

SCREEN: Images in this programme may be distressing to some viewers. We advise discretion

EXT. WRECKAGE SITE

STU
One, two, three –

STUART I/V:

I still carry that Erebus memory and I'll never get rid of it. And no one knows exactly what we did. Um, I guess, I guess it um, I guess the effect it had was it slowly killed me from the inside from an emotional point of view.

**GFX: In Association with
NZ ON AIR'S PLATINUM FUND**

EXT. ANTARTICA

MULGREW V/O
This is Peter Mulgrew again folks. I still can't see very much at the moment. I'll keep you informed as soon as I see something that gives me a clue as to where we are.

GFX: ROGUE PRODUCTIONS

FLIGHT ENGINEER GORDON BROOKS V/O
Where's Erebus in relation to us at the moment?

MULGREW (V.O.)
Left, about 20 or 25 miles.

FLIGHT ENGINEER GORDON BROOKS (V.O.)
I'm just thinking about any high ground in the area, that's all.

GFX: EXECUTIVE PRODUCER
Charlotte Purdy

MULGREW (V.O.)
I don't like this.

CASSIN (V.O.)
You're all clear to turn right...

GFX: PRODUCER
Carmen J Leonard

GPWS
Whoop, whoop. Pull up. Whoop, whoop.

BROOKS (V.O.)
Five hundred feet.

GFX: DIRECTORS
Peter Burger
Charlotte Purdy

GPWS
Pull up.

BROOKS (V.O.)
Four hundred feet.

GPWS
Pull up. Whoop, whoop. Pull up.

CAPTAIN JIM COLLINS (V.O.)
Go-around power please –

GFX: EDITOR
Simon Coldrick

BROOKS (V.O.)
Three hundred feet.

GPWS
Pull up. Pull up. Pull up- -

BROOKS (V.O.)

Two hundred feet.

GFX: On November 28th, 1979, an Air New Zealand DC-10 carrying 257 people on a sightseeing tour over Antarctica did not return on time.

Eleven ordinary policemen faced going to the formidable Mount Erebus where they would discover more than just bodies.

They became part of one of the most extraordinary police operations in history.

GFX: EREBUS OPERATION OVERDUE

EXT. CLAIRE'S HOUSE

GFX: Day One - NOVEMBER 28TH 1979 - 5 pm

**GFX: Constable Stuart Leighton
DISASTER VICTIM IDENTIFICATION TEAM, 1979**

STUART I/V:

At the time of the disaster, I was 22 years old. Yes, 22 and a half actually.

INT. CLAIRE'S HOUSE

STU

Hello!

TV PRESENTER (BG)

Contact with flight 901 was lost mid afternoon today. The aircraft had two hundred and fifty seven people on board,

STU

We all set?

CLAIRE

Hang on.

TV PRESENTER (BG)

...including 20 crew. Today's flight was last heard from about half past two in the afternoon, at that stage it was in the area of Mount Erebus, an active 4000 metre volcano. Air New Zealand announced it had given the plane up as lost.

STU

Shit, eh?

TV PRESENTER (BG)

The airlines Chief Executive, Mr Maurie Davis feared the worst....

STUART I/V:

Just like everyone else in New Zealand it was just absolutely just disbelief that I felt, and also a creeping sense of foreboding that, that in some form or another I may have been involved in assisting, but never really thinking that I would be.

PRESENTER

Have you any possible explanation of this?

MAURIE DAVIS

No we don't.

INT. GREG'S HOUSE

REPORTER (ON T.V.)

There were heart breaking scenes at Auckland Airport. Relatives arriving to meet passengers on the Antarctic Flight were hustled away to a side room. There they received the dreadful news that the flight was long overdue and that the plane had almost certainly crashed.

GREG I/V:

Now I, like the rest of NZ was in, was in shock.

**GFX: Sergeant Greg Gilpin
DISASTER IDENTIFICATION TEAM, 1979**

GREG I/V:

We'd had a training day that very day at National Police Headquarters for the Disaster Victim Identification Team,

INT. NATIONAL POLICE HEADQUATERS

GREG I/V:

And of course there was a feeling coming through even during that training that when would we ever use this. But ah, little did we know that it was going to occur that very day.

INT. GREG'S HOUSE

VIVIANNE

Okay girls, come on, let's go.

GREG I/V:

Surely they wouldn't send us to the coldest region in the world to the Antarctic. I mean I'd never been on snow or ice before.

GFX: 12.30am – Operation Overdue commences

ARCHIVE: POLICE HQ

JERRY POWER SEARCH SPOKESMAN

Well just a few minutes ago we ah, we received news that they'd located wreckage of the DC10. They reported it was about ah 2500 feet up Mount Erebus which is the largest mountain in the Antarctic. And, ah, regrettably reported no sign of survivors.

GFX: Inspector Bob Mitchell
OPERATION OVERDUE ANTARCTICA LEADER

BOB I/V:

We got the news I think about one o'clock it was confirmed that the ah, ah wreckage had been found.

ARCHIVE: POLICE HQ

BOB I/V:

We were fielding calls from people all over the world who wanted to know you know what's going on? Is my ah loved one involved? It was just go, go go, and uniformed staff had been drafted in from across the street and yea everyone was answering phones and trying to answer questions we didn't really have a great deal of information.

INT. STU'S HOUSE

STU

Stuart Leighton - Yes sir -
I understand sir, but - Thank you, sir. Looks like it's all on.

CLAIRE

What do they want you to do?

STU

Ah, go out there. Find, identify and retrieve the bodies.

TVNZ ARCHIVE NEWS:

PRESENTER (ON T.V)

One of the woman killed was one of 5 sisters who had all been stewardesses for Air New Zealand. She was Sue Marinovic one of the organisers of a recent trip to Disneyland for handicapped and underprivileged children.

