

WINGS of Light



Fall 2009

Personal Stories and Resources for Those Affected by Aircraft Crashes

Volume 14

Remembering Pan Am Flight 103 and Honoring Those Killed

It was almost twenty-one years ago. I was still grieving the loss of my father who had been killed in a general aviation plane crash in October 1987; the pain still seemed so overwhelming. It would soon be the second Christmas without Dad. I felt so alone with my grief.

Then it happened. December 21, 1988. A terrible, vicious attack on an international Pan Am flight. Thirty-eight minutes after takeoff from London, Pan Am Flight 103, en route to New York City, exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing all 259 people aboard and 11 people on the ground. Terrorists had bombed the flight. British investigators would later indicate that a bomb in the luggage compartment caused the explosion. Fathers, mothers, children, brothers, sisters, entire families ... murdered. The weeks, months, and years to follow revealed the incredible power that a group of people can have when conviction and passion come together.

In February 1989, the families and friends of those killed on Pan Am Flight 103 formed a nonprofit group, "Victims of Pan Am Flight 103" to fight for higher standards of airport security and to publicize the crash investigation information. I began to follow the interviews with Bert Ammerman, relative of one of the passengers killed on the Pan Am flight. The goals of the group:

- discover the truth behind the bombing
- seek justice for our loved ones
- ensure the airline industry maintains and improves safety measures

- educate the public about this incident
- support one another

While following "Victims of Pan Am Flight 103" activities and watching several interviews with group members,

I decided to form a similar group for survivors and families of those killed in general aviation crashes. I had been so alone with my grief; maybe if I could find others in a similar situation as mine ... people who had family members killed

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WINGS

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Established to assist those affected by aircraft crashes

Wings of Light is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to assisting those touched by aircraft crashes. The most important goal of the organization is to bring people together through the existence of three support networks.

Survivor Support Network

The *Wings of Light* Survivor Support Network is a support group for those who have been involved in and lived through an aircraft crash. This group helps individuals understand the feelings and issues of surviving the crash and coping with the impact on their lives.

Family and Friends Support Network

The *Wings of Light* Family and Friends Support Network provides families and individuals with specialized support that addresses the unique issues surrounding aircraft fatalities.

Rescue/Response Personnel Support Network

The *Wings of Light* Rescue/Response Personnel Support Network brings together individuals involved in the rescue, recovery, and investigative efforts. An often overlooked group, individuals in this network are given a forum for peer counseling and voicing concerns.

Other activities include the development of local chapters, distribution of related informational materials and resource kit, and referral to qualified counseling professionals.

Wings of Light, Inc. is a 501c3 public charity. Contributions are tax-deductible. If you are interested in more information or would like to make a contribution, contact:

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Remembering Pan Am Flight 103

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in general aviation crashes, I would find support and healing. Such an effort would also mean something positive would result from my father's death ... a chance to help others.

I was in a master's degree program at the time and I decided my master's thesis would be a business plan for establishing a nonprofit organization to assist those affected by an aircraft crash. Initially, the thesis included only families of those killed in general aviation crashes, but quickly expanded to include all types of aviation as well as survivors of crashes and rescue/response personnel who respond to the crash site. Anyone who had been impacted by any type of aviation crash was welcome to contact the organization for peer support and assistance. The name I initially used in my thesis was "Broken Wings," but I decided I wanted the organization to have a name that was more positive and full of hope. Ultimately, the name "Wings of Light" was selected.

Since the day *Wings of Light* was established in 1995, we have been contacted by a wide variety of individuals seeking support and assistance ... survivors, families of those killed, aviation professionals, emergency responders, airline

employees, general aviation pilots, business charter companies ... we welcome anyone who has been impacted by any type of air crash. During the past 14 years, we have assisted hundreds of people seeking our help. We have built nationwide networks of peer support, and even assisted an individual in another country with establishing a similar organization there. Corporations, some who have had employees killed and others wanting to develop a policy regarding the possibility of such a loss, have contacted *Wings of Light* for guidance and assistance. Our network of support has been available 24/7 for those in need.

And it all started with the efforts of the families and friends of those killed on the Pan Am Flight 103. I will always be grateful for the inspiration those involved in Victims of Pan Am Flight 103 gave me years ago, and, as a result, hundreds of people have been helped by *Wings of Light* ... all because the families and friends of those on Pan Am Flight 103 had a vision of what can happen when people come together.

