

Air NZ apologises

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Nearly 30 years after an Air New Zealand jet slammed into Mt Erebus in Antarctica, killing all 257 on board, the airline has apologised to families of the dead this morning.

The Air New Zealand DC-10 was on a sightseeing flight when it hit the mountain November 28, 1979.

The airline said today's apology was to take care of some of the "many of the gaps and failings that occurred in the days, months and years after November 28, 1979".

Airline chief executive Rob Fyfe apologised to the families of the 257 victims, at a service to launch a sculpture - called Momentum - commemorating the disaster.

Hundreds gathered at Air New Zealand headquarters in Auckland today to hear the apology.

Mr Fyfe told the gathering the airline made mistakes and apologised to families who did not get enough support after the crash.

"Sorry to everyone affected who did not receive the compassion and support they should have from Air New Zealand," he said.

Prime Minister John Key also spoke about the "terrible waste of human life".

"We cannot bring them back, but we can honour and remember these brave people," he said.

Kathryn Carter, whose father Captain Jim Collins piloted the doomed plane, said Air New Zealand handled the situation very badly after the crash.

"It has been a hard 30 years for us. It was a culture of blame back then," she said.

"The crew were blamed for the accident, which wouldn't happen today.

"The sculpture represents forward thinking and moving on in a positive way."

CHANCE TO REFLECT

Mr Fyfe said the sculpture was designed as "a focal point to enable anyone here at Air New Zealand to reflect on the events that have shaped our airline, our character and our sense of identity."

"For many, flight still has that element of magic, a sense of awe, that promise of reaching out to explore new worlds and a sense of adventure. And so it was for the crew and passengers of flight TE901, that set off to fly over the amazing Antarctic wonderland almost 30 years ago."

He said one of the hardest he had had to do in his time at Air New Zealand was listen to Maria Collins, the wife of captain Jim Collins, and Anne Cassin, wife of co-pilot Greg Cassin, describe their experiences in days, months and years after flight TE901.

He said the pilots were chosen at the time because they were two of Air New Zealand's best pilots.

"Captain Collins and first officer Cassin along with three other members of the flight crew... were highly regarded aviators, they deserve our respect and they certainly have mine."

He said that the unveiling of the sculpture meant people would associate it primarily with Erebus and Perpignan, "and so it should be".

"We are exposed to risk every day of our lives and aviation is no exception. Despite the enormous efforts taken to minimise the risk associated with flying we cannot eliminate risk completely and occasionally, very occasionally, accidents occur."

"In commercial airlines it's virtually unheard of for accidents to happen because one individual makes a mistake or an error," he said.

"There are so many checks, so many processes, so much supervision and so much redundancy designed into our systems that it takes many errors and failure to defeat all the protections that exist."

"This was true 30 years ago and even more so today."

SUPPORT ABOVE BLAME

He said he had spent much time with the families of those who had lost their lives in Perpignan.

"In the hours immediately following the tragedy in France it was apparent to my team and I that whatever caused the accident had already been determined, nothing we could do could change that. But where we could make a difference was in how we supported those who had suffered the unimaginable loss of a dad, a partner, a husband, an uncle, a brother a son, a colleague or a best friend in very tragic circumstances."

"We could also do everything in our power to learn from the accident and ensure that all those who fly in future can fly more safely as a result of the improvements that are made once we discover the mysteries of what caused the accident.

"Yet if we turn the clock back 30 years and reflect on the events following the Erebus tragedy, sadly the historical record displays what appears to be a different priority. The pursuit of someone or something to blame.

"Ultimately hundreds of families lost loved ones in this tragedy and all suffered an equal loss," he said.

"A number of these families feel they were let down by Air New Zealand in the aftermath of the tragedy... The enormity of the tragedy was overwhelming for Air New Zealand and in fact the nation."

He said they did not have the same resources 30 years ago to support the families.

"As a result, Air New Zealand inevitable made mistakes and undoubtedly let down people directly affected by the tragedy. I can't turn the clock back, I can't undo what has been done but as I look forward, I would like to start the next step in our journey by saying sorry."

"Sorry to all of those who suffered the loss of a loved one, or were affected by the Erebus tragedy and did not receive the support and compassion they should have from Air New Zealand.

"I hope that the events following the loss of our men in the A320 accident off the coast of France has shown that we have learned from the past."

JOHN KEY: EXCEPTIONAL NEW ZEALANDERS

Prime Minister John Key said: "Both tragedies brought shock, disbelief and mourning to our country... we all knew someone who knew someone who had been on board."

"The Air New Zealand crew who perished on Mt Erebus had been especially chosen. The passengers who travelled with them were also exceptional. They displayed the kind of curiosity, boldness and bravery that sets New Zealanders apart from the rest of the world."

He said he was proud of the way Air New Zealand had responded to the Perpignan tragedy, including getting family members to France while authorities searched for their loved ones.

"I know that a lot of the families who lost loved ones at Erebus did not feel as well cared for in the wake of that tragedy 30 years ago. I would expect them to be treated much more sensitively and compassionately today. So it is with great poignancy that I note how far we have come."

"Today's ceremony provides an opportunity to honour those people who died in these two accidents. I hope that this quivering sculpture that signifies the fragility and beauty of air travel, will go some way to assuage the grief anger and sadness at the terrible waste of human potential."

He said the sculpture signified the strength of those who had died and the honouring them.
"We cannot bring them back but we can honour and remember these brave and true people and we can learn from our past."

- with NZPA

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