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## Flight 93 victims' effects to go back to families

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By Steve Levin, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

United Airlines Flight 93 slammed into the earth Sept. 11 near Shanksville, Somerset County, at more than 500 mph, with a ferocity that disintegrated metal, bone and flesh. It took more than three months to identify the remains of the 40 passengers and crew, and, by process of elimination, the four hijackers.

Those remains were gathered by the FBI and other investigators from the 50-foot-deep pit the Boeing 757 jet gouged in a reclaimed strip mine, and from the woods adjoining the crash site.

But searchers also gathered surprisingly intact mementos of lives lost.

Those items, such as a wedding ring and other jewelry, photos, credit cards, purses and their contents, shoes, a wallet and currency, are among seven boxes of identified personal effects salvaged from the site. They sit in an El Segundo, Calif., mortuary and will be returned to victims' families in February.

"We have some property for most passengers," said Craig Hendrix, a funeral coordinator and a personal effects administrator with Douglass Air Disaster Funeral Coordinators, a company often contacted by airlines after devastating crashes.

Hendrix said United Airlines' insurance underwriter hired Douglass on Sept. 12 to handle not only funeral arrangements for the victims but also the return of personal effects.

His company also is helping identify the remains and coordinating funeral services for the passengers from the three other airline crashes that day -- United Airlines Flight 175, which crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center; American Airlines Flight 11, which hit the north tower of the World Trade Center; and American Airlines Flight 77, which hijackers flew into the Pentagon.

### A ring and a badge

Since receiving the personal effects of Flight 93 passengers from the FBI in early November, Douglass has been preparing the items for return. For example, about two weeks ago, FBI agents presented the wedding



ring and wallet of passenger Andrew Garcia to his wife, Dorothy, in Portola Valley, Calif.

But before the FBI delivered the ring to Garcia, which was inscribed with "All my love, 8-2-69," Douglass sent it to a jeweler for cleaning and repair.

Around Thanksgiving, Jerry and Beatrice Guadagno of Ewing, N.J., received word that their son Richard's credentials and badge from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had been found by the FBI at the crash site.

"It was practically intact," Richard's sister, Lori, said of the credentials, which were returned in their wallet. "It just looked like it wasn't damaged or hadn't gone through much of anything at all, which is so bizarre and ironic.

"Everything takes on an extra special meaning, especially when there's so little that you have."

Hendrix and Somerset County Coroner Wallace Miller said for most of the other families, the personal effects and the remains of the crash victims will be returned at the same time in mid-February.

"We haven't wanted to bother the families with the return of property without the return of remains," Hendrix said. "The last thing we want is confusion, with them thinking, 'Is this the last thing we're going to get back or is there more?' "

The families of college student Toshiya Kuge of Tokyo and computer specialist Waleska Martinez of Jersey City, N.J., already have claimed some of their remains. Miller said Martinez's family took possession of her remains within weeks of the crash -- she was one of the first victims identified -- and Kuge's did the same before Thanksgiving.

Miller identified the last of the bodies Dec. 19. He is still doing DNA tests on additional tissue samples.

Soon after the crash, the FBI and Miller asked victims' families to fill out forms detailing physical descriptions of relatives on the flight and what jewelry, clothing and personal effects they carried.

Hendrix said the personal effects that survived the crash were ejected from the plane at the moment of impact.

Garcia received her items early because she had described them in detail to investigators. The Guadagnos surmise they received Richard's credentials early because of his status as a federal employee.

In the meantime, Douglass is refurbishing jewelry, straightening credit cards and photos with steam heat, and topically disinfecting most other items.

When the FBI releases to Douglass the "unassociated" material gathered from the crash site -- items that haven't been matched to an individual on Flight 93 -- the company will photograph each item and compile a catalog for victims' families. Members can then make claims for items they recognize.

Miller said Douglass also was helping with the disposition of unidentifiable remains from the site.

### **Picking up the costs**

Miller said Douglass had arranged for four funeral homes in Somerset County to put the victims' remains in individual caskets.

The cost of the caskets, airline shipping, flowers, limousine rides, the services of the local funeral home, burial, even the purchase of a grave site, if needed, will be paid by Douglass, through United States Aircraft Insurance Group, United Airlines' insurance underwriter, one of the largest and most successful claims organizations in the aviation insurance industry.

Hendrix declined to say what his company's fees were. USAIG officials did not return calls.

The U.S. Department of Transportation requires airlines to have disaster plans, which include how they deal with affected families.

A United Airlines spokesman said it was "common practice" for the airline's insurance underwriter to hire Douglass after a major accident.

"They handle most of the major accidents worldwide," said the spokesman, Joe Hopkins.

Douglass Air Disaster Funeral Coordinators has been at the scene of dozens of major airline crashes since the 1970s, from the 1977 Canary Islands crash that killed 582 people to the American Airlines Flight 587 crash in Queens, N.Y., on Nov. 12, which killed 265 people.

Along with other companies such as Kenyon International Emergency Services in Houston, they handle a wide range of services for airlines, from search and recovery of remains and personal effects to morgue operations and mass interments.

One reason Douglass and other companies like it are hired is that airlines hope to minimize the number of lawsuits that families of victims may file in the future.

Tom Ellis, a spokesman for the Chicago law firm Nolan Law Group, which handled lawsuits stemming from the crash of U.S. Airways Flight 427 in Hopewell on Sept. 8, 1994, said he objected to the fact that the information gleaned from victims' families by companies such as Douglass is often used by airlines to limit monetary awards that stem

from lawsuits.

For example, he said, information about a couple's marital problems has been used by airlines in court as an argument for limiting the carrier's financial liability for the surviving spouse's pain and suffering.

"When these people are making their notes and doing the tests they need to do," Ellis said, "they're doing it on behalf of the airline. And that information goes on to the liability insurance [company] for the airline. I don't know why they'd need that."


Hendrix said his company did not operate like that.

"The only thing the insurance carrier wants to know about is the cost involved [of the funerals]," he said. "But we don't get into the intimate details of how or why we're doing something."

Hendrix declined to talk about the personal effects that haven't been returned.

But Sandy Dahl, wife of Capt. Jason Dahl, hopes her husband's plain gold wedding band is among them. And, more importantly, she said, she hopes workers located the present Dahl's son made for him at age 3.

"He took a small box and colored the outside of it," she said. "He put a few rocks in it and called it a Box of Rocks. Jason took it with him every time he flew. He kept it in his flight bag."

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