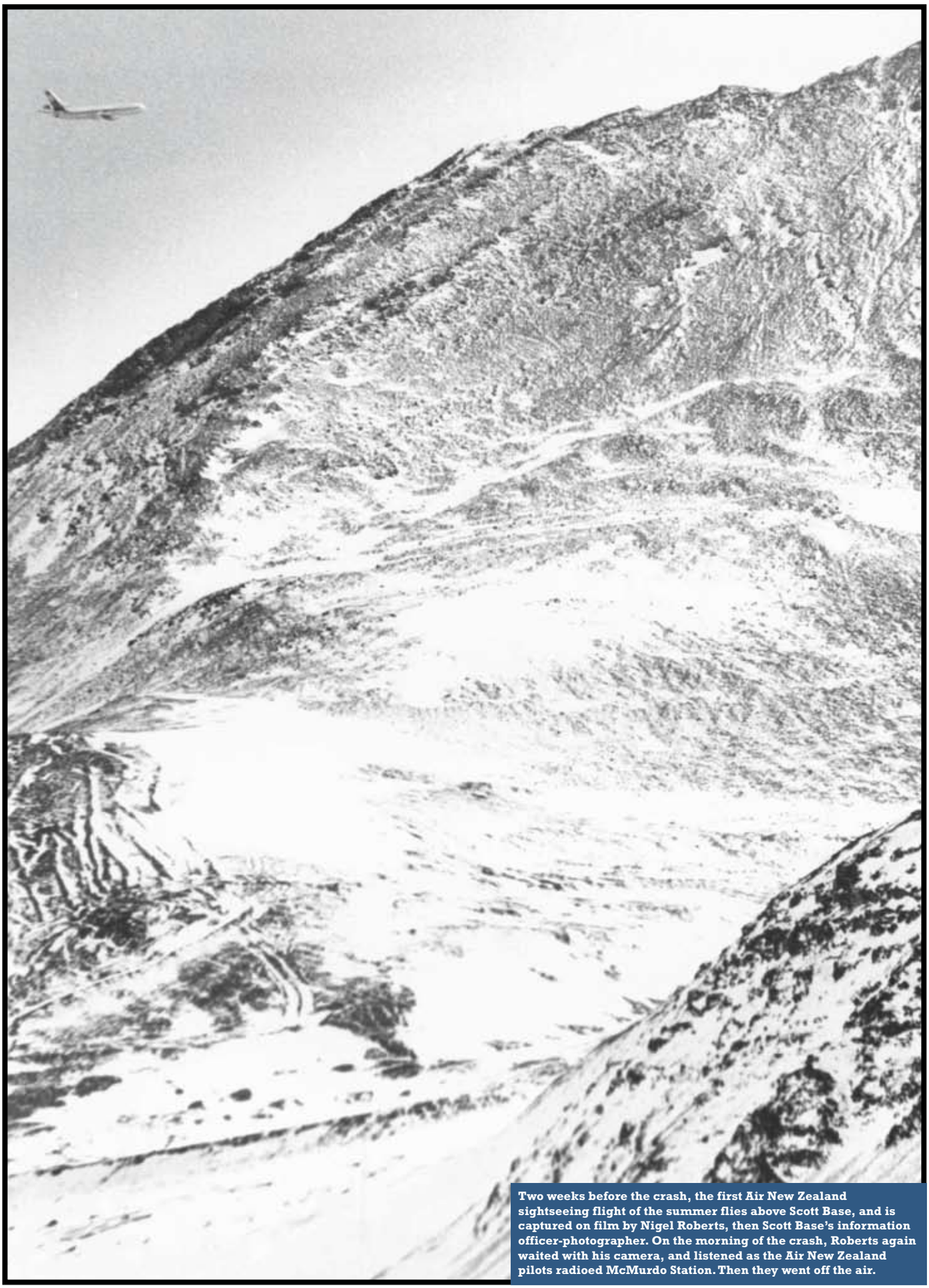
# Echoes from Erebus

# NO PEACE, NO ANSWERS, 30 YEARS ON

+ Cover story

In November 28 the country will mark the 30th anniversary of the Erebus disaster. Mike White investigates why, after so long, the wounds are still so raw for so many and asks if saying sorry would be a step too far.

MIKE WHITE IS A *NORTH & SOUTH* SENIOR WRITER. PHOTOGRAPHS BY NIGEL ROBERTS, MIKE WHITE, LOU SANSON, AND FROM GETTY IMAGES.



NIGEL S ROBERTS

**Two weeks before the crash, the first Air New Zealand sightseeing flight of the summer flies above Scott Base, and is captured on film by Nigel Roberts, then Scott Base's information officer-photographer. On the morning of the crash, Roberts again waited with his camera, and listened as the Air New Zealand pilots radioed McMurdo Station. Then they went off the air.**

What did they think of in those last seconds? What went through their minds as the alarm screamed, warning they were desperately close to the ground? Whoop whoop, pull up. Whoop whoop, pull up.

Six and a half seconds – the time between the alarm and obliteration of the Air New Zealand DC10 with 257 people aboard.

Two trusted pilots, Captain Jim Collins and First Officer Greg Cassin, unaware they were flying straight towards Antarctic sentinel Mt Erebus.

They had wives, children, parents – did they have time to think of them? Or as crew reeled off their altitude – 500 feet, 400 feet – did they simply believe their instruments were malfunctioning?

