

Introduction

In the evening of June 22, 1985, Air India Flight 182, a Boeing 747 named *Kanishka* took off from Montreal bound for London and later New Delhi. In the early morning of June 23rd it was blown apart from a bomb planted by terrorists in Canada, killing all on board.

Three hundred and twenty-nine passengers and crew died. Of these people, 137 were under 18 and 82 were under 13. This remains the greatest loss of Canadians at the hands of terrorists.

The grief to the families and friends was instant, profound and enduring. Grief is paralyzing in its effect and a challenge to convey in print or speech. *Mark Stagg* met that challenge. He was an officer on the *Laurentian Forest*, among the first ships to arrive at the scene.

Mark Stagg described to the Commission the carnage encountered. The oil-slicked waters of the North Atlantic circled the scene of destruction. Wreckage and broken bodies were scattered over a wide area. He recovered some bodies and parts of others and held the hope that some passengers might have survived. That hope was dashed when he lifted a child fully clothed and unmarked from the sea. He hoped for life but knew at once the child was dead. He described pressing the body to his own cheek and feeling the cold confirmation of death. He never forgot that moment; he lives with it still:

The boy in me died that day. I don't recognize this until years later, but I feel the passing. I felt it then and I feel it now, and every day my mind is drawn there. My faith in goodness, and God, and sense and normality died then...¹

¹ Mark Stagg, speaking before the Commission on September 27, 2006. He was the Third Officer on the *MV Laurentian Forest*, the vessel that carried out recovery operations following the bombing. Today he is the head of training and development for the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, United Kingdom Department of Transport.

In spite of the obvious magnitude of the catastrophe, Canada and Canadians in general did not immediately recognize it as a terrorist attack against Canadians. That acceptance was long in coming. Indeed, the first public appearance by a Canadian prime minister at the memorial service in Ireland did not occur until 2005. A lengthy investigation by the RCMP and a long and thorough trial in British Columbia of two suspects, Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri, ended in acquittals in 2005, to the disappointment of the families. As of today, the only person convicted in connection with any aspect of the bombing of Flight 182 or the Narita Airport explosion is Inderjit Singh Reyat. (See Annex C for a timeline of key events).

This preliminary report focuses on the human element arising from the bombing — the accompanying suffering of the victims' families, the heroism of the rescuers and the generosity and warmth of the citizens of Cork, Ireland. The enormity of this mass murder may be grasped by attempting to know more about the victims and their grieving survivors.

Prior to Prime Minister Stephen Harper calling this Inquiry, the Honourable Bob Rae, former premier of Ontario, considered whether there were outstanding questions of public interest related to the bombing of the Air India flight that should be answered after 20 years. He examined how the criminal investigation was conducted as well as the findings and recommendations from other investigations. He assessed the transportation and security measures taken by federal departments and agencies since 1985. He also visited family members and others and delivered a helpful report in the fall of 2005. In it he wrote:

We know the location of the conspiracy that planned the bombings, and the identity of some of the conspirators; we know how the bombs got on two planes; we know the details of the bombs' detonation. We do not need to re-visit these questions. They are clearly established. What we need to know more about is how Canada assessed the threat, how its intelligence and police forces managed the investigation and how its airport safety regulations did

or did not work. Twenty years later, these questions are still worth asking. The Air India bombings were the worst encounter with terrorism Canada has experienced. We cannot leave any issues unresolved.²

The Commission of Inquiry into the Investigation of the Bombing of Air India Flight 182 was established by Order in Council P.C. 2006-293, issued on May 1, 2006 pursuant to Part I of the *Inquiries Act*. (The Commission's Terms of Reference are reproduced in Annex A). The Commission was started on June 21, 2006 and continues to pursue outstanding issues relating to the tragedy. The passage of so many years made it difficult to obtain records and find witnesses. As a result the public testimony got off to a staggered start on September 25, 2006.

This first report seeks to identify the human element of Flight 182. From the disintegration of 329 lives only 131 bodies were recovered. Although the recovery of a body and the opportunity for proper burial brought a small degree of comfort to some families, sadly even that was denied to the majority, as 198 victims were swallowed by the sea. Entire families were lost, others were emotionally destroyed by the death of their loved ones, fracturing their home lives. The families and friends of the victims, as well as our society, have hope that this Inquiry will explain not so much what happened, but why it happened and how it can be prevented from happening again.

The bombing of Air India, coupled with the destruction of the World Trade Center's twin towers in New York City on September 11, 2001, created a heightened awareness of terrorism that has changed our society. Our level of comfort is fragile. Increased security measures, travel restrictions and general unease are now our frequent companions.

A question that lingers among the families and other Canadians is *If Air India Flight 182 had been an Air Canada flight with all fair-skinned Canadians, would the government response have been*

² *Lessons to be Learned*, Public Safety Canada, 2005, p.2.

different? There is no way to answer that. As a country, we would hope not. At the conclusion of the Inquiry, a better understanding of the events and actions that took place may help us all to decide.

