



Air France wreck reminds Long Islanders of TWA crash

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Television pictures about the crash of Air France Flight 447 sent Msgr. James McDonald's thoughts spinning back to July 17, 1996, when TWA Flight 800 exploded and plunged into the Atlantic Ocean off East Moriches. "It brought the horror of the whole thing back for me," McDonald, the former rector of St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church in Center Moriches, said Tuesday.

Among the 230 passengers and crew members killed on TWA 800 was a young couple he counted among his flock - Virginia and Eric Holst of Manorville. He had officiated at their marriage six years before, and he said their funeral Mass, both held in the small church on Ocean Avenue.

McDonald, who now is rector at the Seminary of Immaculate Conception in Lloyd Harbor, happened to be back at his former church handling pastoral duties this week, when word came of the Air France flight's disappearance. "It brought it all back to me, the sadness," he said. "People are so sad because they don't know what happened."

Eric Holst, 32, was a dentist in Center Moriches. His wife, 31, had just begun a telemarketing business. The couple was flying from New York to Paris for the wedding of Eric's brother, Troy, and to celebrate their wedding anniversary.

The hours since news of Flight 447's disappearance on Monday have been difficult for others who lost loved ones on TWA Flight 800. Both jetliners were headed to Paris, though Flight 447 had departed from Rio de Janeiro and Flight 800 from Kennedy Airport.

"When I saw the faces of the families on TV in the airport, it's like the last 12 years never happened," said John Seaman, who lost his niece on the TWA flight. "Those people are saying the same thing we were saying - 'It can't be true.' " Seaman, who lives outside Albany, is board chairman of Victims of Flight 800, a group of surviving family members of those who died aboard the Boeing 747.

While the cause of the Air France crash is not known, Flight 800 exploded when fuel tank vapors ignited after the jetliner sat in the sun for hours before takeoff. Last summer, 12 years after the crash, the U.S. Department of Transportation announced that new devices must be installed on fuel tanks to prevent fuel-tank explosions on certain passenger and cargo jets.

Jim Hurd, who lost his son, Jamie, 29, on Flight 800, said he has only seen snippets of television coverage about the Air France crash. But that's all he needed to feel a connection to the families of those aboard the Airbus A330. "I would never say I know what they're going through, but I certainly understand their predicament," said Hurd, who lives in Maryland. "Once you see pictures of families crying, it does take you back."

Heidi Snow, 37, said the Air France flight's tragedy "is particularly reminiscent of Flight 800 because it is the Atlantic and there is a lack of information." Snow lost her fiance, Michel Briestroff, 25, a native of France who was on Flight 800 to see his family. Finding hardly any support system after the crash, Snow founded ACCESS, or AirCRAFT Casualty Emotional Support Services, a nonprofit that matches grief counselors who have experienced a loss in an air-related disaster to families and loved ones who need help. She started the group, which has about 250 grief mentors, five years ago.

Right now, the service is on call for any assistance to those who lost family or loved ones in the Air France crash. The organization has volunteers in the United States and a few international mentors, with some French speakers in the group.

"That is the unique aspect of an air disaster - it takes a long time to gather information," Snow said. "It prolongs the grieving process."