For more information on "Victims of Pan Am Flight 103" and ways you can assist, visit www.victimsofpanamflight103.org. 

**A special thank you to the
Wings of Light Board of Directors and
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for their time, energy and commitment
to *Wings of Light*.**

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) & Survivor Guilt

A Survivor's Experience and Lessons Learned

By Captain George Burk, USAF (Ret)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): "A common anxiety disorder that develops after an exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which a grave physical harm occurred or was threatened."

Survivor Guilt: "A deep feeling of guilt often experienced by those who have survived some catastrophe that took the lives of others; derives in part from a feeling that they did not do enough to save the others who perished and in part from feelings of being unworthy relative to those who died."

On 4 May, 1970, I was the sole survivor of 14 passengers in a military plane crash. I suffered extensive burns and multiple injuries. Until about 15 years ago, I never knew or heard about PTSD or Survivor Guilt. For over 25 years, I was pretty much left to fend for myself and learn how to deal with the emotions I was experiencing, all the while not knowing or understanding what I was feeling or why. There were no support groups or other burn survivors with whom I could vent and share my emotions and frustrations.

I still recall my primary doctor telling me in mid 1971 "George, we heal the body, we don't have time to heal the mind." He was responding to my question to him, "Doc, what happens to the guys when they leave here (the burn unit.?)?"
As the sole survivor, I know about guilt! After hearing what I still believe were cries for help, I crawled back to the burning plane on my elbows and knees in a futile attempt to try and save my friends and co-workers. I crawled to within a few feet of the wreckage that was burning, heard a muffled explosion and then felt a great deal of heat on my face. I knew then there were no survivors.

Here are a few of my many lessons learned on how I've dealt with PTSD and Survivor Guilt. It's been trial and error, hit and miss. I try to remember what worked and why it worked and discard what didn't and have the wisdom from God to know the difference. It's a process---beginning and middle with no end---and the healing is continuous. God is my pilot!

I've made the physical pain I've had for 39 years my ally; I've learned to live with it. The mental pain is a silent killer.

ADMIT YOU HAVE IT. The first step in the problem solving process is to identify (acknowledge) the problem and its source(s). This is a vital first step. Without it, no amount of therapy or medication will help. They'll only mask the real issues. To be open and honest with others, you must first be open and honest with yourself. It's all inside! Have the character to think it out and the courage to talk it out.

"We are better persuaded by reasons we discover ourselves than by those given to us by others."

Blaise Pascal, mathematician

IDENTIFY YOUR PURPOSE (mission). Everyone has a purpose in life; however, no one else can find our purpose for us. We must find and work at it every day. It may include right actions and right deeds, taking time to enjoy the beauty around us in nature, our family and friends. We accept the suffering we are experiencing as unique to us in the entire universe. Strive to live life to a higher calling with a strong spiritual value system. My doctor, medical staff, family and close friends never let me quit. They gave

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me even more hope to live so that I could still lead a full and satisfying life.

SET APPROPRIATE GOALS. Goals are what you want to accomplish. They are tangible results for which to strive. A goal starts with active verbs such as: develop, create, manage, and establish. Goals can also have a timeline, establish accountability and are measurable for success. Set them every day. Develop a plan and work the plan. That helps provide structure to your life.

CHANGE WHAT YOU CAN ... and don't sweat the small stuff. As one of my friends said to me a number of years ago while we were in the burn unit together, "Don't sweat the small stuff Captain, because it's all small stuff." I once heard the term insanity defined as, "doing things the same way but expecting different results." We can only change ourselves, not others; the internals, not the externals. I've experienced rejection; it's taken many forms. About 20 years ago, when faced with a personal or professional challenge, I learned to ask myself, "Hey dummy, what's the worst thing that can happen here? Nothing! It's already happened. There's no second place. You're not laying in a burn unit struggling to breathe."

"He that will not apply new remedies must expect new evils, for time is the greatest innovator."

Francis Bacon, *philosopher*

TAKE AN EMOTIONAL BREATHER.

