

# Remembering Flight 261: 'We celebrate their lives'

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*Seattle Times staff reporter...February 1, 2000*

POINT MUGU, Calif. - It was a time for tears of release, poignant memories and love letters written in sand as friends and family members said their goodbyes yesterday to those lost on Alaska Airlines Flight 261.

Hundreds of survivors gathered for a second day to commemorate the first anniversary of the Alaska Airlines plane crash off this sunny California beach that took 88 lives. The last event, on the beach at a Navy base at Point Mugu, gave friends and family one final ritual-filled chance to pray or reflect on how their lives changed forever when the jetliner careened out of control and dropped into the sea about 10 miles offshore, killing everyone aboard.

As the sun set yesterday over the choppy Santa Barbara Channel, the mourners paused for a moment of silence at 4:21 p.m. - the time the pilots lost their struggle to gain control of the Boeing MD-83, which had been en route from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, to San Francisco and Seattle.

Yesterday's memorial service was the last of several events for the survivors, who came from as far away as Fiji to mark the anniversary. Many of them spent the past two days tearfully accepting reality. They toured a Navy hangar where wreckage is assembled for investigation into the cause of the crash and recognized that their loved ones had died violently but quickly.

They viewed a moving exhibit of mementos brought by other family members. They boarded private yachts to brave wind and swells as high as 6 feet to drop flowers and tears at the crash site.

For the families, the series of services and commemorations was liberating, a time to recognize that at long last all the "firsts" have been observed - all the birthdays, holidays and anniversaries have been endured.

"Our healing will continue and go on, but this was a great service for us," the Rev. Jeff Knight said as he joined others on the beach.

Knight's parents, Linda and Joe Knight, were among the dead, but he is carrying on the work they began, pastoring at The Rock Church Northwest in Monroe and nurturing a mission project with homeless children in dusty communities bordering the city dump in Puerto Vallarta.

Knight spent several minutes on the beach with only his sister, Jenny, 17, a senior at Monroe High School. Then they joined relatives and members of their church for a group photograph on the beach.

Yesterday began with the dedication of a monument to the dead, placed by the Navy on a desolate, wind-blown point overlooking the base. The monument was bought with donations from Navy personnel and is off-limits to the public.

It is engraved with the Alaska Airlines logo, a kind-faced Alaska native that graces all the planes in the company's fleet, and dedicated to the memory of those lost in the crash.

About 300 mourners attended the service, placing white and yellow carnations at the base of the monument.

"We are here to thank everyone for remembering our family and friends on Flight 261," Patty Sanchez, whose daughter, Colleen Whorley, was among the crash victims, told the Navy personnel in attendance.

"We will always remember the loving compassion you showed us."

The afternoon service, that final goodbye, was studded with moving ritual.

"Rituals take over when we can't find the words to express what we wish to express," Janice Lord, a grief counselor, told the mourners in a brief service inside a tent erected on the beach.

Even the visits to the hangar and the crash site should be seen as helpful, she said:

"That water and those pieces were the last thing your loved ones knew, and that is sacred water and sacred space now."

Music for the service included a haunting flute solo, "Kokopeli," a piece played and loved by Deborah Penna, a student of Seattle's Cornish School of the Arts who died in the crash.

"She was an accomplished flutist," said her mother, Jan Penna-Crane.

"The flute really became her voice. The first piece she mastered when she took up the flute again as an adult was 'Kokopeli.' She loved the mystical meaning it conveyed."

As the mourners moved out of the tent and to the beach, they were surrounded by a circle of hundreds of "caregivers" - the rescue crews, Red Cross volunteers, Salvation Army chaplains and service personnel who mobilized soon after the crash, first to search for survivors and then, when hope was lost, to recover what they could.

On the beach, the name of each victim was read, and 88 monarch butterflies were released. Tradition has it, Lord told the families and friends, that the monarchs carry messages between the spirit world of their loved ones and the material world they remain in as survivors.

The mourners filled wicker baskets with flowers they'd clutched throughout the service. The baskets, escorted by a military honor guard, were loaded onto a Coast Guard helicopter, to be dropped into the water above the crash site as the sun set.

Many wrote notes to their loved ones to be sealed in a specially-built container. Later this week, weather permitting, the Coast Guard will drop the capsule at the spot in the water where the plane went down.

The vault is engraved: "To the spirits of the 88 lost. We celebrate their lives and remember them with love."

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