As Collins called for extra power to climb away, did he ever glimpse the snows that would claim them all a blink later?

For 30 years, we've tried to get inside the heads of Collins and Cassin, see what they did, think what they must have.

Investigators, judges, politicians, pilots and the public have all overlaid rationality on the unknown, done their best to explain how the country's worst aviation disaster could have occurred.

And through it all, bitterness and blame have merged with the grief of thousands, vituperative argument over who was responsible leaving no room for resolution or closure.

Erebus is one of those few events where virtually everyone over 40 can remember where they were at the time. But it remains a troubled recollection for New Zealand, a tragedy time hasn't healed.

We don't even say "Mount", we leave out "plane" and "crash" and just say "Erebus" and everyone knows what we mean. That name, the Greek god of darkness, announces unimaginable death and unending controversy for us.

And sadly, what's become clear over time is that the list of victims from Erebus reaches far beyond the 257 whose lives ended that day on the slopes of a smouldering volcano.

**THE TALE OF** Flight TE901 on November 28, 1979, is well recited, from early morning Auckland takeoff to wreckage and ragged koru in the snow five hours later.

The trip was the 14th Air New Zealand had run to Antarctica, a remarkable voyage to Earth's extremity, to see where icebergs were born, where Scott faltered and where Hillary set out for the South Pole by tractor.

It blended Pan Am-era glamour – scallops, champagne and celebratory cake – with other-worldly adventure and the $329 (more than $1500 today) seats sold quickly.

Passenger photos recovered from the wreckage show clear skies over Antarctica's fringe. But confronted by cloud nearing Ross Island, home to New Zealand's Scott Base and America's McMurdo Station, Collins got permission from McMurdo's air-traffic control to descend below the cloud, to 2000 feet, to give passengers the views they'd paid for, later dropping to 1500 feet.

KIM WESTERSKOV / GETTY

Above: Mt Erebus, with the Ross Ice Shelf on the left, and McMurdo Sound sea ice to the right.

Crucially, however, Collins, Cassin and even the on-board commentator, Antarctic veteran Peter Mulgrew who'd been on three previous Antarctic flights, all believed they were flying down McMurdo Sound, the 40-mile (64km) wide entrance to the permanent Antarctic iceshelf. In fact, they were 27 miles (43km) east, on a collision course with the 12,450 feet (3794m) Mt Erebus.

This was due to a remarkable last-minute change by Air New Zealand to the coordinates of the flight's final waypoint – something the crew hadn't been advised of. Collins and Cassin had received those coordinates before takeoff, entered them into the plane's computer and not realised their track would now take them directly towards Mt Erebus rather than safely down McMurdo Sound where previous flights had gone.

Compounding this was the pilots actually believed they could see McMurdo Sound in front of them, stretching towards the horizon, despite being miles away.

This deception was caused by a flat light phenomenon known as "sector whiteout" where snow and sky blend, leaving it impossible to distinguish land features. Thus, they mistook the gradual slopes of Mt Erebus for the level ice of McMurdo Sound.

Cockpit voice recordings show no alarm on the flightdeck or sense they were off track. The first obvious concern was raised by flight engineer Gordon Brooks 26 seconds before impact when he remarked: "I don't like this."

Shortly after, Collins decided to climb away from where they were, also uncomfortable with the situation.

While debating with Cassin which way to turn, the alarm sounded, warning how close they were to the ground.

At 12.50pm, the 200-tonne plane, flying at 260 knots (481km/h), struck the mountain. The wreckage spread over 570m with fire quickly engulfing much of it. Despite regular rumours, nobody survived the impact.

**ONE OF THE FIRST** people to visit the scene was Nigel Roberts, Scott Base's information officer-photographer. Now a political-science

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professor at Victoria University, Roberts remembers how he'd been ready with his camera earlier that day to catch the DC10 as it roared overhead. He had waited and listened as the pilots radioed McMurdo – and then they'd gone off the air.

His lasting memory of that afternoon and evening was the ceaseless drone of search aircraft, warming up, taking off, and then returning after fruitlessly scouring the surrounding snows.

Shortly before 1am on November 29, the wreckage was spotted on the back side of Erebus and Roberts was sent in with a rescue team to take photographs.

"It was just stunned awe as we flew over, thinking, 'Well, where's the plane gone?' because mostly what was visible was this smear of oil and burnt-out remains. It was just disintegration. Large parts of the plane were completely eliminated."

Focused on taking photos, he didn't notice bodies at the time but back in his darkroom they began to appear in his developing trays, sprawled and strewn figures among the mechanical detritus.

His photos – particularly one of the tail section's koru symbol in the snow – jolted a nation struggling to comprehend what had happened. For as small as New Zealand is now, it was an even smaller community in 1979 with few degrees of separation from the victims – everyone seemed to know someone who knew someone. And Air New Zealand, with its "Nobody Does It Better" slogan, was a national jewel.

In June 1980, Prime Minister Robert Muldoon announced a Royal Commission into the accident, to be headed by High Court Judge Peter Mahon. But before his inquiry began, the report of Chief Air Accidents Inspector Ron Chippindale was released, firmly blaming the pilots for flying too low, in poor visibility, when unsure of their position.

Mahon, whose gaunt features seemed the personification of censorial justice, was Parnell-living, golf-playing establishment. And his political masters expected his no-nonsense approach would swiftly confirm Chippindale's findings. Even Mahon expected the inquiry to last only a few weeks.

