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## Newsmaker: Coroner's quiet unflappability helps him take charge of Somerset tragedy

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By Tom Gibb, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

SOMERSET -- As a youngster three decades ago, Wallace Miller was rattled by the very prospect of public speaking.

As an adult, his speechmaking resume began and ended with talks to high school driver education classes. His job as coroner of easygoing, rural Somerset County did not require much of a speaking part.

But 34 days ago, a bewildered Miller walked from the shelter of anonymity and collided with a score of reporters and photographers. They were pressing for information -- sometimes any iota would do -- about the crash of United Flight 93.

Miller, stick-thin, 6-foot-4, with spectacles and swept-back hair, had never seen anything like it.

"When I stepped into that line that day -- and some of the media were there five deep and it seemed they all had tape recorders -- it was the most terrifying part of the whole thing," he said.

Miller, 44, the first-term as coroner in this county of 79,000, was in the middle of a tragedy with the world peering over his shoulder. All 44 people on Flight 93 were dead.

He had never been in charge of a case with more than two dead.

In the hour before the Sept. 11 Somerset crash, the coroner's staff in neighboring Cambria County had phoned, alerting Miller to the terrorism in New York City and Washington, D.C. He watched on television as the second of two jets slammed into the World Trade Center.



**Somerset County Coroner Wallace Miller and his wife, Arlene O'Toole, filling in as an unpaid deputy, work in an office crowded with files and paperwork related to the Sept. 11 crash of United Flight 93. (Steve Mellon/Post-Gazette)**

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"He said what a tragedy it was," Miller's wife, Arlene O'Toole, recounted, "And he said, 'I'm glad I'm not coroner there.'"

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## NEWSMAKER

### Wallace Miller

■ **Date of birth: May 7, 1957**

■ **Place of birth: Somerset**

■ **In the news: Miller, Somerset County's coroner, was forced into the spotlight Sept. 11 when United Airlines Flight 93 crashed in his jurisdiction. He oversaw recovery of remains and identification of the 44 people aboard.**

■ **Quote: "When you have to do something, what's the other option? Not doing it is not an option."**

■ **Education: Graduated from Somerset Area High School, 1974; bachelor's degree in political science from Washington & Jefferson College, 1979; certification from the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, 1980.**

■ **Family: Wife Arlene O'Toole and stepdaughter Tricia, a high school student in West Mifflin.**

He could not have known that another jet hijacked by terrorists would crash in Somerset County.

Now, a month of 18-hour days later, the crash site has been about as cleared of fragmentary remains as Miller figures humankind can get it. The high science of DNA is pairing remains with the dead. Death certificates have been mailed out for all but the four hijackers. Miller continues to escort victims' relatives who trickle into Somerset County to gaze on the crash scene.

He has acted as a caretaker for the site, ground that he wants to see consecrated as a memorial. He has won good marks from counterparts and victims' families. And he's carried on with what friends say is Miller's trademark quiet unflappability.

"I've never seen him rattled," said James Kight, owner of the Robert Halverson Funeral Home, "and I've known him for 25 years."

But Miller is worn out.

"He's tired, very tired," said O'Toole, usually an environmental health and safety consultant with PPG Industries Inc. in Allison Park, but filling in as an unpaid deputy and spirit booster to the coroner.

Miller never figured there was much chance that cataclysm came with the Somerset County job, and he knew the job pretty well.

His father, funeral director Wilbur Miller, an occasionally gruff, usually affable soul, was elected coroner for six terms, 24 years. Wallace Miller was his deputy for the last

17.

Wallace Miller went off to Washington & Jefferson College and got a bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1979. But even then he figured he would return to the family funeral business in Somerset.

"He said he only wanted to be either a veterinarian or a funeral director,

"O'Toole said. "And he loves this town."

For his part, Miller saw few career options.

"The only other thing I think I might have been suited to be was a professor of, who knows, philosophy, I guess," he said.

He received his certification from the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science the year after he graduated from college. Then it was back to Somerset to join his dad in the funeral home trade.

O'Toole concedes that, before they married three years ago, she was squeamish at the prospect of routinely being around the dead. For Miller, it was a way of life. He grew up mowing the funeral home lawn and setting up chairs for services.

"I knew if I came home from a basketball game and saw the light on in the embalming room, I could go down and talk to my dad," he said.

He was drawn by the lure of having his own business and, when demand was thin, setting his own hours. There is enough flexibility that Miller coaches Somerset Junior High School boys basketball and works as assistant coach for the high school boys and girls track teams.

In 1994, he bought the Somerset funeral home from his father and added another nine miles away in Rockwood. In 1997, he was elected successor when his father, now 74, retired as coroner.

He makes \$35,854 a year as coroner, a wage that his wife says equates to "something like 40 cents an hour."

After the crash he swore in a cadre of deputies -- helpers such as hospital workers and fellow funeral directors -- but Miller chose largely to go it alone.

Even in the middle of it all, where trees were scorched and the Boeing 757's fuselage disintegrated in a crater that collapsed on itself to leave a gouge maybe 14 feet across, the destruction was so complete that it was hard to imagine what happened.

"It was as if the plane had stopped and let the passengers off before it crashed," Miller said.

The FBI took control of the crash scene. Miller had charge of a provisional morgue six miles away. Across the county, at Seven Springs Mountain Resort, he would meet with families of most of the victims.

When they returned home and phoned back with all manner of questions, Miller said, he tried to make sure they got directly to him. "That's one of my trademarks. When you call Miller Funeral Home, you get Miller."


Over time, the work has shifted from gathering remains to filing paperwork, counseling survivors, identifying remains and repairing the



site.

When he was outgrowing his home quarters, the county gave him his own office -- a 25-by-14-foot courthouse basement room complete with a desk, table, seven chairs and a view of a stone wall. There, amid handmade cards from area children -- "You have extreme courage," says one -- he carries on the job of cataloging remains.

When it all goes away, Miller said, he will not miss the clamor one smidgen.

"Until then, I'll go as long as I have to."

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