

Bomber's deed stings 50 years after crash

Published Thu, Jan 07, 2010 05:02 AM

 newsobserver.com

Raleigh NC – News & Observer

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Linda Silver Bufano pauses to reflect on the events of 50 years ago in this Eastern North Carolina field where a plane crashed, killing both her parents near the Brunswick County town of Bolivia in 1960.



BOLIVIA Linda Silver Bufano was 5 when a suicide bomber destroyed National Airlines Flight 2511 near the North Carolina coast on Jan. 6, 1960, killing 34 people - including her parents.

Bufano hates to fly. So she drove seven hours from her northern Virginia home Wednesday to mark the anniversary by walking out into a Brunswick County field where Laura and Marvin Silver fell from the sky 50 years ago.

She had grown up believing that her parents' plane crashed into a mountain somewhere, and she never dug into the details of their deaths.

Her life changed 10 years ago when she learned about the dynamite that ripped a hole in the DC-6 and sent it crashing into the fields behind Richard Randolph's red-brick farmhouse near Bolivia.

Now she's active in the National Air Disaster Alliance, a group that lobbies for aviation safety. After the Christmas Day 2009 episode in the skies over Detroit, in which passengers subdued a would-be suicide bomber, Bufano worries that air travel is not much safer today than it was in 1960.

"We didn't have a Transportation Security Administration then. Now we have a TSA, and we still have people getting on planes with bombs," said Bufano, 55, of Fairfax, Va. "Obviously, there's not that much security."

MacArthur Randolph was 16 the night his family heard terrifying explosions near their house 50 years ago.

"When I got up that morning, Daddy and Mother were saying they believed it was a plane that blowed up," Randolph said Wednesday. "They said it looked like something was on fire and falling down from the sky."

When he went out to feed the hogs at sunrise, the beam of his flashlight fell on the wrecked DC-6 fuselage.

"I didn't know what it was," Randolph said. "I went home and told my father, and went on to school. That afternoon when I got home, the field was all full of Marines."

Marines, sheriff's deputies and volunteers found the remains of 33 passengers and crew members in the mangled fuselage and in the soft black earth on the Randolph farm. Some victims were still buckled into their seats, and seven wore inflatable life vests, indicating they had time to prepare for the crash.

"Everywhere I turned, there were dead people," Randolph's father, Richard Randolph, told a News & Observer reporter that day in 1960.

Suspect was in trouble

Within days, the investigation focused on Julian A. Frank of Westport, Conn., a lawyer whose body was found near Fort Fisher, 18 miles from the crash site.

Forensic evidence revealed that a dynamite bomb under Frank's seat tore off his legs and blew him out of the plane about 2:30 a.m. The disabled propeller plane veered to the right from its flight path over the Cape Fear River and crashed on the Randolph farm.

Frank, 32, had lost several hundred thousand dollars in bad investments in 1959 and was under investigation on charges of defrauding his clients. In the six months before his death he bought nearly \$900,000 in life insurance, with his wife and children as beneficiaries.

Greater loss averted

The disaster could have been far worse. Bufano's parents were among more than 100 passengers with tickets for a flight from New York to Miami. But a cracked window grounded their Boeing 707, and the passengers were reassigned to two smaller airplanes.

Commercial airline bombings were rare then.

There had been a few cases involving murder and insurance fraud, with bombers who destroyed planeloads of passengers and hoped to collect insurance on a wife, a mother or a criminal rival. One man blew himself up in a lavatory after his plane took off from Minneapolis in 1957, but no one else died.

Aviation security was minimal in 1960. Travelers checked their bags and walked onto the tarmac to board their flights.

"No one took any notice of anybody," recalls aviation historian John M. Davis of Wichita, Kan. "You might see a friendly neighborhood policeman standing there as you walked to the gate, and that was the total security."

Early call for safety

After the crash of National Airlines Flight 2511, an Oklahoma senator suggested Congress consider requiring baggage examinations and possibly X-ray inspections. Airline representatives said that might be a good idea, but noted that many passengers traveled with alarm clocks that might be mistaken for time-bomb devices.

"But there was no real reason for a change," Davis said. "It was an isolated event. No one thought anything like it would ever happen again."

Airline hijackings picked up in the early 1960s, with a few U.S. flights diverted to or away from Cuba. Federal agencies counted 364 hijackings around the world from 1968 to 1972.

"That really started people being much more concerned about who was on the plane, and their luggage," Davis said. "But it was still very low-key checking. No one thought people were trying to carry on bombs and things."

Frank carried a 20-pound bag onto the plane that night. Federal investigators never found proof that he made or acquired the bomb himself, but no other suspects were identified.

The pain endures

Bufano's parents were in their 20s when they died on what they had planned as a second honeymoon trip to Miami. Marvin worked in the family's luggage and gift shop in Bridgeport, Conn., and Laura took care of Linda and her 3-year-old sister.

"All I was told was that it was an airplane crash," Bufano said. "Then it was like, OK, get on with your life. I moved into my aunt and uncle's house and went back to school a day or two later. The psychiatrist told them not to dwell on it."

Now she wears her mother's diamond engagement ring on her left hand, and her father's onyx high school ring on her right. She has two daughters of her own, 13 and 19 years old.

"When they both turned 5 and I was still here, I felt really good about that," Bufano said.

"I was 5 when I lost my parents to some bomber, and I know how that changed my life. It wasn't preventable back then because we didn't have screenings and things like that. It worries me now that something could happen again that we could have prevented."

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