

Families say Flight 93 tapes prove heroism

From Phil Hirschhorn and David Mattingly

CNN

PRINCETON, New Jersey (CNN) --Relatives of the 40 passengers and crew members killed when a hijacked plane crashed into a rural Pennsylvania field September 11 said Thursday the cockpit voice recording offers further proof that those on board acted heroically -- fighting back against hijackers who commandeered United Airlines Flight 93 from Newark to San Francisco.

"It does indeed confirm our loved ones died as heroes," said Alice Hoglan, whose son, Mark Bingham, 31, a businessman and rugby player, was aboard the flight that crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

"It was excruciating. It was wonderful," said Hoglan, who flew in from California to hear the tape.

The FBI played the 31-minute recording in closed sessions Thursday inside a Princeton, New Jersey, hotel, first for the families of the two pilots and five flight attendants and later for the families of the 33 passengers.

None of the flight crew's families -- all of whom were represented -- commented on the experience. Only a handful of some 70 passengers' relatives did.

"The whole thing was stressful," said Derrill Bodley, a music teacher who lost his 20-year-old daughter, Deora, a college junior headed home from visiting friends.

"I am just here to honor my daughter's last moments, and to be as close to her as I could be," he said.

The families listened to the tape through headphones while transcripts, including English translations of Arabic words, were displayed on screens. The recording, which was played twice at each session, was muffled especially by the noisy rush of air, relatives said.

The Department of Justice footed the travel and hotel bill for as many as two relatives of each victim. Each family was permitted to send four people.

The government offered on-site counseling and spent time interviewing relatives to assess victim impact.

U.S. Attorney Paul McNulty and Assistant U.S. Attorney David Novak, prosecutors from the Eastern District of Virginia, were also on hand. They exhorted families not to describe the tapes' contents because they will be played as evidence in the terrorism conspiracy trial of Zacarias Moussaoui, a 33-year-old Frenchman who prosecutors believe may have been the intended fifth hijacker aboard Flight 93.

Moussaoui, who underwent pilot training in the United States and allegedly trained in al Qaeda camps inside Afghanistan, was incarcerated in Minnesota on immigration charges a month before the attacks.

Flight 93 was the fourth commercial jetliner hijacked by Islamic militants affiliated with al Qaeda on September 11, about half an hour after the second plane struck the second World Trade Center tower, and only minutes before a third plane struck the Pentagon.

News of the unfolding terrorist plot reached Flight 93 passengers when they were able to make outgoing cell phone calls. Numerous relatives who received calls have reported that their loved ones resolved to take control of their plane.

"These were clearly people who were informed of the unthinkable, digested it, and acted upon it in no time at all," said Hamilton Peterson, whose father, Donald, 66, a retiree, died in the crash with his second wife.

"If anything, I consider it another Normandy. I think this sends a message to the world that the American spirit is alive and kicking," Peterson said.

All commercial airliners are equipped with a cockpit voice recorder that runs in a 30-minute loop, erasing each previous half hour of conversation. The CVR's purpose is to provide investigators a record of everything pilots

say in the last half hour preceding a crash.

Access to CVRs is usually restricted to government crash investigators and parties suing over plane crashes. But the FBI agreed to make an exception in this case.

None of the relatives who discussed the tape would characterize the ultimate confrontation between the passengers and the hijackers.

Deena Burnett, who lost her husband, Tom, 38, a business executive, in the flight, said the voices of the hijackers were not calm, and that it was easy to distinguish when the Arab hijackers and the Americans were speaking.

She was listening for Tom's voice. He had called her four times from the plane, telling her the passengers were planning to do something.

"I found more peace and comfort than I expected," Burnett said.

Kenny Nacke and Paula Nacke Jacobs drove from Maryland because their older brother Lou, 42, died on the flight en route to a business meeting.

"I am proud in a very sad way. I would rather have our brother with us than he be portrayed as a hero," said Jacobs.

"I wish they were here to tell their own story," she said.

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