

# Decade Later, Pain Lingers For Air Florida Survivors

*Crash Nightmare Is 'Too Real to Ever Forget'*

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By Steve Bates  
Washington Post Staff Writer

A vibrating elevator can unnerve Bert Hamilton. Patricia Felch drives back roads to avoid the speed of superhighways. Joseph Stiley breaks into tears spontaneously. Kelly Moore became a devout Christian. Priscilla Tirado works with homeless animals to cushion the loss of her husband and infant son.

For the five survivors of Air Florida's crash into the 14th Street bridge and plunge into the icy Potomac River 10 years ago, the healing of shattered bodies is nearly done. But the emotional devastation of the Jan. 13, 1982, disaster continues to surface, and in some cases continues to grow, as the survivors struggle to get on with their lives.

The crash occurred in a blinding

snowstorm, just 30 minutes before the only fatal subway crash in Metro's history, on a day that permanently shaped the concept of disaster for Washingtonians. Virtually everyone who was in the area that day recalls where they were when they heard the news.

Motorists stuck in traffic on the bridge and millions of others watching network newscasts looked on, horrified, as the few who survived the 737's initial plunge into the river struggled amid wreckage and ice for an agonizingly long half-hour. Two men became instant heroes for their efforts to help the desperate men and women in the water.

For the survivors, life was forever changed. Most say they likely will never fully recover, though some have coped better than others.

"There are so many things that

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# For Air Florida Survivors, Life G

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trigger emotional reactions years later," said survivor Patricia "Nikki" Felch, 38, of Fairfax County. "Emotions that you withheld come out years later, when you least expect it."

"Everything that was normal before ... will never be normal again," said Hamilton, 51, of Melbourne Beach, Fla. Nevertheless, Hamilton said, "You can't let fear overtake you."

The survivors received substantial, undisclosed settlements, as did the families of the 74 who perished on the plane and the four motorists who died. But those who were rescued say no amount of money can compensate them for the experience.

"I have relived that 34 minutes in the water many times," said Stiley, 52, a telecommunications consultant who now lives in Spokane, Wash. "There is a distinct emotional effect that is permanent, and that I'm not professionally prepared to describe."

"It's too real to ever forget," agreed Kelly Moore, who was then Kelly Duncan and was working as an Air Florida flight attendant. At first, "I felt guilty for surviving," said Moore, who lives in Miami. "I don't anymore."

The fifth survivor, Tirado, 32, was screaming "my baby, my baby" while thrashing in the icy Potomac, recalled Felch, who was by her side. Tirado's husband and child had died on impact. "She lost the most," Moore said.

Tirado declined to be interviewed for this article, but her father, Beirne Keefer, said she "still has problems" dealing with the crash. "After 10 years, we're beginning to wonder if this will ever work itself out," said Keefer, of Clearwater, Fla.



Crash survivor Patricia "Nikki" Felch, 38, of Fairfax, below, stands at Gravelly Point near where Air Florida Flight 90 went down on Jan. 13, 1982. Above, in a 1982 photo, U.S. Park Police rescue Felch from the frigid Potomac.





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Yet each of the five has found at least a scrap of salvation amid the emotional wreckage.

While living in Florida, Felch was drawn to a program for children who have the AIDS virus. She became a "volunteer hugger . . . It made me feel like I was giving something."

Hamilton gives inspirational speeches to service clubs and other organizations throughout the country based on his crash experience, emphasizing how a brush with death can force a person to reexamine priorities in life.

Moore said she overcame a long-term feeling of guilt for having survived while others died. She met her future husband, John, a tennis pro, at a Miami church and is now raising three children.

During his long convalescence, Stiley reexamined his life goals and forged much closer bonds with his parents, who for a year and a half nursed him at their home in Idaho.

And Tirado, whom her father described as "a very private person," has found emotional release by working on a novel based on a plane crash and by volunteering at a local animal shelter.

The National Transportation Safety Board ruled that the relatively inexperienced pilots made

critical mistakes before and during their 4 p.m. takeoff from National Airport: They underestimated the danger of ice on the plane's wings. They set throttle power too low because they had failed to turn on an engine-warming device. And they did not abort the takeoff despite signs of trouble, the safety board said.

The Metrorail accident near Federal Triangle shortly after the crash

killed three people and was attributed to safety procedure violations by the train's operator, a supervisor and control room workers.

Flight 90 was nearly two hours late when it lifted off National Airport's slushy main runway. The plane vibrated violently as it failed to gain much speed or altitude.

Cockpit tapes recovered later produced these chilling words from copilot Roger Alan Pettit as the air-



BY LARRY MORRIS—THE WASHINGTON POST





U.S. PARK POLICE PHOTO BY CHARLES PEREIRA

craft stalled: "We're going down, Larry." Replied pilot Larry Wheaton: "I know it."