UNKNOWN VOICE (ON T.V)

Ice covered... Only mountaineers can actually work on the site.

STUART I/V:

Within 15 minutes, I then had to make some urgent phone calls to ah, to my parents.

STU

Yeah, it's me... Yea....

STUART I/V:

My father answered the phone and before I even said a word he says you're going aren't ya?

EXT. GREG'S HOUSE

GFX: Day two

GREG

Hold up girls. Kiss...

GREG I/V:

I gathered some warm jerseys that I had, old jerseys, and went and said goodbye to my children. I genuinely wondered whether I would see them again.

GREG

I'll be back before you know it. Hey. Off you go.

GFX: Christchurch Airport

ARCHIVE FOOTAGE - CHRISTCHURCH AIRPORT TEAM GET READY WITH DSIR GEAR.

STUART I/V:

We were very, very apprehensive. You had staff that were expert in

their own fields in terms of search and rescue, and there were a number of mountaineers, and then an untried DVI team who'd never ever used those procedures in anger before. And so therefore you're having to wonder how you're gonna work together... No-one from the teams had been down to the ice before, so we had absolutely no idea what Antarctica was going to throw at us. We just knew it would be dangerous.

EXT. ANATARCTICA

INT. HERCULES AIRCRAFT

BOB I/V:

Well I was actually feeling quite apprehensive. I'd realised that you know, this was a um, career defining ah, opportunity, but also it carried the ah, the consequence if I messed it up. If I stuffed this up, I'm history. I didn't actually do any of the selection process and I think that in hindsight probably Stu was too young. For those sort of jobs you need somebody, a cop with miles on the clock and Stu didn't have it. But, I knew Greg from way back and ah I was pretty confident that he'd be able to handle it.

BOB

How are you going? I'm going to need a good man to keep us on track at the coal face while I run things from McMurdo.

GREG

No problem.

GREG I/V:

We knew we had a job to do, and I was prepared to do it, but um I was concerned about my, about safety, about not only my safety, but other police officers.

STUART I/V:

There was a feeling in myself of disbelief of actually being on the plane and heading down that way. It's like oh, I am going down there. It's, it's - we're on our way.

MARK I/V:

This was a huge disaster I knew that, a huge disaster. And I knew it was gonna be an awful job – but – it was still exciting.

**GFX: Sergeant Mark Penn
SEARCH & RESCUE TEAM, 1979**

MARK I/V:

We didn't really know what had happened to the plane. We knew it had crashed into a mountain somewhere in the Antarctic. I couldn't even visualise the crash then. Ah, at that time...

MARK

You never think it could happen to one of ours, do ya?

GREG

No. No, you don't.

EXT: HERCULES

GREG I/V:

As I travelled down to the ice it was a time of contemplation. Thinking about what lay ahead, thinking about those who had died. I mean the whole country was in mourning and we were the same.

INT. HERCULES AIRCRAFT

GREG I/V:

As we drew near to McMurdo, the Captain of the Hercules drew our attention to Mt Erebus. And there in the distance was a, was a slight smudge on the side of the mountain.

FOOTAGE – EREBUS CRASH SITE

GREG I/V:

The reality of it hit home that here was a, a big huge airliner um, which had disintegrated. All it looked like was a little cigarette smudge on the side of the mountain. And that was a very, very moving moment.

FOOTAGE/PX – EREBUS CRASH SITE

MARK I/V:

Good god, it's in the middle of nowhere, there was nothing. There was a huge mountain, just snow and and rock and a bit of smoke coming out the top, it's really - and there was nothing.

STUART I/V:

You were all very apprehensive about what you were going to encounter down on the ice. And think about what you were letting yourself in for. I knew I was going into danger, absolutely. There's nothing worse than the fear of the unknown. And we were heading into the unknown.

EXT. AUCKLAND WATERFRONT

GFX: Auckland - Air NZ Offices

INT. AIR NZ OFFICES

NICK

Peter, welcome to the mad house.

**GFX: Peter Rhodes
AIR NEW ZEALAND PILOT
ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION TEAM**

PETER RHODES I/V:

As an accident investigator I felt let's get on and find out what had happened and gone wrong. Pack your bags and go to Christchurch tomorrow.

NICK

I thought you were heading off to the ice?

PETER

Oh, I'm just here to pick up flight 901's flight plan. Been any news?

NICK

We'll figure it out mate.

PETER RHODES I/V:

I was told by Air New Zealand that I was going to join the investigation team at the request of the Airline Pilots Association and also the Inspector of Air Accidents.

AIR NZ OFFICE STAFF

"They're saying it could be a bird strike".
"Have to be a lot of birds". "It's possible.
Isn't it?".

PETER RHODES I/V:

There were all sorts of wild ideas, people were in just total disbelief. I thought that ah something has gone horribly wrong for a crew that I had known in the Air Force and had the reputation in Air New Zealand of being cautious, well trained, always planned their flights well. What on earth would have caused them to run into a mountain? Air New Zealand Flight Operation staff trying to work out like we all were, what on earth's gone wrong.

GREENWOOD

Well how significant?

DORDAY

Well just two degrees of longitude.

GREENWOOD

Okay... Jesus wept.

PETER RHODES I/V:

We had one meeting at the Air New Zealand offices and as far as we were lead to understand at that stage is the whole team, they had no information as to what might have been a probable cause.

EXT. HERCULES LANDING

INT. HERCULES AIRCRAFT

BOB

Alright, men. Let's go.

STUART I/V:

We thought well, we're now going to get off this plane in Antarctica. And so we all put all this great big heavy weather Antarctic gear on and we were a bit like the Michelin men. I thought you'd open the door and there'll be snow blowing there should be winds howling. It would be just like a, like a blizzard.