Regardless if its lunch break, work breaks, or "time outs" at home, take them regardless if you think they are needed or not. The breaks you need the most are usually the ones you don't want to take. Close your office door, place your feet on the desk, close your eyes and relax; or take a walk in the park and listen to the birds singing. It all works and can help you manage stress.

ACKNOWLEDGE YOU'RE NOT TO BLAME. Self-imposed guilt can kill you. And don't let others play the blame game, either. Know that all healing takes time, and time is one commodity you have on your side. Don't be an enabler or permit others to enable you!

"We see things not as they are, but as we are."

H.M Tomlinson, *writer*

LEARN TO TURN NEGATIVE SITUATIONS INTO POSITIVE RESULTS.

Train yourself to find or see something positive in every situation. Remember, it's not what happens to us, it's what we do about it that counts. Practice positive self-talk and fill your mind with positive affirmations. Learn to see your "glass of life" as half full, not half empty. How you see yourself is a good benchmark of how you see the world. Commit to live your life in a way that honors friends, family and the doctors and staff who worked to save your life.

"A friend is a present you give yourself."

Robert Louis Stevenson, *poet*

PRACTICE RELAXATION TECHNIQUES.

These techniques counteract the body's reaction to the mind's "fight or flight" syndrome. Experiment with biofeedback, meditation or mind-mapping techniques. As a burn survivor, I learned first hand how to practice and implement both meditation and mind-mapping techniques. Today, I sat and watched four desert quail walk across our patio.

"Ask yourself the secret of your success. Listen to your answer(s) and practice it."

Richard Bach, *writer*

DEVELOP A WORK AND PERSONAL SUPPORT GROUP.

Surround yourself with people who want you to succeed, not fail. These people are "leaders" who provide you the skills, opportunities and encouragement to strive to reach your goals. It has always been a source of amazement and inspiration to meet upbeat and energetic people who always seem to bring out the best in others. Ask people you admire to serve as your mentors and coaches.

KNOW YOURSELF. Develop and expand the ability to look introspectively at who you are and where you are

headed. Change your internal script from "woulda," "coulda," "shoulda," to "shall," "will," "must." You've heard the term "GIGO," which stands for "garbage in, garbage out" as it applies to computers. Our minds are computers, too. If we continuously program it with negative thinking, the results are the same: GIGO. Your brain is a computer. Nourish it wisely, well and often.

"We have met the enemy and he is us."

Pogo, *cartoon character*

REWARD YOURSELF MORE FREQUENTLY.

Learn to celebrate even the smallest of victories. Reward yourself with an ice cream cone, a special meal or a movie. To me, one of life's many small pleasures is a large bag of popcorn, no butter, in a darkened theater. Give a hug, get a hug.

KNOW THE TRIGGERS. People, places, things, events. I still have dreams about plane crashes. I know they will happen and I've learned to expect them and deal with them. Alcohol is a depressant. Don't drink. If you smoke, stop! Smoking robs the blood of needed oxygen and affects vital organs. Eat right; you are what you eat. Exercise regularly; it helps burn off unwanted stress, calories and helps you to relax so you can sleep better. Wean your mind off the pills! They only mask the real issues. Peel the onion! Life is about choices! I'm grateful and blessed I'm alive, and I choose to live every day like it may be my last.

"Never give up, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn."

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *writer*

HUMBLY ASK GOD FOR HELP.

Acknowledge there is a Power far greater than yourself. Ask Him to remove your fears and shortcomings. Heal the mind, heal the body.

"Without the assistance of the Divine Being...I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail."

Anonymous

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Unfinished Business

Dr. Sandra Howlett, Ed.D.

When someone is diagnosed with a fatal illness, or their health is failing over time, there is often the opportunity to plan, make important decisions, affirm love and say goodbye.

In the event of sudden death...all of that is different. When death is unexpected, as in an airplane crash, the initial feeling among family and friends is shock and disbelief. We imagine there must be a mistake. We imagine the person who calls or comes to our door to deliver this horrible news must be part of a terrible mix up. We say, *"You are wrong. That can't be true. I just saw him this morning."*

Then we learn that what we thought and wished was a horrible mistake is indeed true. Our loved one is dead. And there is nothing we can do about it.