As passengers screamed, the rear of the aircraft struck a guard-rail and several cars on the bridge. With a sickening sound that witnesses likened to a pane of glass shattering, the burning aircraft hit the river, broke apart and began to sink. A few people who had been seated near the rear of the plane clung to debris, screaming for help.

A sixth person, possibly Atlanta bank examiner Arland Williams, also was seen in the water, but later disappeared from view.

Roger Olian and Lenny Skutnik, who were watching from the Virginia shore, braved death by hypothermia to try to save lives.

Olian couldn't quite reach the floundering survivors, but when Tirado fell limply from a U.S. Park Police helicopter lifeline and went underwater, Skutnik, of Lorton, swam to her rescue. "The adrenaline was flowing," he recalled. "I just couldn't hold back anymore."

Skutnik, who still lives in Lorton and has the same job—Congressional Budget Office messenger—said he has not changed as a result of the burst of attention and honors a decade ago. "I wasn't looking for publicity," he said in a recent interview.

Olian, of Arlington, whose rescue attempts gave survivors hope before the helicopter arrived, said he "got a lot of satisfaction just to do it."

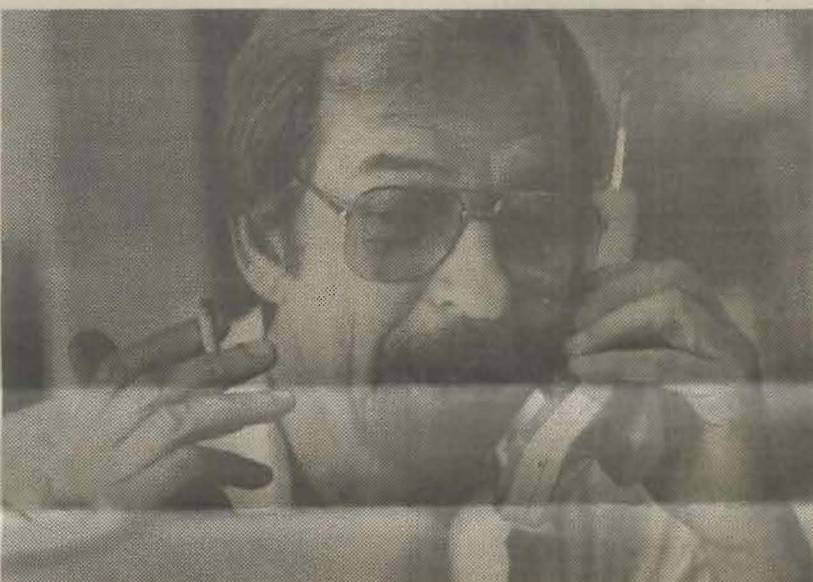
The anniversary always brings an extra emotional wrench to their lives, survivors said. On the fifth anniversary of the crash, Tirado was charged with driving under the influence of alcohol and possession of drugs. "This is always a bad day. I can't help it," Tirado was quoted as saying at the time. All charges were later dismissed.

The only major change at National since the accident is the construction of an overrun area at the north end of the main runway, which has been credited with saving lives in recent years. Area governments have improved rescue coordination. Air Florida is gone.



BY CRAIG RUBADOUX FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Bert Hamilton, of Florida, said he reexamined his life after his brush with death.



BY BLAIR E. KOOISTRA FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Joseph Stiley, 52, said he has "relived that 34 minutes in the water many times."

In spite of their painful memories, most of the survivors still fly. Hamilton, who started an Amway business four years ago, recalls the first jet he boarded after the accident. "It was the same seat assignment as the day of the crash." He changed seats quickly, but still took the flight. "You've got to go out and do it," he said.

Felch, who recently moved back to the area after divorcing a man she married less than a year after the crash, is job hunting.

Immediately after the crash, she said, "no one wanted to hire me back" because of concerns that she was physically and emotionally impaired. Nevertheless, "Life has so much more meaning now."

Tirado "is doing very well" under the circumstances, her father said. "She tends to keep to herself."

Stiley said he isn't bitter about the crash. Yet "the sadness" occasionally wells up in him, and he breaks down in sobs, which he did twice during a recent interview. The crash "was so avoidable," he said.

Moore, who returned to her flight attendant job six months after the crash, left it 18 months later. Her most vivid memories of the crash and aftermath are of panic, and then of praying for the first time in her life.

"I remember thinking to myself at the time: I wonder what I'll be doing 10 years from now," she said. "I really feel that my life has been blessed."

Staff researcher Bridget Roeber contributed to this report.

