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# Mystery over Erebus diary

Published: 6:05PM Sunday October 25, 2009

Source: ONE News



Source: ONE NewsPlane wreckage on Mt Erebus

What happened to a vital piece of evidence in the Mt Erebus crash?

A Sunday investigation reveals that a police officer found a diary belonging to the pilot of the plane in the wreckage, but years later the pages have mysteriously disappeared.

Thirty years after the tragedy, [Air New Zealand has apologised](#) for the first time to the families of those killed and among the crowd who gathered to witness the historic apology were two police officers who have spoken about how their lives have become intertwined with the disaster.

"I'm not afraid to speak out," says Inspector Greg Gilpin of Wellington who, along with Inspector Stuart Leighton, was sent to the polar ice cap to help recover the 257 bodies from the debris of flight 901.

"This is the one issue that has really plagued me over the years," says Gilpin who was confronted with "total and utter human destruction" at the site of the crash.

Gilpin says most of the remains had to be picked out of the ice where they were frozen and personnel had to fight off birds trying to attack the bodies.

Leighton was a rookie cop and just 22 at the time of the tragedy and dug 96 people out of the ice.

"I was taken to the limits of my endurance during that operation," Leighton says. "I couldn't physically or mentally do any more than what I did."

But it's a diary he discovered near the cockpit, with the pilot's name embossed on the front, that still troubles him.

"There is absolutely no doubt in my mind whatsoever on what I saw and what we did with it," says Leighton. He says he noticed a black book in the snow which he identified as belonging to Captain Collins because it had his name and his address embossed on it.

The officer says the front pages were full of the kind of facts and figures such as radio frequencies that Captain Jim Collins could have made while he was flying the aircraft.

Leighton believes a document that clearly belonged to the captain of the aircraft is an "extremely important" piece of evidence and he took the notebook to the senior police officer at the site - Sergeant Gilpin.

Gilpin agrees the notebook contained a wad of papers with clearly legible facts and figures and he says he has "kicked himself for years" that he didn't hold on to it. He says he knows how vital the information was.

Neither of the officers knew the vital pages had gone missing and two inquiries into the tragedy did not get the opportunity to discuss the contents. The officers who found them were not called to give evidence and the first the two officers knew of the state of the ringbinder was when Gilpin saw video footage in a television documentary.

"If it was handed in empty then it was most certainly handed in to the inquiry in a condition different to what it was found," says Leighton.

Gilpin says the fact that pages had been removed concerned him so much he informed Justice Mahon, who headed the royal commission of inquiry. Mahon accepted the officers' account but by then the inquiry was over, a fact which upsets Leighton who says investigators had no reason to call them to give evidence.

He says if they had been able to give evidence it may have helped people draw different conclusions.

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