However, as a string of witnesses appeared, Mahon became increasingly concerned about Air New Zealand's evidence.

"[Their] cards were produced reluctantly, and at long intervals, and I have little doubt that there are one or two which still lie in the pack," he later wrote.

After four extensions and visits to Antarctica, Britain, Canada and America, Mahon shocked the nation in April 1981 when he famously accused Air New Zealand of "an orchestrated litany of lies" and a "predetermined plan of deception".

He absolved the pilots, instead ruling the accident's primary cause was the change of flight coordinates, which the crew were unaware of, compounded by whiteout

**Opposite page and above: The wreckage of the Air New Zealand DC10 was spotted by a US Navy Hercules crew shortly before 1am on November 29, 1979. About 18 hours later, Nigel Roberts was flown to the crash site to photograph the scene. "The picture was one of utter devastation."**

NIGEL S. ROBERTS

which prevented them seeing Erebus.

Mahon was merciless on Air New Zealand, detailing a string of incomprehensible errors, missing documents, evasive testimonies and unbelievable claims from its management.

While the report comforted victims' families, it riled the Prime Minister who publicly damned Mahon, and it was swiftly appealed by Air New Zealand.

The Court of Appeal ruled Mahon had over-stepped his brief by awarding costs against Air New Zealand and hadn't followed natural justice by not permitting the company to respond to charges of lying.

Stunned by the rebuke from his peers, Mahon resigned. He took the case to the Privy Council but was again criticised and the Court of Appeal's decision upheld.

Neither court, however, overturned his findings on the crash's cause, though some argue it wasn't their role to do so. (A later court hearing in the United States, dealing with a claim by families of the crew, did however, challenge Mahon's fundamental conclusions.)

And there the issue festered, Mahon's supporters believing he'd accurately pierced an appalling cover-up by an incompetent airline, while Air New Zealand and the Government charged he'd strayed out of his depth and recklessly slurred the company.

Exhausted by the controversy, Mahon died in 1986, having been wounded by his treatment, offered a paltry pension and twice denied a knighthood.

With voice recordings, passenger photographs, precise black-box data and analysis by international experts, it seems unbelievable that we're still unable to agree on the crash's cause.

But despite volumes having been written and three decades of debilitating accusation

**With voice recordings, passenger photographs, precise black-box data and analysis by international experts, it seems unbelievable we're still unable to agree on the crash's cause.**

**Above: Lorraine Burton. She had just had this photo developed and had it in her bag on the plane. Left: Her sister Christine with son Michael, Lorraine's nephew, born the day she died on Erebus.**

# Day of Life and Death

**November 28 remains eternally bittersweet for Christine Edney – her son's birthday and the anniversary of both her sister's birthday and her death.**

Lorraine Burton turned 40 the day of Flight TE901. A stationery rep for Whitcoulls, she loved to travel, was involved in repertory theatre, collected china ornaments and was a counsellor for Samaritans. Five foot three with hazel eyes, she was divorced and lived in Thorndon, Wellington. The trip to Antarctica was a birthday present to herself.

She'd bought a new yellow dress for the occasion and there was a birthday cake waiting for her on board.

Lorraine Eileen Burton – seat 29G, on the aisle in the smokers' section.

As Lorraine was boarding the Antarctic flight that morning, her youngest sister, Christine Edney, was preparing to give birth to her second child. Shortly after 9pm, around the time Air New Zealand was solemnly announcing the plane was lost and must have run out of fuel, Michael Edney was born.

It wasn't until the next morning when a nurse mentioned a plane had crashed in Antarctica that Christine found out her sister had died.

Lorraine was identified from fingerprints found on Christmas cards in her flat and by four rings – one of which Christine now wears.

**"I'd love to fly over [Mt Erebus] and see it serene, to know it's a nice peaceful place. It would mean a lot. Then I can say farewell – and happy birthday."**

Her coffin arrived in Wellington with the lid screwed down and instructions for it not to be opened.

Remarkably, also found among the wreckage were photos Lorraine had taken at Christine's a fortnight before, and a clipping from a newspaper astrologer predicting the personalities of children born that week.

When they packed up her flat they found an LP, *Sinfonia Antartica*, with a painting of Mt Erebus on the cover.

She never received the birthday presents Christine and her family had bought for her.

November 28 remains eternally bittersweet for Christine – her son's birthday and the anniversary of her sister's birthday and death.

Now an archivist, Christine has spent 30 years collecting as much information as possible about the crash, collating three folders of clippings, photos and items related to her sister. She traced grid maps of the crash site to identify where Lorraine was found; got her coroner's report; and, despite being told it had been destroyed, tracked down the police file detailing Lorraine's recovery from Erebus.

"I don't know what I'm looking for. I'm trying to find something but I don't know what it is. Probably closure. And you don't know when that is until you've reached it. I'll keep on going till the book's closed. One day it will be."

That quest may ultimately lead her to Mt Erebus, the same mountain that took her sister's life, 30 years ago.

"I'd love to fly over it and see it serene, to know it's a nice peaceful place. It would mean a lot. Then I can say farewell – and happy birthday."

and allegation, an immense gulf in opinion persists over whether the pilots or Air New Zealand must bear responsibility for the 257 lives lost.

In many ways we've turned our back on it, uncomfortable with our inability to determine a conclusive truth, ill at ease with the bitterness still harboured over it.

