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## **Ceremony honors Flight 800 victims**

**Jennett Meriden Russell**

During a Flight 800 memorial at Smith Point County Park on Monday.

When Rear Admiral Timothy Sullivan charged out into the waters beyond Moriches Inlet on July 17, 1996, the U.S. Coast Guard commander felt confident that his experienced crew and state-of-the-art vessels would be able to rescue the survivors of TWA Flight 800.

The Boeing 747 had crashed when its center fuel tank exploded only 12 minutes after taking off from John F. Kennedy International Airport on its way to Paris, plunging carnage and debris into the dark Atlantic Ocean.

As the hours wore on, it became clear to Rear Adm. Sullivan and his crew that not even all of the Coast Guard's nautical technology or all the rescue training in the world could change the fact that all 230 people aboard the ill-fated flight had died in the horrific midair explosion and ensuing crash into the sea.

On Monday, Rear Adm. Sullivan stood before a crowd of approximately 1,000 fellow rescue workers, family members and friends of Flight 800 victims who gathered at Smith Point Park to commemorate the 10-year anniversary of the crash. Tears welled in the eyes of the seasoned officer as he recalled the helpless feeling of being reduced to pulling dozens of bodies from the water throughout the 72 hours his crew worked feverishly at the crash site.

"We rushed out that night to find the water on fire," Rear Adm. Sullivan said.

"My crew was initially very disappointed and very upset that we had failed many of you," his voice cracked with emotion as he stared into the eyes of family members of Flight 800 victims. "But, quite frankly, you made us stronger. We worked diligently and did the best we could."

Rear Adm. Sullivan was among eight dignitaries to speak at the memorial ceremony on Monday. Scorching sunlight and brutal 100-degree temperatures marked the roughly one-hour-long event.

Ceremonies took place beneath a large tent that was erected about 100 yards from the Flight 800 Memorial at Smith Point beach. Among those invited to speak were U.S. Representative Tim Bishop, Governor George E. Pataki, Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy, State Assemblywoman Patricia Eddington, and Bay Shore architect David Busch, who designed the Flight 800 Memorial.

John Seaman, chairman of the TWA Flight 800 Family Association and the uncle of Flight 800 victim Michele Becker, 19, of St. Petersburg, Florida, hosted the event. Mr. Seaman spearheaded the fund-raising efforts for the Flight 800 Memorial.

“We are so fortunate to have made it through 10 years,” Mr. Seaman said, “and still be surrounded by friends that we didn’t know, who came to our aid in a very dark time in 1996.”

Monday’s ceremony also marked the dedication of the final piece of the memorial to the victims and the rescuers who raced in vain to the crash site. The conical black granite sculpture called “The Light” is an abstract depiction of the circular sweeping motion of a lighthouse. It took 28 months and more than 500 hours of hand polishing to complete.

Designed by Mr. Seaman’s son, Henry Edward Seaman, the work of art was an afterthought, but now serves as the centerpiece of the Flight 800 Memorial. Carved from a single 6,700-pound piece of black granite, one angle of the \$80,000 triangle faces a granite wall inscribed with the victims’ names. Another point faces the sea where the plane went down 10 miles off the shore. The 10-foot-tall sculpture sits atop a tomb holding many personal effects of the victims.

“It had to be a special and meaningful object that would fit, and fool everyone to think that it had been planned from day one,” Henry Seaman said. “Ultimately, what began as a lighthouse became a metaphor of a beacon calling [the souls of Flight 800 victims] to come home from the ocean.”

Later on Monday, relatives returned to the memorial for a sunset ecumenical prayer service that ended just before 8:31 p.m., the exact moment 10 years earlier when the plane exploded. As a pipe and drum band wailed “Amazing Grace,” two Coast Guard helicopters appeared out of the southern sky and performed a flyover above the seashore, where 230 candles were lined up to represent the victims.

Among those to attend the ceremonies was Margaret Krick. Her son, Olliver “Ollie” Krick, a German-born pilot, had just been hired as a flight engineer aboard Flight 800. The 25-year-old, who loved airplanes and earned his pilot’s license at the age of 16, was on his sixth leg of initial operating experience as a flight engineer on the Boeing 747 when it exploded.

“Flying was his passion,” said Ms. Krick, a St. Louis resident who was visiting the Flight 800 Memorial on Monday with Mr. Krick’s cousin, Narco Mariscal, his wife, Erin, and Mr. Krick’s niece Madison Krick, 7.

“He soloed before he got his driver’s license,” Ms. Krick said. “When his friends played softball and baseball in the summer, he’d take our small [plane] and buzz them from the top. One thing I know is that he was on cloud nine when the lights went out, because he had just learned that the Air National Guard in St. Louis was considering him for an F-15 fighter slot.”

Delaware resident Jane Wagner also attended Monday's ceremony. She said that her friends, Eric and Virginia Holst of Manorville were aboard Flight 800. The young couple, she recalled, were in their 30s at the time of the crash. They were going to Paris to attend Mr. Holst's brother's wedding.

Mr. Holst was a local dentist, while Ms. Holst had started marketing her own line of beauty products. Ms. Wagner had met the two while attending Suffolk County Community College in Riverhead 12 years before the couple died.

"Virginia was a positive, successful, driven, just beautiful human being," said Ms. Wagner. "She was building up her own business, and he just became a dentist.

"I just came up here to be close to them," she continued, "and give her mother [Mari Belaze] support and to get support from her."

Following Monday afternoon's ceremony, Heidi Snow stood next to the great black granite Flight 800 Memorial monolith, which bears the names of the 230 victims. Among those names was that of her then-fiancé, Michel Jean Armand Breistroff. Ms. Snow, who is now married and lives in San Francisco, said Mr. Breistroff, a 25-year-old French native, was heading to Paris to start training as a player for a French national hockey team that was competing in the 1998 Winter Olympics.

Susan Snow said that her daughter was supposed to be on the flight with Mr. Breistroff, a Harvard University graduate.

"For a while, Heidi wished that she had been with him on the flight, because it was so heartbreaking for her," said Susan Snow. "She couldn't believe that people could just go away like that."

In an effort to deal with her grief, Heidi Snow created a support network for victims and survivors of all air disasters. Established in 1996, Aircraft Casualty Emotional Support Services (ACCESS) has provided assistance to more than 1,000 friends and families of plane crash victims, she said.

"It gives people who have been through the pain of losing a loved one in a plane crash a productive avenue to help other people with something that is still tragic for them," she said. "Most of our mentors started out by calling us, and then they turned over and helped others. So they understand both sides, and offer a perspective that it's still okay to grieve and to—later on down the road—have a bad day and to cry."