

Erebus, 30 years later

By MICHELLE COOKE - East And Bays Courier Last updated 05:00 27/11/2009

Photo: AMELIA JACOBSEN

A CHANCE TO SAY GOODBYE: Philippa Collins hopes a trip to the site where her father died will bring some peace after 30 years.

Philippa Collins has been waiting 30 years for this day.

The Parnell resident was just nine years old when her father Jim Collins and 256 others lost their lives when their plane crashed into Mt Erebus, Antarctica, on November 28, 1979.

Her mother and three sisters not only had to deal with their grief but also the blame, which was originally placed on their pilot father.

Today Ms Collins will visit Mt Erebus with five other representatives of passengers and crew members who also died.

She hopes the three-day trip will bring some peace but regrets that not everyone affected has the chance to visit the last place their loved ones saw.

"We've all made that journey in our minds so many times over the last 30 years and trying to figure out who goes was quite hard."

It came down to practicality.

From her family, she was the most available - but it wasn't an easy decision to reach.

"It's always been something I've wanted to do and in a way I feel like everything I've done in the last 30 years has been building up to this."

She's spoken to Greg Gilpin, a policeman on the 1979 recovery team about what she can expect.

"He's talked about what an amazing place it is and what an experience I'll have. It comes back to being an individual experience so it's hard to know what it will be like but I do have a really strong desire to be there.

"The whole thing has so many dimensions to it and all these different layers which make it really exciting and really quite daunting."

The 30th anniversary marks the first time Air New Zealand has offered this experience and Ms Collins considers herself lucky.

"The tragedy happened and it was 30 years ago but it might provide an opportunity to be more at peace with it.

"It's fantastic it's finally being done and a shame it's taken so long. But it's a good start."

She hopes the airline will offer other people the same opportunity in the future, "because it's something people should have the chance to do if they need it".

On that fatal day, 30 years ago tomorrow, Mr Collins piloted the Air NZ TE901 scenic flight to Antarctica.

He was originally blamed for the crash but a royal commission inquiry led by Justice Peter Mahon placed the blame on the airline and its systems instead.

Justice Mahon accused Air NZ of an "orchestrated litany of lies" and attributed the accident to a change of flight co-ordinates that the crew were not informed of.

Ms Collins says her two elder sisters and mother Maria were much more embroiled in the controversy than her and her younger sister, who was six at the time.

"We weren't really aware of the importance of it because the main thing from our point of view was we had our routine and went to school. Sometimes after school our grandma would meet us because mum was at the inquiry.

"It was just something there that was happening. As an adult I really learnt about what occurred but as I got older I also realised what I missed out on as well.

"There was an amazing person out there and it's a real shame I didn't get to know him.

"I knew him as a nine-year-old knows their dad but as a person I didn't have that opportunity."

As the only man in a family of six, Mr Collins would even complain that the cat was female, she says.

Her mother still lives in the Kohimarama home she shared with her late husband and her daughters live nearby, in Kohimarama and Parnell.

"He tucked us in at night, read us stories - he really loved the family life," Ms Collins remembers.

"He had a great sense of humour and I remember I tried really hard to remember the jokes at school so I could tell him."

Air NZ chief executive Rob Fyfe recently apologised to families about the little support they received during the aftermath of the crash, but the Collins' family wants the airline to formally apologise for attributing the crash to pilot error.

"His words were really heartfelt but the fact remains neither Air NZ nor the government have acknowledged the role they played in the accident."

Ms Collins says the airline changed the flight co-ordinates by 2 degrees, which when programmed into the computer led the plane straight into Mt Erebus.

"It's not the same Air NZ it was 30 years ago," but until it has acknowledged its part in the crash, there is "unfinished business" remaining, she says.

"It's drawing a line in the sand and saying: 'Okay, this is what happened and now we can move on'."