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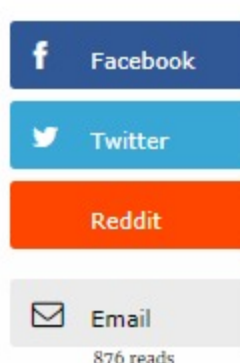
How the Lockerbie disaster haunts Scotland, 30 years on

The explosion on Pan Am Flight 103 ripped the aircraft apart and the debris plummeted on to the roofs of the town.



One of the engines of the plane in a Lockerbie street

ROY LETKEY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



On the evening of 21 December 1988, John Parkes, an explosives engineer based in Edinburgh, heard the news that a plane had crashed over the Scottish border town of Lockerbie. His first thought was: “Christ, this sounds bad.” Parkes called one of his employees, a former miner called Geordie, and arranged to pick him up and drive the 70 or so miles south to the scene of the disaster.

But before he could leave, the phone rang again. “It was a steeplejack pal of mine, Joe Pendrick – he had just phoned up for a blether,” Parkes recalled when I first interviewed him in his cottage, in 2013. As soon as Joe, a former paratrooper, heard what had happened, he offered to come too.

The three men drove through the night down the motorway. The exit to Lockerbie was blocked with council vehicles, but Parkes didn’t want to waste time talking to officials. “I just drove up and shouted ‘Engineers for disaster relief, we’re down from Edinburgh.’” They let him through.

Lockerbie, a sleepy historic town that just happened to be under a transatlantic flight path, had suddenly found itself at the centre of an international catastrophe. The explosion on Pan Am Flight 103 ripped the aircraft apart and the debris plummeted on to the roofs of the town. In the three decades since that night, the question of who planted the bomb and why has haunted the town’s residents, the relatives of the 259 victims on the plane and the 11 on the ground, and the Scottish government. It has spawned conspiracy theories blaming everyone from Iranians to CIA drug smugglers.

Parkes had driven to Lockerbie on his own initiative, but he was swiftly put to work. A fire was raging on Sherwood Crescent, where it would later emerge the wings and fuel tanks had landed. The consequent blaze claimed 11 residents’ lives. “As we got closer to the inferno there was a lot of crap lying around the roads and we were bumping over that,” said Parkes. “And then the sights unfolded like World War II.” Some houses had been flattened, leaving only a crater. “The crater gave me a sign that there were certainly no survivors off the aeroplane at that point because it was massive and it was still steaming.”

The team were sent to a house where the police suspected that the bodies of passengers had fallen. It was in darkness, but the three men thought they could see the shape of a woman’s body on the roof. The air had a “strange, perfumey smell”. They went round the back of the building, and there they had the first inkling of the house of horrors they had stumbled into.

“There was half a face,” Parkes remembered. “It was very bizarre, just sitting on the windowsill as if one half had been sliced off.” He laid it on the ground.

Joe, the former paratrooper, remained calm, but Geordie, the ex-miner, seemed more affected. “You can sense when people are not too happy – it’s like taking people up heights,” Parkes said. They left Geordie and opened the back door. “The house was immaculate. Somebody had just got up and left it. But when you opened the bedroom door you just opened it out to oblivion. There was nothing.” There was a bed, and a wardrobe, but the floor was hanging in mid-air and a woman’s legs dangled from the slate roof. The men were unable to remove the body safely, so they covered it in sheets instead.

Next Parkes entered the kitchen, where an even more macabre scene greeted him. “There was one guy sitting strapped in his seat, not a mark on him, he looked like he was sleeping,” he said. “I only noticed there was dust across his eyelashes and a big wallet lying between his legs bulging with dollars and his tattoos, and I says, ‘American squaddie going home on leave for Christmas.’ Poor bastard but he was stone dead. And then, two metres from him, an arm was sticking out, a big black arm with a big gold chain round it. Just an arm.” Alongside them sat a torso of another woman. It was at this point Parkes realised that the ground he had been walking on was littered with body parts – the remains of those who had boarded the doomed plane.

By dawn, reinforcements had arrived: police from Glasgow, and Americans in nondescript coats. It was the start of an investigation that would last years, and stretch from small-town Scotland, to Malta, to Palestine and Libya, before ultimately leading to the disputed conviction of the Libyan Abdelbaset al-Megrahi in 2001. For the three men from Edinburgh, though, it was the end of a long night. They drove back to the capital, stopping en route at a hotel for a dram. Parkes remembers feeling sad rather than shocked. “You think, ‘We never saved anybody.’”

Initially, Parkes tried to forget what he had seen. “I washed my hands of it. I refused to read papers, I refused to watch television.” It was only years later, when the trials began in the late 1990s, that he re-engaged.

He believes to this day that Lockerbie was a self-inflicted tragedy that occurred when a shipment of munitions stowed in the hold was accidentally triggered. He says his calls to investigators were not returned.

His willingness to challenge the official narrative was seized upon by relatives of the Lockerbie victims, led by English doctor Jim Swire, who viewed al-Megrahi as a scapegoat for more powerful plotters. Parkes’s critics, however, have likened his observations to a conspiracy theorist’s hunt for a “smoking gun”. Al-Megrahi was released on compassionate grounds by the Scottish government in 2009 after being diagnosed with terminal cancer, although his survival for three further years fuelled suspicions that there were other forces at play. In 2014, Scotland’s chief prosecutor reaffirmed his belief that al-Megrahi was guilty.

As for Parkes, the last 30 years have not treated him kindly. When I spoke to him late last month, he was in financial difficulties and, at 72, is battling a rare form of cancer. What would he say to his younger self, on that night he set off for Lockerbie? “I would have told myself – excuse my French – to get tae fuck out of it,” he says. “I always felt there was something sinister.”