INSTRUCTOR

Hey guys. Welcome to Antarctica.

EXT. MCMURDO BASE

STUART I/V:

And there was this most wonderful day, the bright blue sky, an American Commander was there, with his sleeves rolled up.

**GFX: Constable Stuart Leighton
DISASTER VICTIM IDENTIFICATION TEAM, 1979**

STUART I/V:

So that was our first lesson is that you know, you don't know what you don't know so we um, I think we were a little bit overdressed.

INSTRUCTOR

Hey Greg, pleased to meet ya. Hey, long flight. Let's head on up on to base and get some hot food in to ya.

BOB I/V:

They were very helpful. They said to me, if we've got it, you want it, you've got it. Everything,

GFX: Inspector Bob Mitchell

OPERATION OVERDUE ANTARCTICA LEADER

BOB I/V:

anything we wanted if they had it, it was ours, and they couldn't have been more generous, more helpful.

GFX: McMurdo Station - Antarctica

**GFX: Sergeant Mark Penn
SEARCH & RESCUE TEAM, 1979**

MARK I/V:

We were under a lot of stress, the sea ice was breaking up. We expected the sea ice to break up within about a week of us arriving there, and once the sea ice broke up we knew that the Hercules couldn't land, they couldn't take the bodies back to New Zealand.

GFX: Day Three

INSTRUCTOR

You are about to go out into the...

INT. SCOTT BASE

INSTRUCTOR

... most inhospitable place on the planet. If you don't know what you're doing, the results can be deadly and immediate.

BOB I/V:

I was worried that when we got up on to the mountain that we wouldn't be able to handle it and um cops being cops, um, if something can go wrong it will.

INSTRUCTOR

mountaineers are up at the wreckage sight right now marking it with flags This is why you're here gentlemen. Green flag means a body. Or portion thereof. The bodies will be frozen, they might be buried in the snow, or hidden in crevasses. Red flag means a

crevasse. Don't fall in. Easy to say, hard to do. I know you've got a big job....

GREG I/V:

Those two or three days before we went to the mountain were very trying. There was uncertainty of what we were going to face.

**GFX: Sergeant Greg Gilpin
DISASTER VICTIM IDENTIFICATION TEAM, 1979**

GREG I/V:

This, this has got nothing to do with the body recovery. I thought I could cope with that without any problems, but I was just concerned about the conditions.

INSTRUCTOR

Scattered around the site are a couple of hundred of these little fellas. They might have been damaged on impact, or in the fire. They might explode.

MARK

You right, mate?

INSTRUCTOR

But safety is the first priority.

STU

You ever been on the snow before?

INSTRUCTOR

If you're unsure, just walk away.

MARK

It's mostly just common sense. You'll be okay.

STU

Yeah.

STUART I/V:

We had no doubts in our mind we were in an absolute survival situation. Where you're wondering oh do we really need to be here,

do the bodies really need to be recovered? Is this beyond our capabilities? And some people were of the view that it was.

GREG

Are you sure we're the guys for the job? This is serious stuff.

BOB

We're here now Greg, we're committed -

GREG

We're completely untrained for this environment.

BOB I/V:

Greg and I had a conversation and he said you know this is madness, he said we've got no business being here. Um, we don't know... we're not mountaineers, um he goes, we're all street cops.

GREG I/V:

I was concerned there's no doubt about that, I was genuinely concerned about - I envisaged us hanging on to the side of a mountain and never having been in snow or ice before I thought this is madness.

MARK

Look, we can make it work. I can run the site with you mate. Double-shift sort of thing.

BOB

Yea, that could work – Good on you Mark.

INSTRUCTOR

Can I get a show of hands from the DVI team - who has had some survival training in the snow?

MARK

Yep!

EXT. SNOW COVERED HILL

INSTRUCTOR

Okay – so down on your haunches – on your back.

STUART I/V:

And so the decision was made to have us assessed as to our capabilities. We were learning to walk on snow and then on ice

INSTRUCTOR

Just concentrate on the technique, keep that in your mind.

STUART I/V:

They would lay us on our backs

INSTRUCTOR:

Don't panic. You'll be fine. Right you set?
Alright guys – let him go.

STUART I/V:

And just let you go. They just really dug into us that we were going into – this was not a game. This is no joke. This was serious. It was life threatening, and we had to um be prepared to survive and be disciplined to survive, ah in that type of environment.

INT/EXT. HELICOPTER

GFX: Day six

GREG I/V:

We were the first officers to, to head to the mountain. As we neared the mountain it was shrouded in mist and fog and the helicopter pilot couldn't find the crash site. Then there was this clearance a clearance, a sudden clearance, and he dropped straight down.

STU

Can you see anything?

STUART I/V:

It was quite clear that the pilot was not a hundred percent confident to go in and actually land on the mountainside.

BOB

Alright. This is where we get off.

GREG

Is he going to land?

BOB

Because of the weather conditions, the pilots gonna to maintain a hovering position.

STU

How far to the ground?

BOB I/V:

Because of the prop wash from the rotor blades,

BOB

Off you go son.

BOB I/V:

Everything was white, and so you just had to jump into a white void, and, and have faith.

STUART I/V:

As the junior boy I was the last one on and consequently the first one out. I was extremely apprehensive, what am I gonna see, how am I gonna cope with what I'm going to see? Will I be able to do the job that I'm asked to do? Ah, because you just don't know, no-one's experienced it before. And it's the fourth biggest air disaster in the world at that time.

EXT. MOUNT EREBUS

EXT. WRECKAGE SITE

BOB

Jesus God.

GREG I/V:

The site that greeted us was just - it was unbelievable really. The experience I'd had dealing with death and that really you couldn't prepare for what we saw. It was just a scene of utter destruction. Both um human and aircraft.

