

ASHES TO DUST– A STORY OF CLOSURE

By, Sandy Tigner

My earliest although sparse memory of words spoken by my father in his lifetime were that “Tigners do not make old bones.” Whomever passed on those foreboding thoughts to him, or perhaps they were of his own making, proved to have an uncanny premonition of grotesque proportions. Not too many fall from the skies in the prime of their lives in an aircraft that plummets to the earth within 50 seconds after takeoff. South African Airways Flight 228 impacted the ground with such mighty force that deep gouges were made in the earth below and fiery explosions scorched the land, strewn incinerated, broken bodies and aircraft wreckage for miles. My dad, Robert Tigner, was one of 123 passengers and crew that died on this night. Miraculously, 5 passengers survived this massacre.

The night of April 20th, 1968 at J G Strijdom Airport in Windhoek, Namibia became known as the night of “the black hole.” As SAA 228 lifted off from the runway, it was a dark, moonless night without significant lights on the ground. The Boeing 707C aircraft, only 6 weeks old, climbed to an altitude of 650ft and then began descending. Investigations confirmed pilot error failing to maintain a safe airspeed and altitude and a positive climb complicated by no visual reference leading to probable spatial disorientation. Without there being a flight data recorder or cockpit voice recorder, definitive conclusions remain unanswered and will for posterity remain in that ‘black hole’ almost 50 years ago.

I was six years old when I learned that my dad was never coming home to our family. My handsome, generous, smart, ambitious and kind dad was lost in oblivion. In the mind of a six-year-old, his absence was initially greeted by the fantasy of the Red Cross wheeling him back through the door reuniting us in a tight hug and ending the nightmare. Alas, that day would never come. Instead, my home became a place of never-ending visitors who continually reached for tissues placed on every available table top and whose words were gentle and sorrowful as everyone cried and consoled.

Life changed forever as we slowly moved forward. Some of us mourned fully, some of us were too young to begin to know how to, but our family was altered in a deep and profound way that molded our outlook on life. It made us deeply grateful for the small things that others took for granted and heightened our sensitivity to others' pain and plight.

Time has taught me that the sudden and gruesome death of a parent at such a vulnerable age left me with much fear and distrust in life events. It has taken 55 years to finally process this loss and the effects of this early assault on my psyche. We as human beings are taught to be strong, to carry on regardless, to roll with the punches. We grow up, we live, love, work, and navigate the emotional roller-coaster of life to the best of our abilities. We win, lose, and soul search, but some of us never find a way to fill a certain emptiness within, to rid ourselves of a shadow that lurks within the deepest part of our soul. I have come to realize that part of the emptiness I have felt within was the inability to have faced and process my father's death and, quite simply, say goodbye. This realization led to a serious investigation into my father's crash two years ago and with the help of Mark Young, a photographer, investigative journalist, and aviation safety author, my questions were answered. I decided to make the journey a few weeks ago to Windhoek and with the help of the Namibian Directorate of Aviation Accident and Safety, we traveled to the exact area where SAA 228 fell.

It was a sunny winter's day as I walked through the typical dry landscape dotted with acacia trees, dry grasses, and reddish sand. Internally, I felt a rush of anxiety as I tried to sense where my father's body might have lain. I realized in that moment of pure, naked truth the subconscious contract I had made as a six-year-old girl, 49 years ago, to find the spirit of her father and say a goodbye in the only place on this earth that made sense. His grave site in Johannesburg had never provided much comfort and to this day has not. My not physically being with my dad as he lay dying or dead on foreign soil haunted me with a lifelong guilt. On this present day, I greeted his spirit saying what I needed to say and felt an overpowering energy of his presence, of being heard, and the liberation of an enormous sense of closure.

My tears fell not only for him, but for all whose ashes melded with the dusty sand on the ground below my feet. I cried for all the victims of this senseless and tragic mistake that left infinite holes in the hearts and lives of those left behind. We do not forget, we do not stop asking why, but there comes a time in our lives when we are ready to face loss sooner, or in my case later, and find soul-saving closure. Following our inner compass requires courage, but this leads to a peace that infuses darkness with light, lifting a burden that liberates our psyche.

I realize the privilege and blessing of our family being able to bury the remains of my father and to have finally found this known place of his crash site. I think of those whose loved ones remain unfound, whose burning questions live on unsolved. It hurts, it tortures our souls whilst the world forgets their need for closure. My wishes go out to all whose loved ones are lost and for their questions to be answered.

May the power of intention, will, justice and action lead to their closure and inner peace.

May the Gods bless all those who lost their lives on flight SAA 228, and all victims of aircraft disasters throughout time.

MAY THEIR SOULS REST IN EVERLASTING PEACE.