

Egg Harbor Township resident helped tighten airline security after Lockerbie attack

By MICHELLE LEE Staff Writer, 609-272-7256 | Posted: Thursday, August 20, 2009 |

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EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP - The 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, had a huge effect on Joe McGrail, a retired aviation consultant.

McGrail, 75, worked as a staff investigator in 1989 and 1990 for the President's Commission on Aviation Safety and Terrorism. The commission crafted a report with 64 recommendations that lead to stricter airport security laws and regulations.

McGrail listened to testimonies from families whose loved ones died on the flight. He visited the Lockerbie crash site and cemetery in February 1990 and remembers seeing dozens of unclaimed clothing and sneakers that belonged to the crash victims.

McGrail - who evaluated national and international airport security policies - considers his contribution to the report "the most significant work in my entire life."

So it is easy to understand the anger and frustration McGrail felt Thursday when Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi - the only man convicted of the bombing - was released by Scottish officials and allowed to return to Libya on compassionate grounds. Al-Megrahi, 57, has been diagnosed with terminal prostate cancer and could have three months left to live. He served only eight years of the life sentence set during his 2001 trial.

"I can't find a word strong enough to articulate my objection to what they did," McGrail said during an interview in his Egg Harbor Township home. "A compassionate release to his home? Again, where was the compassion for the 270 people (who died) here?"

Pan Am Flight 103, which left London headed to New York City, was destroyed Dec. 21, 1988, by a bomb hidden inside a cassette tape player packed into a suitcase. All 259 airplane passengers and crew members died in the crash, as well as 11 people on the ground. The explosion drew more attention to airport security and led to strained international relationships and sanctions against Libya.

McGrail said his heart goes out to the victims' families and that he can understand their outrage. McGrail said he believes the full story behind the bombing never came out during the 2001 trial, and he still thinks someone else ordered al-Megrahi to orchestrate the attack.

"I strongly object to what the (Scottish) authorities have done," McGrail said. "Let the guy die in prison."

The government reforms that followed in the years after the crash and new screening technology have made a profound change in public safety, McGrail said.

Before the Pan Am attack, McGrail said, many aviation security systems were a mess. The private contractors who did security checks were often under-trained, underpaid and saw high staff turnover, he said.

Now, McGrail said, the screening techniques and equipment used to review passengers and their luggage are much better. One security problem McGrail thinks still needs further tightening is with reviews of the cargo stored on airplanes during flights.

McGrail still keeps his copy of the commission report at home and he says he flips through it every time he hears about airport security problems and crimes in the news, especially after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the December 2001 failed attempt by Richard Reid to light a bomb in his shoe on American Airlines Flight 63.

He even developed a friendly relationship with the parents of Rick Monetti, a Cherry Hill resident and Syracuse University junior who died on Pan Am Flight 103.

Eileen Monetti said McGrail is as steady and reliable as a rock. She said McGrail calls her and her husband, Bob, every few months to discuss politics, aviation security and their families. Monetti, who spends summers in Ocean City, said McGrail was kind to all of the victims' families and that they invited him to attend a 20th anniversary memorial service this past December at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington D.C., which McGrail unfortunately could not attend.

McGrail said the Pan Am tragedy is still very significant to him personally because of the effect it had on so many lives. The event also serves as an important reminder of the importance of "trying to get security right," he said, and to prevent something like that from happening again.

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