PX – EREBUS CRASH SITE

GREG I/V:

Well... it was overwhelming... to see so many fellow New Zealanders, human beings and other, other persons from other countries also um, lying there. It was hard, it was hard to take.

BOB I/V:

It was horrific. The whole area was covered with um with bodies, and they were mangled, and um the whole thing was just a shambles. It was, it was the worst sight that I'd seen.

STUART I/V:

There was a lot of mutilation, a lot of bodies. It was just grotesque and it was just, it was just overwhelming. I personally felt a little bit out of my depth. I couldn't walk with the other two. I just had to be alone with my own thoughts and I also had the feeling that I don't belong here This is quite foreign, what am I doing here, you know it's um, this is, this is for where the big boys are.

BOB

Just take it one step at a time, Stu.

STUART I/V:

You just suck it up and you say, this is reality, this is it.

BOB

The chopper will be back shortly with the rest of the crew and supplies. What time you got?

GREG

It's just gone two a.m.

BOB

How you feeling?

GREG

We can do this.

BOB

Good luck.

GREG I/V:

Bob Mitchell had to return to McMurdo to coordinate the operation from there. Stu Leighton and myself had to busy ourselves because the rest of our team hadn't arrived

GREG

Can you lend a hand?

GREG I/V:

Stu and I were the only two there.

GREG

That should do it.

STU

Wish they'd hurry up. I'm starving. No sign of the chopper.

GREG

Should be here shortly. We could be in for some weather. Let's go.

GREG I/V:

We'd only been on the mountain a short while and we were soon to learn how quickly the weather could change.

STUART I/V:

There was lots of light metal lying around and the wind would pick this, this stuff up and it would just fly around in the wind. And you know that you're on the slope of a mountain. And you're thinking, is this tent gonna stay – is it gonna be blown away. Are we going to be rolling down the side of a mountain? It was absolutely frightening, the strength and the force of these winds.

INT: TENT

GREG I/V:

I can honestly say that I was wondering whether we were gonna survive, and I was praying – um I remember it.

STUART I/V:

I thought my goodness if this is the way that it's gonna continue routinely, and this is the way it's gonna be I don't know whether we're gonna get out of this. And that's when I had my first serious doubts of whether we were gonna get out of that alive.

EXT: ANTARCTICA

GFX: Constable Stuart Leighton

DISASTER VICTIM IDENTIFICATION TEAM, 1979

STUART I/V:

There was no night time in Antarctica, it's continuous 24 hour sunlight. It's quite an unusual disorientating sort of ah feeling.

PX – EREBUS CRASH SITE

STUART I/V:

The camp site was right next to the actual crash site itself, and one of the first things that was built while I was there was a actual helicopter landing pad, and um we'd built a snow toilet, an igloo, and we'd carved a little bench and a little wee hole, you know just like the outside dunnies. Some perfume from the aircraft we found, and we put that in there. Yea, it, it was very effective.

EXT: WRECKAGE SITE

GFX: Day seven

UNKNOWN

....the reference point here. This is the ah tail fuselage up here on the side. Now grid 11, obviously is down the bottom here and we're going to be working across the mountain. So left to right. That way we don't have to go up and down all the time.

MARK I/V:

The crash site itself was, it was awesome to look at. And I must say I did have a moment of dread there

**GFX: Sergeant Mark Penn
SEARCH & RESCUE TEAM 1979**

MARK I/V:

because the moment of truth was getting closer for me to get stuck into this DVI procedure. So yes I was probably a bit nervous at that point.

GREG

...uncovered okay. And with that in mind be really careful of all these jagged bits of metal we've got all over the place. There's a, there's a lot of hazards, so just watch yourself okay guys.

MARK

How we doing?

GREG

Yeah, good, good. We'll have ah four teams, four men to a team - comprising of ah two police, a mountaineer and a photographer. And they'll rotate continuously, two teams on, two teams off, 12 hour shifts.

MARK

I'll run my shift. You got here first, you guys take the first shift.

GREG

Fine.

MARK I/V:

Greg was onsite co-ordinator when Greg was there, I was onsite co-ordinator when Greg left, and so I was in charge of it and I had to make sure that the thing ran properly.

GREG

The site's a grid, marked by the black flags. I've marked them here on this map. Now, each grid has to be signed off before moving on to the next.

COP

What about when it's just parts of bodies?

STU

Christ.

GREG

No, fair point. Um, each body part gets its own tag.

MARK

Any questions?

GREG

Alright, let's go.

GFX: Sergeant Greg Gilpin
DISASTER VICTIM IDENTIFICATION TEAM, 1979

GREG I/V:

I felt like I had a responsibility. Um, and I, I was determined to um, to get it moving and everyone had the right attitude – it was a real NZ attitude, let's get this job done.

MARK I/V:

There were some horrendous sights. Decapitated bodies, there were people torn apart. There was guts, there was brain. It was just awful.

STUART I/V:

The bodies went from being tightly whole all the way to the most um - most disintegrated bodies you'd ever hate to see.

GREG

Right, you got the bag ready? Bag over?

GREG I/V:

Legs and feet, arms,

GREG

It's male isn't it?

COP

I don't know.

GREG I/V:

And you couldn't just assume that they had come from bodies which were lying nearby, because they may not, and I mean that was all part of the process.

STUART I/V:

The way that I could tell whether it was male or female was by their hands. You'd be looking at their painted fingernails and their wedding rings and the rings on their hands, and they were smaller hands, painted um nails.

GREG

Okay – take your end down. Hold it up, hold it up. Nice and easy. Take your end down first.

STUART I/V:

I don't think I could have retained my sanity if I had have had an honest belief that people had survived that crash or that they suffered in any way.

GREG

You right?

STU

Yeap

GREG

Lift your end up a bit mate.

