

We'd fly wherever there was breakfast to be had
Not long before blueberry pancakes were the fad.

We'd walk around the towns and explore all kinds of places
You could not wipe the smile off either of our faces.

My memories of flying are all happy and light
I think of them by day and dream of them at night.

That's all they are now, just pictures in my mind
I view them once and then hit the rewind.

The question "why" still lingers heavy in my heart
And without an answer, I don't know from where to start.

All I know is that for the last four years I have tried to understand
Why the plane went down that day and the flight not gone as planned.

It was the worst day of my life, that 12th of April 1997
The day that I learned of my father's trip to heaven.

As I struggle with my feelings and my anger and my strife
I learn that "Are you ready for take-off?" pertains to my life.

Deb Hawkins, MA., lost her father, Sheldon Rothstein, 57, on April 12, 1997, Bahamas, aboard a private aircraft.

My Mother

When my mother was killed on EA Flight 990 I was in denial. She must have made it off the plane is what my mind kept telling me. We didn't have a body so she must still be alive somewhere. I started having terrible dreams so I finally sought counseling. The lady had one great idea that has really seemed to help me. She suggested making some kind of a memorial and maybe burying something that could represent my mother. I thought about that all the way home. My husband jumped right on this idea and together this is what we did.

We made a mold and poured in concrete. I got some big wood letters to put at the top that say MOM and painted them bright purple. Then we bought metal house numbers and put them below MOM that had her birth date 09-21-34 and her death date 10-31-99. We put all of this in while the concrete was still wet. Before we placed it where we were going to, I had bought an angel that we buried and put our makeshift headstone flat on the ground. I put a little 3" tall picket fence around the whole memorial and planted rhodies and other flowers all inside. For Christmas my daughter had bought me a girl angel garden statue reading her bible sitting on a pedestal so we placed her at the foot of the concrete. I go out there frequently and talk to mom. It helps me a lot. I hope if you decide to do something like this, it will help you too!

Shari Gemmill, WA, lost her mother, Barbara Freeman, 65, aboard Egypt Air 990, Nantucket, MA., October 31, 1999.



"Widowed Without Warning"

My husband Stephen M. Shortley was 37 years old when he died on USAir Flight 427 in Pittsburgh on September 8, 1994. We were high school sweethearts, married for twenty years with two teen-aged children. This is an excerpt from my book, "Widowed Without Warning:"

Holidays used to be a festive occasion in our home. I would decorate the inside of the house with beautiful Christmas displays while Steve decorated the outside of the house with little white twinkle lights. The first Christmas after he died, I did not want to celebrate the season. I had no magical holiday feeling. I could not imagine how I was going to get through Christmas and then New Years Eve without the man I had been spending these special occasions with for the past two decades. I had no desire to shop or buy presents. I did not want to receive any gifts either. The only present that I wanted was my husband.

Walking through the festively decked shopping malls listening to Christmas carols, watching people scurry about, knowing they would be going home to their normal happy cookie-scented holiday households made my eyes tear up with sadness. If I did not have my children, I would have taken a flight to some deserted island until January 2nd. It was unbearable.

For the first two Christmas seasons, I would go through the boxes of decorations and find Steve's Christmas stocking and the ornaments with his name and not know what to do with them. I would hold them and cry. Then gently put them back into the box. The third Christmas, I cried a little less and put the ornaments on the tree. But I still placed all of our stockings back into the box. I did not want to hang his stocking and yet, I did not want to hang my mine and my children's without his. There would have been a visible void seeing just three where there used to hang four. I thought it best to put all of them back into the attic.

That first year, just three months after the plane crash, my children and I tried with all of our might to maintain a tradition with just the three of us. I felt it was important that we remain a family no matter how difficult it was for the three of us to continue without the fourth major part of our household. Sad and pathetic are two words that come to my mind to describe the three of us exchanging gifts and trying to pretend this was a festive occasion. We were three souls on the ship of life lost without our captain. I had to take over the captain's role because I knew they were looking to follow me now. Thing is, I was in no shape to lead. I dreaded this festivity as much as them. Lisa, Dan and I had so much empathy and love for one another that somehow we made it through the exchange. None of us were really thrilled to unwrap presents, but we went through the motions. We all went to bed that night knowing that at least we tried.

Each year celebrating the holidays became easier and easier. Here we are seven years later, I am happily remarried and my two children now have three new sisters. Holidays are happy again. I still gently unwrap my first husband's ornaments and stocking each year with a sigh, but it doesn't hurt as much as it did that very first year. Time does mend. It doesn't heal. But it does hurt less and less.

Joanne Shortley-Lalonde, author, "Widowed Without Warning," lost husband, Stephen M. Shortley, age 37, aboard USAir Flight 427, Pittsburgh, PA., September 8, 1994. Photos below: (Left): This large monument is located in Sewickley Cemetery in Pittsburgh. It contains all of the names of everyone on the plane. (Right): This small gray stone is located in the actual crash site in Hopewell Township, PA. The families purchased the area where the plane actually crashed so it could never be used for anything else.