It took nearly 20 years before Mahon's report was finally tabled in Parliament (though the report of Chippindale, who died last year, remains officially recognised by the International Civil Aviation Organisation).

And nearly 28 years passed before those who recovered the victims from Erebus were honoured.

MP Jim Anderton pushed for the pilots to be officially exonerated but was rebuffed by Cabinet colleagues, who felt it would reopen a can of worms.

In some respects, Erebus has become a historical mountain we've chosen to skirt rather than scale.

**BUT FOR SOME,** there's no debate, the issue being blindingly simple.

Ian Gemmell commanded Air New Zealand's first Antarctic flight in February 1977 and was the airline's chief pilot at the time of Erebus. Accused of being a lead conspirator in the company's cover-up, he was also at the centre of allegations that crucial documents from the crash site were strangely never located or later vanished, earning him the nickname "Shredder" among pilots thereafter.

Gemmell insists the pilots didn't see Mt Erebus because they were flying in cloud, not because they were tricked by whiteout, and says their actions in descending were "crazy".

"The conditions were just hopeless for visual flying. But the pilots' association had an agenda that they were going to get the pilot off the hook by any means they could find. And their evidence had a lot of inaccuracies and straight-out bloody lies in it."

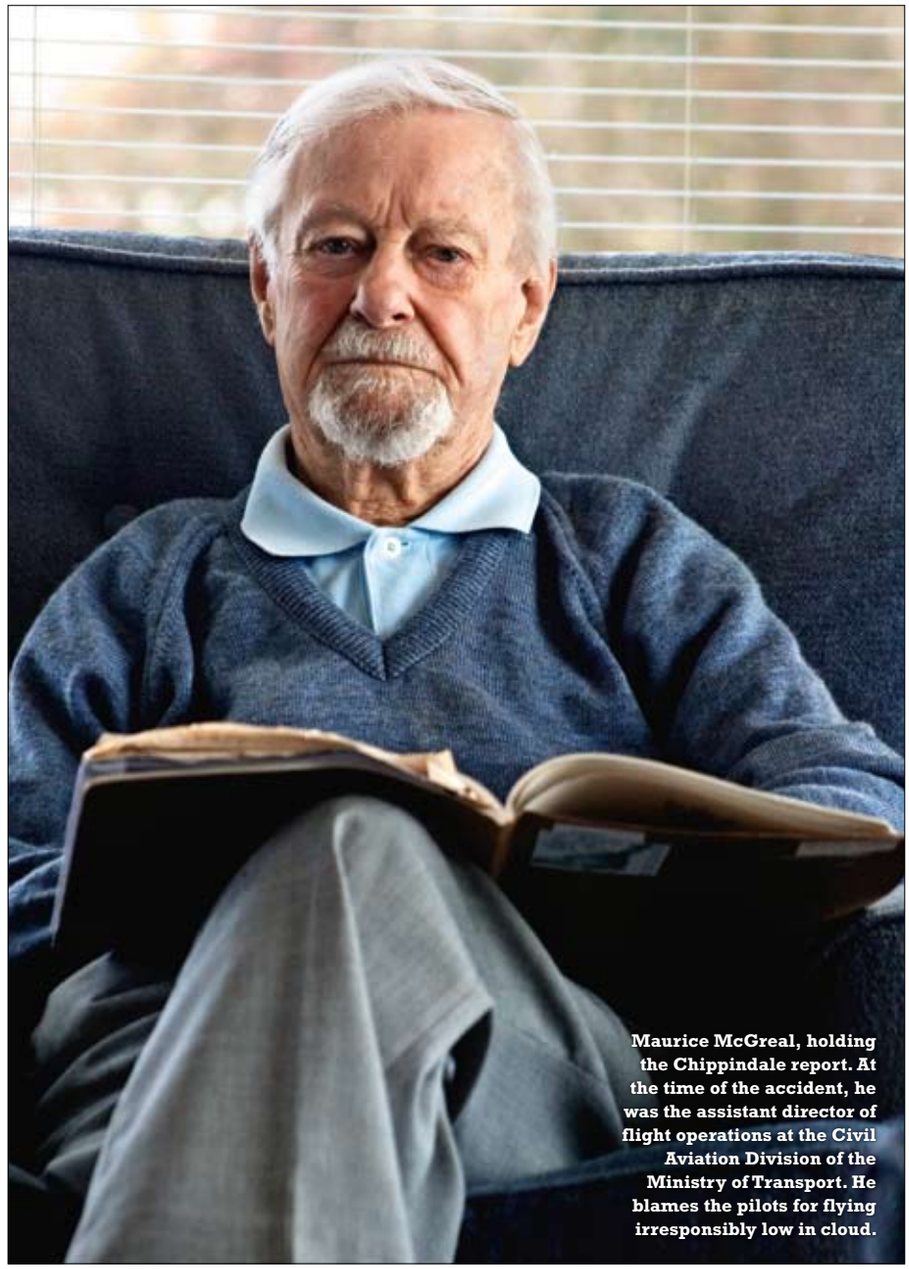
Labelling Justice Mahon "an idiot" who'd made up his mind on the case before hearing the evidence, Gemmell denies any Air New Zealand witnesses lied.

"There was no need to. We were straight up and down. We weren't trying to hang the pilot, we were just giving the facts."

Also tainted by Mahon's findings was Air New Zealand's expert on DC10 navigation, Keith Amies, who says accusations of perjury have dogged him and his family for the past 30 years.

