The Plane Crash Should Have Killed Her. Sometimes She Wishes It Had.

In 1990, Avianca Flight 52 crashed in suburban Long Island and a 17-year-old girl was pulled from the wreckage. Survival has been its own ordeal.

Astrid López, visiting the site where Avianca Flight 52 crashed on Long Island.Credit...Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

By Christopher Maag
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Astrid López rolled her wheelchair to the edge of the field where medics once pronounced her dead. She rose, wobbled, then planted her cane in the grass.

She hoped that something in this landscape — the green hillside, the barren winter trees, the little cove — might help pry loose memories of the plane crash and her life before it.

All she felt was pain.

Ms. López looked to the man standing at her side, Dr. Victor Fornari, a child psychiatrist whom she met in the weeks after the accident, when it wasn't clear whether she would survive. Now, 35 years later, they were seeing the crash site together for the first time. She took his hand and frowned.

"Nothing," she said in Spanish. "I remember nothing."

Avianca Airlines Flight 52 slammed into a wooded hillside in the Long Island village of Cove Neck on Jan. 25, 1990. There were 158 people aboard; 73 of them died. Most who lived were severely injured.

The crash had been avoidable, investigators would later find, and many of the dead probably should have survived.

Ms. López sometimes feels as if she should have died.

Today, Flight 52 has largely faded from the public memory. Only a few survivors and rescuers who responded to the crash commemorated the tragedy by attending Mass on Sunday at the Church of St. Dominic nearby in Oyster Bay.

But in other ways, memories of the Avianca disaster are all around.
Image

Ms. López was joined at the crash site by, from left, Carolyn Willson, a Red Cross volunteer who helped Astrid recover; Dr. Vincent Fornari; and Liliana Donlon, Astrid's older sister.Credit...Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Lessons from the mistakes of Flight 52 made modern aviation safer for everyone who travels on commercial flights today. Communication between flight crews and air traffic controllers became standardized.

Ms. López, now 52, is forever damaged, her body so mangled that she forgets precisely how many surgeries she has endured. More than 70. Her belly and knee would need another two operations, with more to come after that.

Left for dead

The red and white Avianca airliner departed Bogotá, Colombia, at 1:10 p.m. on Jan. 25, 1990, bound for Kennedy International Airport.

It stopped in Medellín to take on fuel and passengers, including Astrid López, a teenager who was traveling by herself to Disney World. Her parents knew how much their daughter loved Disney, so as a reward for her good grades, they bought her a plane ticket to New York and then to Florida.

The jet left Medellín with plenty of fuel for the trip. But foul weather caused cascading delays across the northeastern United States, forcing Flight 52 into three different

holding patterns for a total of 77 minutes. When the plane finally got permission to begin its descent into New York, the flight crew failed to warn air traffic controllers that they were dangerously low on fuel, investigators would later find.

Instead, the first officer made vague requests for “priority” routing, which ground control did not understand to be an emergency. The plane was slotted into a normal, circuitous route for final approach. As winds gusted violently, the pilot flew too low to safely reach the runway, forcing him to burn fuel on a last-second abort.

The plane was over Long Island when its systems started to fail.

Image

The wreckage of Avianca Flight 52, which killed 73 people.Credit...Tim Clary/Associated Press

“We just, uh, lost two engines and, uh, we need priority please,” the first officer radioed at 9:32 p.m., according to a transcript of communications.

The cabin lights went dark, as did the navigation lights on the wings. The aircraft plunged silently through darkness.

A little over a minute later, the nose of the plane slammed into a mature oak tree. No one in the cockpit could have survived. The fuselage hit the ground so hard that the cabin seats were sheared from the floor and rocketed forward, crushing passengers.

Rescuers arrived to find chaos. The fuselage had broken into three pieces. The cabin was a twisted nest of luggage, galley carts and human bodies. A toddler dangled from a tree, cold but uninjured. Passengers begged for help.

In the middle of it all, one girl made no sound.

The rescuers who found Astrid assumed she was dead. Some of her skull had been sliced away, exposing her brain. Another part of her brain lay beside her on the ground. The rescuers carried her down the hill to a grassy field transformed into a makeshift morgue. They covered her body with a white sheet.

Then she moaned.

No one believed she would live, a Red Cross volunteer recalled. The victim's face was so disfigured she could not be identified. Her only defining feature were the braces on her teeth. That was how her mother, calling the Community Hospital at Glen Cove from Medellín, confirmed that the nearly dead girl was her 17-year-old daughter, Astrid.

Image

Miriam Ballesteros with her daughter Astrid, in her hospital room on Long Island, more than three months after the crash.Credit...Vic DeLucia/The New York Times

Months after the crash, Astrid gave an interview in her hospital room to a reporter from The New York Times. She sat up, smiled, and said she planned to become a lawyer.

"Now I hope I can continue my studies here," she said.

