

## Sisters talk of mum's loss in Erebus crash

By CHERIE HOWIE - Marlborough    Last updated 13:00 26/11/2009

CHRISTINE CORNEGE/Marlborough Express

A TIME TO REMEMBER: Picton sisters Melanie Fishburn, left, and Susan O'Rourke remember their mother, Marlene Hansen, who died in the Erebus disaster 30 years ago on Saturday.

It is said that everyone in New Zealand knew someone, or knew someone who knew someone, killed when an Air New Zealand Antarctic sightseeing flight crashed into Mt Erebus 30 years ago on Saturday. Picton sisters Susan O'Rourke and Melanie Fishburn have a closer connection than most - they lost their mother. They share their story for the first time.

Susan O'Rourke was watching television one night almost 30 years ago when she heard 10 words she has never forgotten – a plane is overdue from a sightseeing trip in Antarctica.

The 16 year old had tuned into a breaking news story so her father, Allan, who was at work, would be up to date with the latest beer and cigarette prices.

"In the old days, breaking news was always about the price of beer and smokes going up. I thought I better get the info for Dad."

Instead, she heard the horrifying news that an Air New Zealand DC-10 on a sightseeing flight to Antarctica, carrying her mother Marlene Hansen, was missing.

"We found out about the accident the same way as everyone else – on TV. It was like your worst nightmare."

Later, someone came to the door and told her the plane would have run out of fuel by now.

"You know then something tragic must have happened."

She ended up at a friend's house, where she found herself doing something she never did, watching an All Blacks test at 2am.

Mrs O'Rourke's sister, Melanie Fishburn, also remembers that night.

The 7 year old was in bed when she suddenly heard her sister screaming.

"The next thing I remember is waking up two doors down [the street]."

The mother-of-one doesn't have many memories of her mother, but the sense of loss she feels is clear 30 years on.

"It was quite hard growing up without her. I remember going on school trips and I'd look and see all the other mums and I'd think, 'where's mine?'."

She was grateful her sister had done her best to step into the role.

"A lot of that [mother] stuff was done with Susan ... she really did a lot for me."

Mrs O'Rourke remembers the "person missing at the dinner table", when she would cook a dinner that no-one in the grieving family wanted to eat.

She also remembers her grandparents, who were so distraught at the death of their only daughter they could not make the journey to Picton from their Auckland home.

"She stayed the night with them before the flight ... they had this wonderful evening and then it was all shattered."

When her mother left Picton for the airport, Mrs O'Rourke, who now has three children of her own, did not go with her.

"I said goodbye and went to rowing practice. I mean, why wouldn't I? She was coming home the next day."

Mrs O'Rourke also talks about the small things her mother's loss meant for the family, such as the 4 1/2 years it took to get a death certificate, preventing her mother's car from being sold as it was registered in her name.

A mother-of-four, Mrs Hansen worked at Kentucky Eataways and was heavily involved in several community groups, including Waitohi JAB and Picton Playcentre, before she went away on a great adventure and never came home.

She was 37 when she died.

Asked what she remembers most about her mother, Mrs O'Rourke described her keen attachment to her knitting machines – she had three – and the time her mother insisted on lugging one out of the house during a fire.

She was not particularly adventurous and the sisters were not sure why she had become interested in the Antarctic flight, a journey she shared with her boss Tony Stevenson.

Perhaps a clue can be found in a well-worn plastic bag stuffed full of mementos collected by Mrs O'Rourke since the disaster.

The collection includes, hauntingly, the Air New Zealand promotional brochure Mrs Hansen was given by her travel agent when she booked the trip.

The brochure, adorned with a full-page photo of the stunning Antarctic landscape, describes the on-board pleasures of the \$329 return "cruise", including two main meals and complimentary bar service, documentary movies and the services of an in-flight commentator.

It was that last service that led to Mrs Hansen even being on the doomed flight.

She had switched an earlier booking for the November 21 service so she could be on the same flight as famed mountaineer and in-flight commentator Peter Mulgrew.

Mrs Hansen was one of 44 people whose remains were never found and police officers knocking on the door of the family home were a common occurrence after the tragedy, Mrs O'Rourke says.

"They'd bring by little samples of material or jewellery (found at the crash site), things like wedding rings, but we didn't identify anything. All we got back was a wallet."

For that reason she is against the Air New Zealand-organised visit by a small group to the crash site on Saturday.

"That's her grave. Why are they doing it now after all these years?"

She thinks it is because of the Air New Zealand crash at Perpignan, which occurred exactly 29 years after the Erebus disaster. Five Kiwis, including four Air New Zealand staff, died.

Mrs O'Rourke says she has heard Air New Zealand chief executive Rob Fyfe's apology for the way the airline had treated the families of those lost at Erebus, but is looking forward to hearing it in person at a commemoration service in Auckland on Saturday.

"I think [after Perpignan] he realised how we were treated ... he seems like a genuine person. You can bitch and moan all your life but there comes a time when you've got to take responsibility."