"He made me look like a real bloody arsehole when in actual fact anybody who knew anything about it knew what I was saying was true."

MIKE WHITE



**Maurice McGreal, holding the Chippindale report. At the time of the accident, he was the assistant director of flight operations at the Civil Aviation Division of the Ministry of Transport. He blames the pilots for flying irresponsibly low in cloud.**

A friend of Captain Collins, who'd flown with him more than 60 times, Amies, now 87, says every Erebus anniversary again raises the accusations made against him. "And the frustrating thing is you just can't do anything about it. I'd just hope there wasn't a November this year. But there's going to be one and someone's going to write about it."

Another who flew with Collins is Maurice McGreal, who at the time of the accident was the assistant director of flight operations at the Civil Aviation Division of the Ministry of Transport.

Like Gemmell, he blames the pilots for flying irresponsibly low in cloud.

**"The reality was they didn't know where they were. They couldn't see, otherwise they wouldn't have run into the hill."**

**Maurice McGreal.**

**Justice Mahon's widow, Margarita, recalled her husband saying during the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the disaster: "What appears to be a lie today may very well be proven to be the truth tomorrow and I must listen to every word in that way."**

**"There's been a lot of sadness which is quite private but, oh, would never have happened if this hadn't come into our lives."**

**Margarita Mahon.**

"The reality was they didn't know where they were. They couldn't see, otherwise they wouldn't have run into the hill."

And he's equally scathing about Mahon, saying he simply didn't understand aviation operations and was manipulated by people like pilot Gordon Vette, whose research of sector whiteout was accepted by the judge.

"Mahon's report gave reasons in political and believable terms to unprofessional people. Chippindale gave reasons in aeronautical terms as to why an aeroplane full of people flew into a hill – because the pilot did it. And that's not acceptable to [pilot's wife] Mrs Collins – because her husband was the man driving the aeroplane.

"One side is driven by knowledge and airmanship and the other side is driven by remembering people."

The reality of Erebus, despite the controversy, is simple in McGreal's book, as is his assessment of what makes a good pilot. "If they're alive they're good ones. When all's said and done, flying is a dangerous business. If you make a mistake you die."

**ON THE OTHER** side of the argument lie those who defend both the pilots and Mahon's findings.

Lawyer Gary Harrison remains one of those with the deepest knowledge of the case, having spent nearly a year assisting Mahon during the inquiry, and can still recall details such as the crucial flight coordinates. "We were in the rather nice position of just being able to search for the truth of the matter.

"Air New Zealand were running this argument that this pilot had flown [at 1500 feet] in breach of his briefing instructions and that no other pilot had done this before. But their own newspaper which they distributed throughout New Zealand said that yes, indeed, they had done it before. So here we were getting these barefaced lies being told in the witness box that are contradicted by their own publication."

Harrison says it became utterly clear the pilots weren't flying recklessly in cloud and the crash was due to the changed coordinates combined with whiteout.

Mahon's resultant report was "the most incredible work" and he feels the Court of Appeal and Privy Council made numerous errors in their condemnatory judgments.

"They purported to understand it all but they didn't. He was treated appallingly, even by his High Court colleagues.

"None of them wanted to get too close to him or they mightn't get their knighthoods in time to come."

Mahon's widow, Margarita, insists her husband kept an open mind, recalling how she once mentioned suggestions Air New Zealand's witnesses weren't being honest.

"And he said, 'What appears to be a lie today may very well be proven to be the truth tomorrow and I must listen to every word in that way.' He wouldn't even say to me he had thoughts they were lying. Never.

"Now that I'm 81, I get quite sad about the way it's affected the whole family. There's been a lot of sadness which is quite private but, oh, would never have happened if this hadn't come into our lives."

MIKE WHITE

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**ACROSS AUCKLAND, MARIA COLLINS** wanders through the house she shared with husband Jim and their four daughters at the time of the accident and sweeps a hand across the harbour view he loved.

"And there's Jim's fence out there, it could do with a re-stain but it stands up straight."

The pair met when she visited Jim's flat in 1960 to show slides of her recent overseas trip. They were married just over a year later with the reception on the lawn of her parents' St Heliers home.

By 1979, she'd got over the fear of her husband having an accident while flying and on the morning he left for Antarctica she was preoccupied getting the girls ready for school. "Our last conversation was, 'Don't forget the blue cod,' it was as mundane as that. 'Take care, have a lovely day,' the sort of things you say. Why would I worry?"

Borne up by support from friends and sympathy from strangers, there was initially little time for grief.

"What happened and how it happened and why it happened – that would all come out in the inquiry. All I knew was Jim was 1500 feet on a mountain, dead.

"You're busy and it makes wonderful anaesthetic and it was like being at a party at my place – people bringing food, lots of people, lots of reminiscences. And at the end of the day I'd think, 'He's not going to come home – when all these people leave it's just us, nobody else.'

"It took a long time to live through the reality that he wasn't coming back."

While initial inferences of pilot error didn't surprise her, she couldn't accept Chippindale's finding that Jim had blatantly ignored regulations – not the man who ran safety briefings and insisted the family wear bulky lifejackets when they went boating.

"The implication was, he had no business to be so low and he was just going, 'Whoops chaps, let's go for a joyride.' Well, anybody who knew Jim knew he'd have followed the safety requirements and procedures to the absolute letter. His life was as precious to him as his passengers'."