The shock of receiving such bad news is often followed by numbness. We find ourselves 'going through the motions' of doing what must be done yet strangely detached from the feeling and emotion we would expect to experience. Important decisions must be made. There are investigations and questions to be answered along with countless phone calls to family, friends and business associates. There are also the incoming calls for information, often adding insult to injury.

We often find ourselves replaying that last conversation with our loved one, that last goodbye. Sometimes we imagine that we should have been able to prevent their death ...

Add to this the unfinished business that commonly accompanies unexpected death. These are the loose ends of life ... and death. We all have them. Words unspoken, apologies withheld, stories we meant to tell, questions we thought we had time to ask, projects left undone, unfulfilled plans and dreams that have been lost. All those loose ends that are part of most everyone's life on any given day. Sometimes loose ends are focused on 'shoulda', 'woulda', 'coulda'. This includes all the 'if only' scenarios we conjure when trying to move forward while looking in the rear view mirror.

There can also be NEW unfinished business created. If there is someone who caused or contributed to the crash, there may be litigation that could take months or years. In the end, justice in your eyes may or may not prevail. No court can give you what you most want – the return of your loved one. That is impossible.

So what does unfinished business look and feel like? There are many ways it may show up. Guilt, anger, feeling stuck and unable to move forward, a pattern of blame, self destructive behaviors and even a desire for revenge ...

While the past affects the course of the future, the only real power we have is in the present moment. What we *can* do is to reframe the experience into something that works to release some of the anxiety and empower you to step forward into living your life again. People change when the pain of staying where we are is seen as greater than the pain of changing. Is it possible to shift the energy from feeling stuck in your unfinished business to a place of healing? Absolutely!

There are tools and exercises which can help you to reclaim your own life. The following two strategies address different issues. Both involve letter writing and can be done in the safety and privacy of your home, without sharing if that is your preference. Be sure you have a block of uninterrupted time to do this work.

#1: The Unsent Letter

The first strategy works well in situations where you feel angry at someone who you believe may be responsible for the death of your loved one. That person may even BE your loved one.

Write a highly personal, no holds barred letter putting all the anger and hurt you have onto a piece of paper. Remember, you are the only one who will ever see this so don't hold back! There are no rules of etiquette, grammar or punctuation to this letter. The goal is to purge as much of the hurt and big feelings as you can from your spirit. When you think you are done, reread it and start adding "And another thing ...". Once this is complete, read this letter aloud

and then burn it. The healing work is in the release through writing. There is no helpful reason to keep this letter. It needs to be destroyed.

The second part of this exercise may be undertaken at the same time or later. Write an imaginary response to your previous letter ... this is the letter you would LIKE to receive, but never will. Again, let yourself go and say what you need to hear to heal.


#2: The Love & Healing Letter

This letter is an opportunity to say those things that you may not have been able to say to your loved one before they died ... and they still need to be expressed. It is a format often used in hospice and also works well after loved ones have died. There are five key sections. You write as little or as much as needed to get your message across.

- Please forgive me.
- I forgive you.
- Thank you.
- I love you.
- Goodbye.

Some people keep this letter, others burn it as a ritual of love, some deliver to the cemetery or attach to a helium balloon. Again, the healing is in the feeling and that is accomplished in the writing. By the way, the first four parts are excellent to write to those people you care for who are still alive! This is the ultimate love letter.

Both of these strategies are likely to trigger lots of emotion. Let it come up and out. Afterwards, take a shower and be gentle with yourself. Grieving is hard work. Healing takes energy as well.

Two things for you to remember ... breath ... and breath again. 

Dr. Sandra Howlett is a Grief Specialist and public speaker in Phoenix, Arizona. She works with grieving families at Hansen Mortuary and New Song Center for Grieving Families as well as the American Hospice Foundation. She may be contacted at showlet312@aol.com.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

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GET A LIFE (OF YOUR OWN.) The time away from work should be time devoted to yourself and your family. Establish clear physical and emotional boundaries between home and work, and hold to them as much as humanly possible. Fill your life with “pictures” of people, places and events that have enriched you.

Oh yeah, one other suggestion. Don't get all stressed out trying to manage your post-traumatic stress and survivor guilt. ↻

“Write a letter to Santa and tell him how you would like your life to be next year at this time.”

“2,002 ways to Cheer ☺☺ Yourself Up”

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