

## Ventura County Star

### **Ocean of tears: Survivors try to find bearings after the sea takes a loved one**

Colleen Cason -- 02/06/2000 --Thousand Oaks, CA – Alaska Airlines 261

The ocean does what it pleases. It gives what it chooses and takes what it wants. It indulges when it lets us play in the surf at Puerto Vallarta or fish off the coast of San Francisco without peril. But it can just as easily torment us.

On Monday, the sea off Port Hueneme swallowed 88 people who thought they were on the way to San Francisco from the resort of Puerto Vallarta. And the ocean shows no inclination to easily give up the bodies of most of those who died when Alaska Airlines Flight 261 spiraled into the water. Only four bodies have been recovered. Identifying the remains could take more than a year.

For most of the victims' families, there will be no casket, no urn, no grave to visit. We know grief is a process. Although it's far messier than this makes it sound, every stage must be completed to move to the next. First comes denial, then anger, bargaining, guilt, depression, loneliness and acceptance or what some call closure. But what does the vast, timeless sea care about the human need for closure?

The ocean was a sea of denial for Heidi Snow. She knew her fiance, Michel Breistroff, was aboard TWA flight 800 when it plunged into the ocean off Long Island on July 17, 1996. She knew it was irrational but hoped against hope that he had survived. The plane's passenger list was just a piece of paper, she told herself. And her fiance was so alive in her mind. It was a month before his body was identified.

Families of the Alaska Airlines victims came to Los Angeles immediately after the crash telling themselves maybe their loved one survived. A grief counselor listened to desperate scenarios that featured a daughter, a son, a brother, a sister somehow commandeering a piece of wreckage, floating to Anacapa Island and sitting there awaiting rescue. It's a delusion I understand. My friend Jim Bertken drowned off the coast of Morro Bay in August 1995. Alone on the deck of a commercial fishing boat, he must have fallen overboard in the middle of the night. It was dawn before anyone noticed he was gone.

As the Coast Guard searched, I convinced myself Jim -- always full of mischief -- was playing a practical joke. He will phone home and laugh off all our scolding that this is a thoughtless thing for a husband and father of two little boys to do. I know, it's irrational. And, of course, Jim never called. His memorial was held on a bluff over the Pacific in Malibu. At first, I wondered why there? Why not a church?

After the eulogies, the hundreds of mourners threw carnations into the surf. My flower sat on the surface for a second before the waves pulled it under. It was then I accepted Jim was gone. The sea is far too powerful even for Jim's enormous life force.

Families of the victims of the Alaska Airlines tragedy came to the beach on Thursday. This time the sea was in a giving mood. "The first sight of it began to lift the veil of denial," said Robert T. Scott, a Red Cross grief counselor. "People began to show emotions. As they got to the water, there was a catharsis. Almost everyone cried," he said.

Heidi Snow had performed this same ritual when Michel died. She threw their special flower, white irises, into the sea at a Flight 800 memorial service. Today she is executive director of Aircraft Casualty Emotional Support Services, which comforts people who lose family to plane crashes. And she returns to the ocean often. "I feel closer to it. It is the last place he was. I have that connection."