The Commission heard most of the families' evidence between September 26 and November 17, 2006. (See Annex B for a list of witnesses). The persistent raw emotions of their experience, suffering and sorrow had to move the feelings of all who listened. Some accounts had been documented previously in books, articles and the media. In other cases, individuals who had earlier chosen not to speak came to be heard. What was different this time was that the families were invited by this Commission, mandated by the Government of Canada, to express their feelings in a formal public hearing before a government-appointed Commissioner. It is hoped the process of relating such personal grief will bring some healing to them. By speaking before the Commission, family witnesses have become the public conscience. By listening, the audience validates their experiences. Transcription in an official record makes their tragedy a part of our history. In this way, the further passage of time cannot erode the public memory of the enormity of what happened. The pain and loss it inflicted upon the families and communities of those who perished cannot be erased.

The majority of the people who bear this emotional burden are Canadians. Others are citizens of India, the United States, Ireland and the United Kingdom. Many of the rescuers in Ireland risked their lives in a frantic effort to keep the bodies from descending to the depths of the Atlantic Ocean. All of them expressed the hope that a public inquiry would help to prevent similar tragedies.

This report relates to events that took place before, during and after the Air India bombing. But its perspective differs from those in previous reports. Its purpose is not to chronicle history that is already well-documented, but to record the human toll that emerged from those events. It is understandable that the passage

of time can be a deterrent to reliving such personal experiences in a public setting. For that reason, not everyone affected by the bombing gave evidence, some due to death and others because of a choice to remain silent. All living family members of the victims retain painful memories going back two decades. It is impressive that so many people maintained the will to testify and came forward after such a long time.

The transcripts of the hearings contain all the testimony from every witness. Both spoken and written words are recorded in the Commission's evidence. In addition, we have received printed, audio and video materials from many who testified and others who did not travel to Ottawa but wished to have their perspective heard. These materials form part of the Commission's official public record.

This report is based on the entirety of the evidence, evidence that is now public and available. The Commission's intent was to use examples from the evidence to portray the enormity of the destruction of Flight 182, its emotional effect, and the means adopted by families to cope. Our purpose is to record a composite of the human element, the resulting consequences of that June day 22 years ago.

This first report is being released before the Inquiry is complete because the families of the victims of the Air India tragedy have already waited much too long for their stories to be told. The publication of this report will mark the first opportunity for Canadians, and particularly young Canadians, to be able to fully understand the tragedy that befell many of their fellow citizens over 22 years ago.

These are not easy stories to read. The pages that follow are permeated with an ineffable sadness that is emotionally draining, but the examples of courage and determination that are related through the narratives illustrate the strength that accompanied the desolation of the victims' families.

A sense of grief was present throughout the hearings, but it was accompanied by guarded optimism and the resolve not to be defeated. There was the evidence of the families as well as the rescuers and others who attempted to alleviate the pain. It was *Mark Stagg* who captured the prevailing mood in these words:

But it is the families of Air India Flight 182 that take my breath away and of whom Canada should be so proud. They have a grace and dignity in the face of such suffering that has been both humbling and a source of renewal and restoration of my belief in humanity. My pain is dwarfed by that which these people have suffered without respite for 21 years and yet they still have the love to reach out to me and offer comfort. I never have to explain. They understand. And I say again, I am humbled.³

J. C. Major
Commissioner



Monument at Ahakista, Ireland

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³ Mark Stagg, *supra*, September 27, 2006.

Outline

This document is organized as follows:

Section I (The Human Loss) tells stories about some of the victims of the bombing.

Section II (Heroic Efforts) and Section III (The Canadian Response) relate stories of people who were on the scene immediately after the crash and in the days following.

Section IV (The Aftermath) describes ongoing grief and ways in which memories of the victims have been preserved and honoured both personally and through public events and memorial sites.

Section V (Reconciliation and Hope) relates stories of individuals who organized and rallied family members to ensure that they never gave up hope in seeking justice and an inquiry to bring their emotions and concerns into a public forum. Section V concludes with actions taken by family members and friends in an attempt to deal with their own loss by helping others.

Throughout the report are graphical images including a selection of photos from those submitted by family members. These are numbered in sequence from 1 - 62. Captions for these images are listed in Annex D.

NOTES

- Every effort has been made to ensure the proper spelling of family names and place names. In some cases where there were variations, the Commission has consulted the families and other sources to select the preferred spelling.
- We have also consulted expert sources for the common spelling of foreign words.
- All quoted testimony appears in *italics*.
- The names of victims appear in ***bold italics***.
- The names of rescue/recovery workers are also in ***bold italics***.
- Where errors in spelling and punctuation occur in testimony, we have taken the liberty of making corrections.
- Some testimony has been condensed without losing the sense or intent of the original.
- Since these are the family stories there may appear to be some errors in fact or inconsistencies in certain testimony. The reader is cautioned to consider this to be the opinion of the witness (always cited in the footnotes) rather than the view of the Commission or any other party.
- Quotation marks are used for short descriptions, nicknames and quotes within referenced statements, e.g., *His mother cried out "help me" during the night.*
- Most of the photos reproduced in this report were submitted by family members. Commercial or other sources for photographs are acknowledged in the captions.