STU

Yep

GREG

Good

STUART I/V:

To me they were always people, they were always someone's mother, father, brother, sister or whatever.

GREG

Let's get in there eh? Alright, we've got it.
One, two, three – go. Yep yep, one more
time. Hang on a sec, hang on.

STUART I/V:

These bodies were frozen solid. Whatever grotesque shape that they landed in, that's what they froze at.

GREG

You okay, mate?

STU

Yeah, how are we going to get that.. in
here?

STU

One, two...

STUART I/V:

So we had to have larger bags manufactured in New Zealand and rushed to the site.

GREG I/V:

The eyes of, of New Zealand were on us, and to a certain extent the eyes of people overseas were on us. And I wanted to um, to return these people to their loved ones as soon as we could.

ARCHIVE MATERIAL: THE BLACK BOX IS FOUND.

PETER I/V:

We got a radio message back they found the flight recorders. Did they have any technical problems? Did they have any other warnings?

GFX: Peter Rhodes
AIR NEW ZEALAND PILOT
ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION TEAM ASSISTANT

PETER I/V:

Did they have any issues on navigation where they thought they were?

INT. MCMURDO/SCOTT BASE

MULGREW V/O

This is ah Peter Mulgrew again folks. I still can't see very much at the moment. I'll keep you informed as soon as I see something that gives me a clue as to where we are.

MULGREW V/O

Is that coming over?

FLIGHT ENGINEER GORDON BROOKS (V.O.)

Where's Erebus in relation to us at the moment?

MULGREW (V.O.)

Left, about 20 or 25 miles.

UNIDENTIFIED CREW (V.O.)

Left do you reckon?

FLIGHT ENGINEER GORDON BROOKS (V.O.)

I'm just thinking about any high ground in the area, that's all.

PETER

They thought they were here...

MULGREW (V.O.)

I don't like this.

PETER I/V:

The crew did not see the mountain till the last moment. In fact they

didn't see it even then. The only warning they got was the ground proximity warning saying "pull up". Why they didn't see the edge of Mt Erebus we couldn't work out at that stage.

BROOKS (V.O.)

Five hundred feet.

GPWS

Pull up.

BROOKS (V.O.)

Four hundred feet.

UNKNOWN

Go around power please

GPWS

Pull up. Whoop, whoop. Pull up.

BROOKS (V.O.)

Three hundred feet.

GPWS

Pull up. Whoop, whoop. Pull up.

BROOKS (V.O.)

Two hundred feet.

EXT. MT EREBUS

GFX: Day eight

EXT. WRECKAGE SITE

STUART IV:

The campsite was getting slowly bigger and bigger and more tents

*were being erected.
You had quite a lot of people coming and going.*

GREG I/V:

And I did think at the time it was a little odd that Air New Zealand people were on the site. The scene today would be probably treated like a crime scene, but in those days it wasn't. And it was made very clear to us during our briefings before we went up there that we were not investigating and that we were there purely for body recovery and we knew that.

UNKNOWN COP

One, two, three....

GREG

What have we got here?

STU

It's Captain Collins.

GREG I/V:

He was in his uniform, virtually, he was virtually unscathed - his body. He was lying on his stomach.

GREG

Alright, well. Let's bag him and get him out of here.

STU

And there was this.

GREG I/V:

It was a ring binder notebook which had Jim Collins' name on it. In the first five or six pages there was technical writing – I knew nothing about flying an aircraft but I knew that it was, that's what it would probably be and I thought well this is important and so I took it up to the top of the crash site. We went to the, to where that property was and made an inventory of all the property. Now that ah ring binder um, wasn't there.

EXT. MOUNT EREBUS

EXT. WRECKAGE SITE

GREG

Love to be able to change for dinner.

STU

I'd settle for brushing my teeth.

MARK

Mmm. It just gets better and better with age.

MARK I/V:

Our hands became full of grease, human grease because a lot of the bodies were burnt.

MARK (CONT'D)

It's all yours.

STUART I/V:

We ended up having the one set of gloves the whole time we were there.

STUART

Cheers mate.

STUART I/V:

So they were baked full of you know the fatty human remains, the soot and the wreckage whatever, and you were having to use those same set of gloves to put food in your own mouth.

INT. TENT

GREG I/V:

It was 24 hour daylight. You would constantly see the body that you were dealing with. Yeah so I did not get much sleep at all during the whole time.

GREG

Bastard bloody things.

EXT. WRECKAGE SITE

GREG

Bugger off! Buggar off. Get out of here ya bastards, buggar off!! Buggar off, get out ya bastards.

GREG I/V:

The main thing for me was the birds.

GREG

Piss off.

GREG I/V:

They never shut up the whole time, They squawked the whole time, they circled the crash site. They were um, obviously they got to the bodies before, before we got there. They tormented me.

MARK

Pull the pin.

GREG

Pull the pin, okay.

STUART I/V:

We did ask the Americans for some help

MARK

Try to keep your hands as far away as you can.

GREG

Yea – it is.

MARK

It is....

STUART I/V:

They did send a rocket launcher up - that they thought might be useful,

GREG

There's ya sights.

STUART I/V:

And I can remember the debate that we had with all these gungho cops, ah you know with a 50/50 sort of shall we or shan't we,

GREG

I got no idea.

STUART I/V:

You know let's assemble it, let's read the instructions and put this thing together,

MARK

How do you sight it?

GREG

I dunno?

STUART I/V:

And um you know wiser heads ruled.

GREG I/V:

The engineer said no you can't use that because of all these cylinders on the site you know it could cause an explosion or whatever.

GREG

We don't want to bring down the bloody mountain do we.

STUART I/V:

And we used up a lot of our energy trying to protect the bodies from, from what the birds were doing.