Collins knows some people will forever blame her husband for the crash and even acknowledges his role in it. "Because without the crew's decision, the flight doesn't go from A to B. So he was there. But he was there through systems that were supposed to keep him safe – and they failed him.

"It'll always be two viewpoints. One was the official accident report from the chief

**"The implication was, he had no business to be so low and he was just going, 'Whoops chaps, let's go for a joyride.' Well, anybody who knew Jim knew he'd have followed the safety requirements and procedures to the absolute letter."**

**Maria Collins, pictured above with a photograph of Jim Collins, the pilot of the DC10.**

accident investigator and one was an official inquiry report – and who do you want to believe?

"But if I can't clear his name totally then I want to go to my grave feeling it's so damn near it that I have to be satisfied."

On the eve of the disaster's 30th anniversary, Collins, 74, hasn't given up hope Air New Zealand will move on from making her husband a scapegoat and finally acknowledge the mistakes it made that contributed to the accident.

"I can accept people make mistakes and I know they weren't deliberately negligent, but when you hide behind your pomposity and don't come out and say, 'We made errors too,' so it can be dumped on someone who's dead anyway, that's not forgivable."

Anne Cassin, the wife of co-pilot Greg Cassin, says that any apology from Air New Zealand or the Government would be "gratefully received. It would still make a difference. But it's been so long now I guess I'll believe it when I hear it."

After the crash, Cassin became a commercial pilot herself and one of her daughters, Maria, now flies for Air New Zealand.

She describes the past 30 years, living with her husband being blamed for the disaster, as hell. "I've had to learn to let it go and say that the people that matter, know and understand it, and anyone else doesn't matter. It's a hard thing to do but it's all I can do."

This year's anniversary promises to be as difficult as ever. "To be honest, I hate it. I hate it all coming up again. I actually want to run away and hide for the next few months. We all hate it."

But perhaps this year will be different; perhaps this year will see sympathy replace melancholy.

In September, Air New Zealand announced it would help five representatives of victims' families travel to Antarctica for the 30th anniversary commemorations, something that remarkably has never happened before, despite a trail of earnest but unconnected politicians and flunkies shuttling south over the years.

Air New Zealand CEO Rob Fyfe, whose handling of the airline's A320 crash off Perpignan last year was widely praised, will also make the journey and, weather permitting, the group will visit the cross overlooking the crash site.

Fyfe says Air New Zealand's current management has for months considered how to best recognise the Erebus tragedy. "Nothing we can do can wind back the clock and change past actions, so we are focusing on what we can now do to make a difference."

While the number of family members being taken appears small, Antarctica New Zealand's chief executive Lou Sanson says they're limited by the sheer difficulty of travel to Antarctica.

Places on flights to Antarctica and accommodation at Scott Base are very limited, and there are only two helicopters available at that time to reach the crash site on the other side of Mt Erebus.

Having long sensed Erebus remains an open issue for those affected, including rescue teams, Sanson is pleased Air New Zealand is finally trying to bring some closure. "We've tried to do what we can to recognise that this is such a significant event for New Zealanders. And in the past, well, in a nutshell, Air New Zealand has sent a wreath and that's been about it. But we've certainly sensed a change under the current leadership."

Sanson says it's important to realise New Zealand has lost more lives in Antarctica than any other nation.

"And every time you fly into McMurdo you sit there and look at this magnificent mountain and you realise just what a deep part of New Zealand's national psyche it is."

**THE MORNING OF** the Erebus crash 13-year-old Brendon Bainbridge got up at 5.30, hugged his dad, Tom, and set off to do his paper run. It was the last time they saw each other.

As his father flew towards Antarctica, Brendon was coming second in the high jump and 1500m at the Auckland school track and field championships. When he arrived at the airport to greet his father that evening, he was still in his running kit, medals round his neck, barefoot and bubbling with excitement.

Because of Erebus, Brendon never got to share that day's triumphs, or have his father cheer him as he won the Auckland cross-country champs the next year, or toast him as he married, built a successful career and had his own children.

While the family eventually received some compensation from the airline and its insurers, his mother Joy, who'd bought the Antarctic ticket for her husband's 40th birthday, was left struggling to raise five children on a book-keeper's wage. (Compensation was paid according to each victim's circumstances and factors such as dependants and future earning potential. The settlements were full, final and confidential and prevent further legal action against the airline.)

"The sad thing was there wasn't a moment when it was done," says Bainbridge. "It dragged on for weeks and weeks then months then years afterwards so there wasn't a defining moment where you could say, 'Okay, this has happened,' and move on.

"Even to this day I think I still feel that. As a family we didn't talk about it for probably 20 years, it was that raw."

Like so many relatives of victims spoken to while preparing this story, Brendon Bainbridge says Air New Zealand's denial of responsibility has kept their emotional wounds wide open and an apology, even after 30 years, would help many of them.

"There are 200 New Zealand families out there who still feel they suffered this massive tragedy but Air New Zealand doesn't acknowledge that in any shape or form. It's not about money – it's about, okay, here's what really happened, and someone taking accountability for it. It's something they own forever – we own it, they own it too."

He appreciates the airline's gesture in helping some family members travel to Antarctica this year and says he'll definitely put his name forward. "Even my sister said to me the other day, 'It's one thing I really want to do before I die – to go down there and see it.'

