

AVIATION CRASH SURVIVORS FIND SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

While airline crashes over recent years have resulted in the development of specific passenger family support bereavement groups, one international organization has been created to meet the support needs of surviving families for any aircraft crash, including general and corporate aviation. The organization, Wings of Light, has also developed two additional mutual aid support networks for those who live through a crash and those individuals involved in crash rescue and recovery efforts.

I'll never forget every detail of Tuesday evening, Oct. 13, 1987.

I had just sat down to dinner when the phone rang. I knew by the sound of my mother's voice that something was terribly wrong. My father had been killed in a plane crash. Three people were on board, but only one survived and it was not Dad.

I remember thinking: It can't be. I had just talked with him on his birthday two days before. He told me all about a plane trip he was going to take. We talked at length about his love of flying and my hope that someday I would have enough resources to get my pilot's license. And now he was gone.

That night I didn't sleep at all. I kept imagining different scenarios of the accident. Each one concluded with someone else, not my dad, being killed. He must have survived. I wouldn't let myself believe he was really gone—so quickly. I kept waiting for the call to tell me that it had been a mistake, that Dad was the one who survived. That call never came.

The next morning I left on the twelve-hour drive to my parent's home. Funeral plans had already been made when I arrived; I felt so guilty that I had not been there.

The casket was closed because there had been an intense fire after the crash. The fact that I couldn't see Dad made it that much more difficult for me to accept. Was it really Dad who was gone?

For the next several days, I answered the phone for my mother. To my shock, most calls were for Dad. "Is Al there?" the caller would ask. "Who's calling please?" I would say. After they told me, I had to tell them Dad had been killed. The response was always the same: "I was hoping it wasn't Al."

Why would someone call the family and ask to speak to a person listed in the obituaries? My father's was not a common name. I know now that the callers meant well; I know they were denying his death, as I had. At the time, though, the pain of each call was almost unbearable.

The weeks, months, and years ahead were filled with so many questions and very few answers. In other accidents, the cause is usually known very quickly. In aircraft accidents, the investigation continues for what seems like forever. It can be years after the accident before there is closure. And information on the progress of the investigation of a general aviation crash is not readily available. There is little contact, if any, between the investigators and families.

All we knew was that the accident was being investigated and when a final report was issued, we could call a number in Washington, D.C., to get a copy. But no projected date for the report was provided.

During our wait, it became apparent to me that others are in the same predicament. Survivors of those who die in general aviation accidents have additional sets of challenges, because often in general aviation accidents you are a "lone survivor"—there is no one to go through the experience with.

After extensive research, the need was evident for a national organization to assist survivors and family members of those killed in crashes, both commercial and general aviation. It was then that I started plans for Wings of Light, Inc.

Wings of Light is a national nonprofit organization founded in 1995 and headquartered in Phoenix, Arizona. Its mission is:

- To provide a support and information network to survivors, family members of victims, and others who have been touched by an aircraft accident.
- To serve as a liaison between survivors and family members and government and investigative organizations.
- To act as a referral source to qualified critical incident stress counselors; and
- To speak on behalf of survivors, family members of victims, and others who have been touched by an aircraft accident in order to bring about positive change in the aviation industry.

The most important service provided by Wings of Light is access to others with similar experiences through three support networks: survivors of aircraft accidents, family members, and rescue/response personnel.

Each network is comprised of volunteers who have experienced an aircraft accident as either a survivor, family member, or member of an emergency response team, and who want to help others.

As a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, most funding for Wings of Light comes from individual tax-deductible contributions. Many times, contributions are made in memory of loved ones. Those donating more than \$50 receive a Certificate of Appreciation.

HOW PROFESSIONALS AND OTHERS CAN HELP

There are many ways that people can assist Wings of Light and individuals affected by aircraft accidents.

Referral to Wings of Light

Most of the referrals to Wings of Light are generated by word-of-mouth from individuals who have seen the Web site (www.wingsoflight.org) or various published articles. If you know or meet someone who has survived a crash, lost someone in a crash, or been part of a response team to a crash, please tell them about Wings of Light.

Start a Local Group

If you have been affected by an aircraft accident and would like to volunteer to start a local Wings of Light support group in your area, please contact Wings of Light. New support groups are currently developing in New Zealand, Australia, and Europe.

International Network of Grief and Trauma Counselors Experienced with Aircraft Crash Victims

Currently, Wings of Light has a number of resources available for referring victims to professional counselors. We are continuously updating and adding to that network. If you are a licensed counselor with experience counseling victims of aircraft crashes, sudden loss, or post-traumatic stress, and are interested in being considered for the international counseling network, please contact Andrea Waas at Wings of Light.

Direct inquiries to:

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