GREG I/V:

Eventually we decided that we would bury the bodies again so the birds couldn't get to them. And it worked.

EXT. MCMURDO/SCOTT BASE**GFX: Day Nine**INT. MCMURDO/SCOTT BASEPETER I/V:

Always in an accident many passenger cameras on board are used as information.

PETER

It looks like fuel on the window. Which means this must have been taken at the moment of impact. They had no warning at all.

PX – PASSENGER PHOTOS**GFX: Peter Rhodes
AIR NEW ZEALAND PILOT
ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION TEAM ASSISTANT**PETER I/V:

The pictures were developed which surprisingly showed proof that the aircraft was flying in totally clear conditions. You could see clear horizons both sides of the aircraft at the time of impact. That caused us to be puzzled as to how you can run into the mountain in what appears to be totally clear air. Totally perplexed and ah puzzled.

INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)

Look this is your Mount Erebus on a bright sunny Antarctic Day. This is the same mountain, five minutes later... and five minutes after that.

PETER I/V:

The atmosphere is so dry, the snow is so dry you get no reflection from it, so you get no depth perception, and you don't know whether you're looking at a piece of rock at the end of your arm's length or the side of a mountain ten miles away, you've got no depth focus, no depth perception at all. The crew were absolutely totally unaware of the rising ground in front of them until the ground proximity went

off.

EXT. WRECKAGE SITE

MARK I/V:

The days that I spent on the crash site at Erebus - was the hardest I've ever worked in my life. I'd never been under such stress. There was enormous pressure on us to get those bodies up and out of there.

GFX: Day ten

GREG I/V:

There were places on the site where it just didn't look right. The problem with the holes up there you don't know how deep they are.

PX – EREBUS CRASH SITE

MARK I/V:

We checked everything out and we abseiled down all the crevasses. There were bodies we were chipping out of this ice, you know, parts of the engine for example must have been exceedingly hot and they just melted their way right through the ice on this glacier and of course one of the bodies had followed it. And it was completely packed in the ice and it took us ages to chip it out with our ice axes. The crevasses were reasonably wide at the top, but many of them narrowed down and you had two ice walls getting narrower and narrower and narrower, and if you were silly enough to fall down one of those and get yourself jammed down there you might die before somebody pulls you out.

EXT. WRECKAGE SITE

MARK

Slow

STUART I/V:

There'd be two teams working, and slowly going through and eliminating all the grids for where the bodies were.

GFX: Day Eleven

STUART I/V:

Whether you're dealing with a car crash or whatever, one of the first things you try and do is de-humanise the scene, because you can get over-whelmed by the fact that you're dealing with, with people. And it was just a blank page and just nothing on there and nothing ever would be written on there. I'll never ever forget that, as long as I live. Those were the biggest mental challenges combined with the physical environment, um and it was overwhelming. At stages, it, it truly was.

INT. TENTSTUART I/V:

You're becoming more and more tired as you're being overcome by the trauma of it all and your body started to shut down and your reserves started to deplete and the hardest thing was to motivate yourself mentally to carry on and to keep on doing your role, um not wanting to let the team down.

EXT. WRECKAGE SITESTUART I/V:

And you're starting to get run down, it just started to take its toll after a while,

STU

Come on. Come on.

GREG

Hey. Take it easy.

STU

Come on, come on, come on, come on,
come on.....

GREG

Hey, hey, calm down okay? Time for a
break.

GREG I/V:

We were, were you know, we'd been working so hard and it was having an effect on us obviously.

STUART I/V:

One of the recurring thoughts that just came into my mind when I'm on my down time, you know looking at this wonderful view and trying to reconcile that with the devastation and the carnage that had just taken place.

GREG I/V:

Trying to cope with such a job. I used to just turn away from the site. The crash site, and think of my family. And um, I used to think about the, it was summer of course and I used to think, just down below us we had a, a sports ground. And I use to envisage the, the cricket players there you used to see every Saturday. And I was thinking that's what they'd be doing now.

INT. AIR NZ OFFICES

GFX: Auckland - Air New Zealand Offices

NICK

Put on the news William. Oh Peter...

PRESENTER (ON T.V.)

Amid growing speculation over what happened to the DC-10, Air New Zealand has adopted a cautious line.

PETER I/V:

When we got back to New Zealand from the accident site we had a situation where from the Chief Executive downwards they were trying desperately hard to protect the company's image and its future.

RON TAYLOR (ON T.V.)

Well he hit at two and a half thousand feet. What height should he have been operating at?

MORRIE DAVIS (ON T.V.)

We establish a minimum altitude of six thousand feet. We are aware that the

wreckage was sighted at two and a half thousand feet. Beyond that we can't speculate.

PETER

A bit of arse covering -

NICK

He's right, though.

PETER

Oh you reckon?

NICK

Yea, they must have been flying too low, stands to reason -

PETER

But, it's a sightseeing tour, for God's sake.

NICK

And there are rules and protocol -

PETER

Right. And what's this then?
See Antarctica from 2000 feet. It's what people were paying for.

PETER IV:

The aim was to take passengers down there to see things, and ah this crew along with other crews that went down there found a way to get down below sixteen thousand feet when they thought they were in the clear.

NICK

Look mate we're all on the same team here.
No one wants this mess to get any worse than what it is. Right?
If you've got a problem, then I suggest you take it to the appropriate person.

RON TAYLOR (ON TV)

So there's no suggestion that he's off track?

MORRIE DAVIS (ON TV)

There's no suggestion that we can make whatsoever in this matter.

PETER I/V:

It was an almost them and us feeling. Morrie Davis was a very blunt gentleman. He had worked his way through the company to get to Chief Executive. His heart and soul was in the Company.

INT. MORRIE DAVIS OFFICE

PETER

Morrie?

