

# Foreword

*by Jim Hall*

From 1994 to 2001, I had the distinct honor of serving as Chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). The NTSB is an independent federal agency charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation disaster in the United States, as well as significant accidents in the other modes of transportation—railroad, highway, marine, and pipeline. Since its inception in 1967, the NTSB has examined more than 124,000 aviation accidents and over 10,000 surface transportation accidents, and has also assisted many foreign governments with their own investigations. In its issuance of over 12,000 recommendations for all transportation modes, the Board has established a solid reputation for diligence and impartiality. For more than seven years, I headed this organization that serves as the “eyes and ears” of the American public for aviation and other transportation accident investigations across the country and around the world. Now, as a transportation safety and security consultant, I continue my commitment to promoting safety in our nation’s transportation system.

When I announced my retirement from the Board, media and industry analysts speculated that perhaps one of my “most lasting legacies will be the change in how family members of victims of major transportation accidents are treated.” While this is, and continues to be, a cause I champion, the overhaul of this system cannot be credited to me. Rather, the advancement of this goal and the significant legislative progress made during my tenure regarding the treatment of families in the aftermath of airline accidents is largely due to the relentless collective work of Terri Severin, other surviving family members, and organiza-

tions representing their interests, such as The National Air Disaster Alliance. Before October 1996, when Congress passed and President Clinton signed the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996, the Safety Board's primary mandate was to inspect transportation accidents. It was only through the work of these families that the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996 became a legislative priority, giving the Safety Board the additional responsibility of aiding the families of victims of commercial aircraft accidents occurring in U.S. territory. Terri's book does a wonderful job of describing the problems faced by families, providing both an intimate account and historical context.

The October 31, 1994 crash of an American Eagle ATR-72 in Roselawn, Indiana, which took the lives of all 68 persons aboard, was a great tragedy. It was a tragedy not only for the 68 victims, but, like all accidents of this kind, it was devastating for the hundreds of loved ones they left behind. My involvement with this disaster began just hours after it occurred, when I stood in the muddy soybean field in which flight 4184 had come to rest. Through the rain and mist that dark night, I was able to make out what appeared to be the tailcone of the fallen aircraft, not knowing at the time that in the morning light it would prove to be the only large piece of the plane remaining. Since then, I have had the opportunity to meet many of those who lost their loved ones, as the Board examined the crash, and updated individual family members on the status of our investigation. One of those individuals was Terri Severin. In the months following the catastrophe in Roselawn, Indiana, Terri became an impromptu spokesperson for the surviving family members, uncovering and exposing major failures by the airline in the handling of the victims' remains. It was through the work of Terri and other family members that the full scope of the Roselawn tragedy became clear. Compounding the devastation from the disaster was the airline's callous behavior.

Before October, 1996, in addition to Roselawn, I visited the scenes of three other major fatal airline crashes: USAir Flight 427, which killed 132 just outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on September 8, 1994; ValuJet Flight 592, which killed all 110 aboard in the Florida Everglades

on May 11, 1996; and TWA Flight 800, which killed 230 off the coast of Long Island, New York, on July 17, 1996.

As beautifully articulated in, *In the Wake of the Storm*, the airline emergency response teams, in all four disasters, on occasion lacked organization, coordination, and perhaps even compassion. However, it was only through the strength and courage of these surviving family members working together, that we learned of the horror stories relating to their treatment—constant busy signals from the airline’s 800 accident information number; misidentified remains; personal effects being mishandled; unidentified remains not treated with dignity, including the holding of mass burials without informing families; and using confidential information obtained during this grieving process in court against the families.

Internationally, family members of victims, including Terri, began to organize and demand more accountability in the aftermath of tragedies. They outlined five major concerns in the areas of initial notification of the accident, including the recovery and identification of victims, disposition of unidentifiable remains, returning of personal effects, and access to investigative information.

In response, the Board created the Office of Family Assistance to fill the void. It functions as a coordinator in the integration of the major resources of the federal government and other organizations, to support the efforts of the local and state government, and to assist the airline in meeting the needs of aviation disaster victims and their families. Family counseling, victim identification and forensic services, communicating with foreign governments, and translation services are just a few of the areas in which the federal government can help local authorities and the airlines deal more effectively with a major aviation disaster.

We designed our family affairs operation to harness the assets and abilities of the federal government and to work in cooperation with the local medical examiner or coroner, who has the responsibility of recovering and identifying victims. We focused on the recovery and identification of remains specifically because of the emphasis every family member placed on this—recognizing that in the immediate aftermath of

a crash there is no greater interest for those who have lost a loved one. With all due respect to our investigators, for the victims' families the cause of the crash is a secondary issue. The NTSB fully recognized that the family affairs efforts must be focused on the quick and accurate identification of remains. Sadly, it took the passage of legislation at the behest of families, and the intervention of the NTSB, to appreciate the necessity and importance of this process. Nonetheless, these survivors and family members can take solace in knowing that their compounded grief, which moved them to action, has prevented similar future harms, not only in the United States but worldwide, as foreign governments around the world followed our lead and adopted legislation based upon the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996.

This story goes beyond Terri Severin's success in forever altering the airline industry's approach to families. It is an inspiring account that transcends grief, providing hope in the wake of tragedy and embracing life after experiencing a great loss. No one involved in these accident investigations can truly understand what families go through in the aftermath of a tragedy, nor do we presume that issuing a final report resolves their grief. However, our perspective is forever enlightened by the family members who bravely come forward and continue to share their stories with the public. As Thomas Jefferson, America's third president and one of its Founding Fathers, once said, "The care of human life and happiness is the first and only legitimate object of good government." I believe this phrase embodies the goals and mission of the NTSB's Office of Family Assistance.

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