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Homes, neighbors rattled by crash

By The Tribune-Review

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Betty Rhoads thought her furnace had exploded. When she "mostly felt" the blast Tuesday morning, she had no idea a Boeing 757 had crashed less than a mile from her rural Somerset County home, killing all 45 people aboard.

"I ran to the basement," said Rhoads, who lives with her husband, Charles, in a two-story white farmhouse next to an old barn on Lambertsville Road in Stonycreek Township, Somerset County.

"Nothing was wrong. I then ran up to the attic, and nothing was there. I didn't know what was going on," she said.

The windows of her home were latched shut, but the explosion blasted them open. When the elderly couple looked outside, they saw smoke billowing from the abandoned strip mine behind their house where United Airlines Flight 93 had crashed, carving a crater in the earth.

There were no survivors.

Eric Peterson, 28, an off-duty corrections officer, was an eyewitness to the crash.

"It was burning when it hit the ground," Peterson said. "When it went down, it was in one piece. It was flying low, real low.

"We couldn't see past the tree line, but we knew it crashed. I didn't think it was going to clear these places. It looked like it tumbled."

Mark Stahl of Somerset, a 32-year-old petroleum salesman, was working on his office computer when he heard the crash. He followed plumes of billowing smoke to the scene. Carrying a digital camera, Stahl arrived at the site 15 minutes after the plane fell from the sky.

He began taking photographs of the still-smoking scene. Later, he showed them to people who crowded around his car in a cornfield filled with reporters, photographers and large television trucks spouting giant satellite dishes.

"I heard the boom, followed the smoke and came up on this," Stahl said as he displayed an 8-by-10-inch photo of the crash site.

About 30 firemen were at the scene when he arrived, Stahl said. He didn't realize a passenger jet had crashed until a firefighter told him.

"It's unbelievable," he said.

Ron Delano, who lives about two miles from the crash site, also rushed to the scene after hearing about the crash.

Delano said the plane hit a wooded area near a strip mine where he frequently hunts. He was stunned by what he saw.

"If they hadn't told us a plane had wrecked, you wouldn't have known. It looked like it hit and disintegrated," Delano said.

Georgetta Guynn and her husband, Alvin, of Vanderbilt, Fayette County, had been out with relatives when they heard about the attack on the World Trade Center.

"We came home and I went into the house to watch the television. Alvin had to go fix the fence because the cattle were starting to get out," she said. "When I saw what was going on, I went outside to tell him and I said, 'No planes are allowed to fly.' And then he said, 'Well, what's that, then?'"

"We looked up and there was this big jet going overhead and it was pretty low and we could not hear the engines. It was like they were off. And then about a minute or two later, we got some binoculars and we were looking through them and there was all this smoke in the air and we knew it crashed.

"I'm scared to death right now, but I'm a Christian woman. It's scary. The passage I was reading out of the Bible this morning was about the end of time, of nation versus nation."

Rosemary Tipton, principal of Shanksville-Stonycreek Elementary School, was in her office when the building shook. From her window, she could see smoke rising from the ridge.

"Within 10 minutes," Tipton said, "a mother arrived to take her child home from school." By 1 p.m., both the elementary and neighboring high school were all but empty.

Of 220 pupils in the elementary school, only about 20 were left in class, Tipton said.

Students who asked what was wrong were told, "A plane crashed. But everyone here is OK. We're staying in the rest of the day," she said.

Gary Singel, the district superintendent, said all schools in the district are expected to be open today.

The district is one of Somerset County's smallest, with just 500 students. "We're going to be in the midst of the world's microscope for now," high school Principal Constance Hummel said.

Although school employees and faculty were shaken by the news, both local and national, they were trying to keep conditions as normal as possible for their students.

"I think the day has been very good here, as normal as possible," Hummel said.

Residents of Shanksville, about 3 miles from the crash site, also were trying to carry on with their daily lives.

"I moved out of the big city to get away from things like this," said a clerk at Ida's grocery store, who declined to be identified.

Jim Stop of Somerset was fishing at the Indian Lake marina, about three miles from the crash site, when he looked up and saw the plane overhead.

"I heard the engine whine and scream," Stop said.

He then heard an explosion and saw a fireball.

Barry Lichty, the mayor of Indian Lake Borough, said the ground shook and the town's electricity went out. He called the utility company to find out the cause.

Later, Lichty learned that a plane crash had disrupted service to the borough.

"I went to the scene, but stayed about 100 yards away. I don't think people wanted to get too close for fear of what they might see," he said.

At least two witnesses in Shanksville said they saw a large plane circling the crash site following the explosion. About two or three minutes after the explosion, the airplane climbed into the sky almost vertically, the witnesses said.

"It sure wasn't no puddle jumper," said Bob Page, general sales manager at Shanksville Dodge.

Page said he could not see if there were any markings on the plane or what kind it was. State and federal officials could not confirm reports of a possible second plane in the area.

"I feel terrible for the people who were on that (downed) plane," Page said. He had moved a small portable television outside so employees could follow coverage of events unfolding in their own back yard.

"You just don't expect something like this to happen in a town the size of Shanksville," he said.

Tribune-Review reporters Paul Peirce, Debra Erdley, Robb Frederick, Marsha Forys and Jason Togyer contributed to this story.