But her health crises were just beginning. A round of surgeries addressed her brain injuries. Others inserted metal to straighten her limbs. Astrid's mother, Miriam Ballesteros, flew from Colombia to care for her.

After a few months, Astrid was finally ready to meet with the child psychiatrist who had been treating the injured children of Flight 52. The crash had changed their lives; they would change his.

Lessons from a tragedy

Before the disaster, Dr. Victor Fornari was a suburban psychiatrist focused on helping adolescents with eating disorders. His practice was based nearby, at North Shore University Hospital, and he happened to be fluent in Spanish. Within days, he was treating children who had gruesome injuries and deep emotional scars.

Dr. Fornari gave the children paper, crayons, markers and paint, and asked them to draw whatever came to mind. At the time, the academic literature on art therapy for children facing traumatic stress was scant, but the process proved helpful. An 11-year-old boy drew a boat overcome by high waves, with some passengers drowning and others who survived. A girl who was not yet 3 drew squiggles and dots, explaining that they represented people who were safe because they were not on the plane.

"Some things are so unspeakable," Dr. Fornari said. "Drawing, music, dancing — it's a way to express things that might be hard to put into words."

Astrid's older sister, Liliana, has helped her navigate her recovery in the years after the crash. Credit...Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Of the 21 children in his care, Astrid was the oldest, and her recovery would take the longest. She spent six years shuttling among hospitals, Dr. Fornari's office and her mother's rented apartment on Long Island before she would finally be stable enough to go home. The survivors of the flight and the relatives of those who died eventually shared a $200 million settlement paid by Avianca Airlines and the U.S. government.

As a child, Astrid had been disciplined and reserved, Liliana Donlon, her older sister, said. Now a combination of brain damage, memory loss and chronic physical pain had turned her into someone who lashed out at the rules and was happy with her power — even in her weakened physical state — to resist. Such "disinhibition" is a common, lasting trait among brain injury victims, Dr. Fornari said.

Image

Dr. Fornari, Ms. López and Ms. Willson at the crash site.Credit...Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

“Her brain is different than it was before the crash,” he said.

Ms. López went through a period of rebellion when she returned home to Colombia. With money from the settlement, she said, she partied and bought herself nice clothes as well as a farm outside Medellín. For a while she even rode motorcycles and Jet Skis.

“It took me a long time, but now I’m trying to do what my doctors tell me,” she said. “I never thought I would live this long.”

Based on his experience with the children of Flight 52, Dr. Fornari published his research about his treatment protocols in 1999. Soon, he was asked to contribute to disaster response plans for Nassau County and local school districts, focusing on the mental health of child survivors. He later wrote an update for New York State’s disaster plan.

That led to a call from the State Department. Officials there told Dr. Fornari that intelligence suggested Manhattan faced the threat of a major terrorist attack, he said. They asked him to help create a federal plan for treating affected children. It was January 2001.

“I said, ‘With all due respect, why me?’” he said recently. “I guess nobody else had taken care of 21 kids who survived a plane crash.”

In the wake of the crash, the Federal Aviation Administration mandated that all flight crews from overseas airlines be proficient in English.

It was, the F.A.A. would say later, “a landmark for the international adoption of English as the standard language of aviation.”

The Avianca crash also highlighted the need for stronger seats. An F.A.A. report from 2022 referred directly to the Cove Neck disaster: “This and other accidents led to the adoption” of rules requiring all new planes to come with seats capable of withstanding up to 16 times the force of gravity, or 16g. The seats on the Avianca jet, which was built in 1967, were rated to only 9g.

Grateful, but not always

Suffering from a recent knee replacement, Ms. López had decided to skip the memorial service. If a visit to the site of the crash had failed to trigger any memories, sitting uncomfortably for an hour wouldn’t help. And her family finds it difficult to know whether she remembers any part of her life before the tragedy, or whether the things she calls memories are actually shadows created by the suggestions of other people.

“Maybe she remembers 20 percent” of the events they discuss from their childhood, said Ms. Donlon, Astrid’s sister. “Or maybe she remembers nothing? I don’t know.”

Image

Ms. López with her niece, Vanessa Donlon (at left), Ms. Willson and her sister near the spot of the makeshift morgue after the crash.Credit...Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Her visit to Long Island was not all bad, and she was happy to reunite with the many caregivers she bonded with. When she first arrived in Dr. Fornari's office — in a wheelchair and dressed for the occasion, wearing makeup and a white lacy pantsuit with blue flowers — she cried, overwhelmed to see her favorite doctor for the first time in years.

Often, she is grateful to be alive. But not always. Her life is a timetable of pain: surgery, followed by months of grueling physical therapy, then another surgery. Getting out of bed, eating, putting on clothes. Every motion hurts.

Even after having been pulled lifeless from the wreckage of a plane and set down among the dead, Ms. López does not believe she has insights to give anybody about pain. She had no choice about nearly dying or living. She lives because she must, but no one can make her like it.

Christopher Maag is a reporter covering the New York City region for The Times. More about Christopher Maag

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