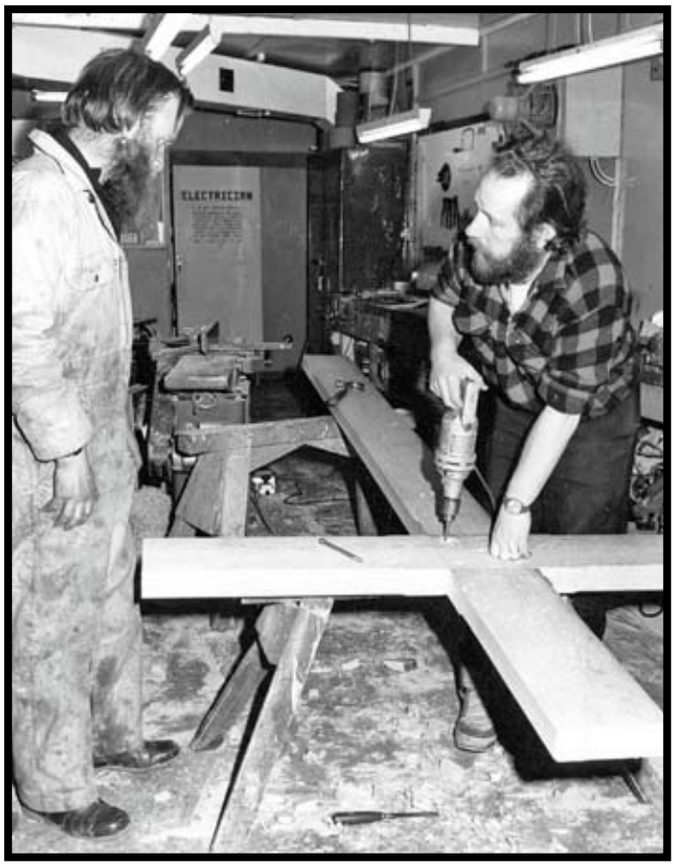
"It's part of the closure and a connection. Everyone who went on the trip – they weren't commuting to work – it was something they chose to do because they had a connection to the landscape or the adventure of it. And going there would give you the same connection and experience they might have had."

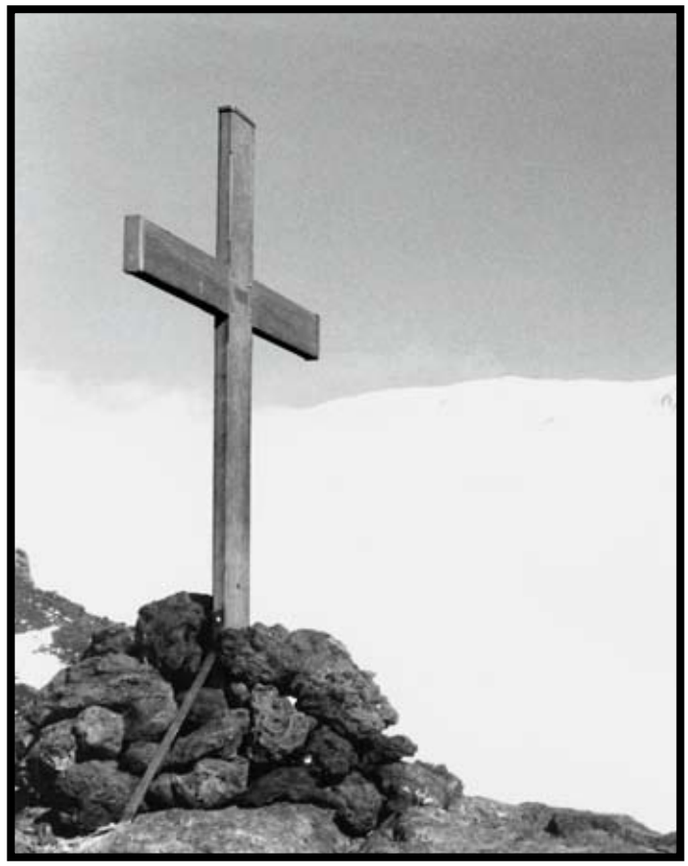
CEO Paul Dykzeul had been fascinated with Antarctica since he was a teenager, so when the idea of a family trip on board the DC10 arose he was the first to put up his hand. But struggling with three jobs and two mortgages and with a new baby in the family, Dykzeul eventually pulled out, leaving two brothers, Doug and John, and brother-in-law Stephen Hughes to go.

"The day of the flight I can remember thinking, 'Lucky bastards.' Here I was, the one who was more interested in Antarctica than any of them, and they were going to be having a terrific time. I would've loved to be on board."

That evening, he was collected from hospital where he was about to have a knee operation, to join a family vigil as they waited for news of the plane.

As well as the crash leaving the extended family with three widows and six children without a father, it left Dykzeul with inevitable feelings of guilt that he'd somehow escaped death. "There are times in your life where things happen to you and you get a



**Above: Garth Varcoe (left) and deputy leader at Scott Base Ted Robinson constructing a cross of oregon pine only 10 days after the crash. It was erected near the crash site three weeks after the disaster.**

sense of the fragility of it all and it changes your perspective on things."

While he's never sought to blame anyone, Dykzeul absolutely accepts Mahon's findings. "New Zealand was a less cynical society then and I think everyone was surprised the truth wasn't told. What I find completely inexcusable is the spin that was applied to things at the time.

"The whole process was a long and painful experience. My mother's still consumed by grief, it's still there, it'll never go away.