PETER I/V:

He felt anger at the pilots because we were in danger of damaging the company's image. Air New Zealand's image was going to be the loser. And it would be far easier if we left the decision making process to the airline and the government. In very blunt terms he put it that way. Much more colourful language that I'm using.

EXT. MOUNT EREBUS

EXT. WRECKAGE SITE

GFX: Day twelve

STUART I/V:

I'd actually hit the wall. I worked to the point of exhaustion, both mentally and physically.

GREG (O.S.)

Stu!

MARK I/V:

Just about at the end of our tether at that point, we had worked so hard, of course you'll always remember the last one. There she was, and perfectly preserved.

MARK

Poor girl.

Flashbacks – INT. STUART’S HOUSE

PRESENTER (ON T.V)

One of the woman killed was one of 5 sisters who had all been stewardesses for Air New Zealand. She was Sue Marinovic one of the organisers of a recent trip to Disneyland for handicapped and underprivileged children.

INT. STU'S TENT

STUART I/V:

That's the worst I've ever felt in my whole life. I had nothing more to give, nothing.

MARK (O.S.)

Hey, Stu! Out here!

EXT. WRECKAGE SITE

MARK

Here he is. Here, get that in ya.

STU

Marque Vue?

MARK

Only the best for us, mate.

MARK I/V:

We'd found all the bodies on site. We'd done all we could do,

GREG I/V:

Lying all over the site were all these bottles of wine unbroken.

STUART

Might as well – only go to waste.

GREG I/V:

At the completion of the body recovery operation we had a little celebration.

MARK I/V:

We had a bit of a, bit of a, a session you could say to let a bit of the stress out.

STU

Here we go, here we go, woo hoo!

MARK I/V:

We needed to let off steam and it was a good way to let off steam.

PX – EREBUS CRASH SITE

GREG I/V:

There were quite a few sliding down the mountain on body bags yeah, plastic body bags, just a bit of fun mm.

EXT. WRECKAGE SITE

GREG I/V:

It was an amazing effort really, even if I say so myself – under those conditions. But it was a trying time. Our thoughts had turned to home and getting back. Getting off the mountain.

MARK

Mate, you look like shit. And you smell worse.

GREG

Taxi's here.

MARK

I got it.

INT. MCMURDO/SCOTT BASE

MARK I/V:

When we got back to McMurdo, Al and I were met by the Fire Chief and he took us to the fire station, and there was this huge tank of

warm water

MARK

Bull-shit.

FIRE CHIEF

Come on guys, jump in.

MARK I/V:

Dirty blackened faces, grease all over, you know we were really filthy.

MARK

One, two –

MARK I/V:

And it was just bliss. I've never had bliss like it before. It was just wonderful getting into that, plunging into this warm water over my head.

BOB I/V:

We had basically a fortnight to get in, get the job done and get out. My main concern was that one or more of the guys would be injured in the process. But I was hugely relieved when the last one came off the helicopter I can tell you that, yeah.

GFX: Day fourteen

ARCHIVE: FOOTAGE

STUART I/V:

You know each of those families that lost somebody on Erebus grieved for that individual family member. I grieved about the whole lot. And I can remember thinking oh my God I hope this is not gonna traumatise me, I hope this is not going to absolutely screw me when I get back, cos I knew it had the potential to do so, and unfortunately it did.

ARCHIVE: SUBURBAN STREETS

GREG I/V:

Arriving home, it was a good feeling but I thought I could get home and get back to normal quickly, but it just didn't work that way. I

couldn't really get it out of my mind.

INT. GREGS HOUSE

GREG I/V:

And I went back to work and I wondered why I couldn't do what I used to do or perform at work like I used to, but I was just mentally and physically I was, I'd had it really.

STUART I/V:

People just could not comprehend or realise what we had gone through. You had this story in you of what you'd seen, what you'd experienced and you couldn't share it with anybody in a meaningful way because they just couldn't understand.

INT. STU'S HOUSE

MARK I/V:

We were invisible after Erebus. Nobody, nobody, nobody, spoke to us about it. Certainly I didn't - I wasn't contacted by anybody, I gave, I didn't have a debrief after I got back to New Zealand and so you know we just sort of faded away.

STUART I/V:

I thought we deserved better than what we got. And no one wanted to know and no one went out of their way to support us in that respect. And that was devastating.

GFX: June 1980 – Accident investigation report released

INT. AIR NEW ZEALAND OFFICES

GFX: Pilot Error cause of Crash - Auckland Star – 17th July 1980

GFX: Captain's Decision Cause of Tragedy NZ Herald, June 20th 1980

**GFX: Air Chief Critical of Pilot
Auckland Star**

PETER I/V:

The Chief Inspector of Air Accident's report ended up being very controversial amongst most of the pilots. He'd ended up saying the cause of the accident was the Captain's decision to continue flying at low altitude in conditions of poor visibility. And not all of us agreed with the findings that he wrote, but when you put it in the context of the technology at the time and the legislative system we lived in at the time, that is a conclusion that he could support.

GFX: July 1980 - Royal Commission of Enquiry into the Erebus crash

ARCHIVE FOOTAGE:

UNKNOWN

This Royal commission of enquiry,
concerning the DC10 disaster at Mt Erebus
shall be the truth...

UNKNOWN

The crew were not monitoring their actual
position in relation to the topography
adequately.

GFX: Air NZ exposed tounlimited compensation claims – NZ Herald

INT. GREG'S HOUSE

ARCHIVE FOOTAGE:

JUDGE (ON T.V)

It's not been suggested has it that the safe
thing might be to put the whole blame on
Captain Collins.

FLIGHT MANAGER

I can assure you it's not sir.

UNKNOWN COURT PERSON

You took some envelopes of material back with you to NZ?

FLIGHT MANAGER

Well that's news to me.

