

Senior Article

On 28th November 1979, Air New Zealand flight 901 crashed into Mt Erebus on Ross Island in Antarctica killing all 257 people on board. Captain Jim Collins and First Officer Gregory Cassin were in charge on the plane. This is the worst aviation disaster in New Zealand's history. Antarctica is an amazing place with so many magical things to see; snow covered islands and mountains, ice, penguins and so much more. People have always wanted to see this mysterious place but it wasn't possible for anyone except adventurous explorers until Air New Zealand began taking people for scenic flights in 1977. People that could afford it could pay \$245 and fly over Antarctica for the day. This is about the same as \$1,200 in today's money.

The scenic flights took off from Auckland then flew over many scenic points around Antarctica including the Auckland Islands, Balleny Islands near the Antarctic coast, the coast of Victoria Land as far as McMurdo Sound, McMurdo Station and Scott Base on Ross Island and Campbell Island. The DC 10 would then return to Christchurch after covering over 8,600 km and flying for 11 hours.

At 12.49pm, only half way through their adventure, all 257 people onboard the Air New Zealand DC10 were killed after crashing into the slopes of Mt Erebus. Back home in New Zealand nobody knew that this disaster had occurred until later that evening when the first reports started coming in relaying that a sightseeing plane was missing in Antarctica. The wreckage of the plane wasn't found until midnight and New Zealanders read of the terrible loss of life in the newspapers on the morning of 29th November 1979.

The New Zealand public and especially the families of those who died wanted to know why the disaster had happened. Ron Chippindale wrote a report blaming "pilot error" as the cause of the disaster. This was debated in great length and many people, especially the families, colleagues and friends of the crew were outraged at the finding. In April of 1981 Justice Peter Mahon's report was released to the public and it cleared the crew of blame. Mahon's report argued that the main causes of the crash were changes made to the plane's navigation computer coordinates and the whiteout conditions which made it impossible for the crew to see the mountain. He also reported that there were many errors within the administration of Air New Zealand that contributed to the crash.

Air New Zealand flight TE901 that ended so devastatingly on the slopes of Mt Erebus changed aviation in New Zealand and around the world for ever. Crash investigations now include research into "systemic failure" which looks into all the administrative and managerial factors

that may have contributed to the crash. The training of pilots in New Zealand has also changed to include more study into the various human factors that can cause crashes.

257 people from New Zealand, Japan, America, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Canada, Australia and France were lost on that terrible day in the Antarctic. Thousands of people were directly affected by losing someone close to them and our nation was permanently changed by such a horrific loss of life. Many memorials have been built around New Zealand and there is also a memorial site on the lower slopes of Mt Erebus. Ceremonies are often held at these places on the anniversary of the tragedy and people take the opportunity to pay their respects to those who lost their lives in such a terribly sad and tragic way.