"My great ambition is to go down there – I desperately want to. I don't particularly want to see the crash site but I'd love to see Erebus and go on to the mountain. It's sort of like unfinished business.

"It profoundly changed all our lives forever."

**IN APRIL 1995,** 14 people were killed when a Department of Conservation viewing platform at Cave Creek on the West Coast collapsed. With echoes of Erebus, a Commission of Inquiry was ordered. Its controversial finding, that nobody was responsible and the disaster was the result of "systemic failure", angered victims' families who felt there'd been no resolution and nobody was willing to say sorry.

Ten years later, a commemoration was held at Punakaiki with one of the speakers being DoC's director-general, Hugh Logan.

Logan was well attuned to tragedy – as an Antarctic field leader he'd been the first person to land at the Erebus crash site; and he'd led DoC's own review into Cave Creek.

As he travelled down the Buller Gorge on his way to the ceremony that day, Logan asked his wife to drive while he read over the speech his staff had prepared. "And I thought, I can't give this speech, it's not good enough, it's not couched right – it's not a clear-cut, 'Sorry, we stuffed up.'"

So he stopped at DoC's Westport office, asked to borrow a computer and rewrote the speech, including a public apology from the department for the tragedy – something that had long been called for.

"I stood there and looked at all those parents and thought, no, you've got to say, 'Hey, it was us, we messed up.'"

His honesty was praised by the families who said if it had happened earlier, the healing process would have been much quicker.

Logan says there are strong parallels between Erebus and Cave Creek and while Air New Zealand should have apologised years ago, "It's never too late and it could still be done now. It would be welcomed and it would be a wise thing to do and the proper thing to do.

"It's important to find a mechanism of closure – and that's never been found for Erebus."

Nigel Roberts, who flew to the Erebus crash site with Logan the day after the disaster, appreciates how much some form of apology from Air New Zealand would mean for victims' families.

And the political-science professor points to precedents, such as Helen Clark's statements to the Chinese community, Vietnam War veterans and Samoa, and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology to Aborigines. "It's somebody who wasn't directly responsible recognising they're the successors and inheritors."

Roberts says the crash's cause was clearly the combination of many factors and that the country had moved beyond seeking to blame. "But can you imagine the impact if Rob Fyfe came out and said, 'Look, we're very sorry for the mistakes we made as an organisation.' And if he said that on the 28th of November the country would be stunned but very appreciative."

NIGEL S. ROBERTS

BRYN CAMPBELL / GETTY

SUE FLOOD / GETTY

**Heartbreak and beauty: An aerial view of McMurdo Sound (top) and Mt Erebus (above).**

In June this year, the pilots' union, the Air Line Pilots Association, launched the first website about the Erebus crash (www.erebus.co.nz). Association president Mark Rammell said the site was intended to be factual and objective, leaving people to draw their own conclusions as to the crash's cause.

"We live in a different world now, it's not about blame and shame – it's about helping people to close the doors. Every family I've met still has issues about Erebus."

An Air New Zealand pilot for 22 years, Rammell says lessons learnt from Erebus have saved thousands of lives.

"It's like all aviation accidents, it's like a Swiss cheese and all the holes lining up. You block any one of them and you won't have an accident. And some days they all line up and that's where you lose life."

**BEYOND THE ARGUMENT,** beyond the ugly recrimination and accusation Erebus has spawned, lie desperately sad personal realities. There's poignancy in every victim's story, longing in each family member's recollections.

Like Philippa Lewis who lost brother Jon Broad and the bright young niece named after her who'd been given the flight as a 21st birthday present. ("She was a very clever girl, a lovely girl, very gentle, very unassuming. There's a lot of angst still. It affects us to this day.")

Or Janine Marsden-Brown, whose parents died on Erebus, after months of saving for their trip of a lifetime. Sixteen at the time, Marsden-Brown went to live with friends of her parents. ("My brother was working and would come over and give me $10 a week because I didn't have a mum or dad to do that for me.")

Or Dave Bresnahan, the head of McMurdo Station at the time, whose voice still breaks as he remembers hearing there were no survivors. ("Walking across from the command centre and it's 2.30 in the morning and there were people hanging out their windows and doors. And nobody said anything as I walked by. Everybody knew.")

**The Erebus memorial cross above Lewis Bay. The wooden cross shown being erected on the cover of this magazine was replaced, after damage by wind, in 1987 with a cross of stainless steel, on a rocky promontory overlooking the crash site.**

LOU SANSON / ANTARCTICA NZ PICTORIAL COLLECTION

At best there's an acceptance of events, but you wouldn't call it solace.

Just regrets, sadness and favourite photos.

It's hard to find peace when remembering Erebus and perhaps only the few who've been there can offer any comfort.

Peter Beck, the Anglican Dean of Christchurch who'll again travel to Antarctica for November's commemorations, has dealt with people's grief for years and can understand why Erebus is so visceral for so many, even now.

When asked to take the 25th anniversary service at Erebus, Beck was humbled by the huge emotional outpouring from victims' relatives and friends. "All I could do was take their prayers and their continuing sense of grief at what happened which, because of the controversy that followed, was even sharper."

As he flew over the crash site, wreckage revealed by melting snow, he was struck by both the overwhelming heartbreak and enormous beauty of Erebus.

"You stand by the cross and there's such a profound silence it's almost deafening.

"Those who are there, their memory is held safely. Whatever faith you have, it stands for this deep tragedy, a deep sadness, but also a deep peacefulness." +