**GFX: Flight Manager Says He Took Nothing From The Air Crash Site
– NZ Herald**

**GFX: Widow Tells Inquiry of Robbery
NZ Herald, 1980**

CAPTAIN COLLINS WIDOW

They were taken without my knowledge and without my permission.

JUDGE

Does that strike you as a remarkable sequence of errors?

UNKNOWN COURT PERSON

Yes sir. It was very disquieting.

**GFX: Air New Zealand and Division hiding crash
blame.
- NZ Herald**

INT: GREG'S HOUSE

TV FOOTAGE:

REPORTER

Justice Mahon was highly critical of the post accident conduct of Air New Zealand. He described the decision by Morrie Davis to destroy so called irrelevant documents as one of the most remarkable executive decisions ever made in the affairs of a large New Zealand company.

INTERVIEWER

He still believes that you're holding one or two cards under the table.

**GFX: MR DES DALGETY
AIR NZ BOARD MEMBER**

DES DALGETY

I don't think believe that.

INTERVIEWER

The companies held all its' cards out?
There's nothing been held back?

DES DALGETY

As far as I'm aware – yes.

INTERVIEWER

Well then, how do you suppose the pad and papers secured by the ring binders that could have disappeared?

DES DALGETY

I would have no idea sir – as I say, unless they were removed because they were damaged.

GREG I/V:

There was a documentary, and at one stage Justice Mahon is holding a ring binder and rubbing it on his face, and it's Captain Collins' ring binder, and he's asking the witness "where do you suppose the pages have gone"? I know very well that we saw that writing in that ring binder. I thought well this isn't right. I couldn't let it go because I thought well 257 people died here, and I'm not gonna let this go. I'm a police officer and I believe in honesty, I wanted to see justice being done. So I went to Gordon Vettie who had assisted Justice Mahon at the Commission of Inquiry. He came to Wellington and spoke to me. And um, he said "Well this is just what we've been looking for", and

Justice Mahon wrote to me and said "the ring binder that you saw" - I've still got this letter,- "would have contained the coordinates that Jim Collins was given at the briefing, um.... which were incorrect".

GFX:

The Royal Commission found that the dominant cause of the crash was due to a mistake by airline officials, who altered the navigational coordinates to fly directly at Mount Erebus.

And omitted to tell the crew.

Justice Mahon accused the airline of an 'orchestrated a litany of lies'.

ARCHIVE PICTURES**EXT. EREBUS CRASH SITE****STUART I/V:**

There's quite a few trigger points that I have that will instantly bring this Erebus memory back to me and I'll never get rid of it. I see older ladies' hands and I look at their hands and I look at the rings, I look at their painted fingernails. I look at those sort of things and I'm instantly back there again.

GREG I/V:

Smells and you know going past the ferry terminal that I do in Wellington, and I can smell diesel or whatever and I'm straight back on Erebus.

BOB I/V:

I still get recollections of the crash site and the greasy mess that was in all the property and stuff like that.

GREG I/V:

Well it's affected me to this day. Um, I thought it wouldn't because of what I'd dealt with over the years. I mean I had 14 years' Police experience at that time, you can't get away from it.

GFX: In 2007 the men received Special Service medals, finally acknowledging their efforts in the recovery operation.

Bob Mitchell received an MBE

ARCHIVE: PHOTOS OF MEN RECEIVING THEIR MEDALS.

BOB I/V:

That was a huge honour. I actually am very proud of that medal because it associates me with all those guys on the mountain I think that's brilliant yeah. I'm really proud of that.

GREG I/V:

Fantastic mm. I was very grateful for that, and I know everyone else was too.

MARK I/V:

You couldn't not be proud of it. We cleaned the site up, we cleaned the site up and we got all those bodies back to their families which was damned important to the families.

ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE – MEDAL CEREMONY

STUART I/V:

To finally, finally someone to come up and say you know you guys did a great job and we want to formally recognise that, it sort of finished off the process and it actually in some respects gave me a bit of closure in terms of well someone's finally acknowledged what we did was worthwhile. And that's made me at peace a lot, it truly has.

GFX: Operation Overdue set a world record for identifying victims. A total of 214 bodies were returned to families.

GFX: Air NZ challenged Justice Mahon's finding of a cover up. The Court of Appeal found he exceeded his authority with the accusation and that finding was quashed.

Justice Mahon's appeal to the Privy Council was unsuccessful. However it said his report 'convincingly clears' the pilots of contributing to the disaster.

The pilots have never been formally exonerated.

GFX: Greg Gilpin was New Zealand's longest serving commissioned officer at the time of his retirement in 2011.

Despite a police investigation into the missing pages of the

Captain's ring binder, the issue remains unresolved.

GFX: Stuart Leighton is now Operations Manager of Southern Communications for the NZ Police.

Since Erebus he has never been back to the snow.

GFX: Mark Penn served for the United Nations on peacekeeping missions in Africa and the former Yugoslavia.

He was a royal bodyguard before he retired in 1996.

GFX: The protocols for victim identification that Bob Mitchell helped develop have been used around the world.

He now lives with his family in the UK.

GFX: The Operation Overdue Body Recovery Team

NZ Police:

Russell Blackler, Greg Gilpin, Trevor Horne, Brett Jones, Stuart Leighton, Mark Penn, Peter Rodger, Bruce Thompson, Alistair Windleburn, Peter Younger

US Navy Servicemen:

Charles Hitchcock, Brian Vorderstrasse, Dennis Kyne, Thomas McCabe, Brian Wurth.

Mountaineers/Volunteers:

John Stanton, Roy Arbon, John Keys, John Barnett, Colin Monteath, Eric Saggars, Hugh Logan, Darryl Thomson, Keith Woodford, Ray Goldring.

CREDITS