

2000-degree inferno

AN AIRPORT bomb blast 15 years ago, sparked by a small Spanish separatist movement, had unexpected nightmare repercussions when 583 people died, 100km away, in the world's worst aviation disaster.

The tragic scenario unfolded on a fog-shrouded runway at Los Rodeos Airport, on Tenerife, the largest of Spain's Canary Islands, after two Boeing 747 jumbos were diverted from Las Palmas, a neighboring island and the site of the bomb blast.

Pan American's Clipper Victor, full of elderly people bound for a Mediterranean cruise, and the Dutch airline, KLM's Rhine River, bearing package holidaymakers looking forward to an Easter in the sun, were preparing to return to Las Palmas after that airport had reopened.

Beneath low, scudding clouds and in a fog, which sharply reduced visibility, the Pan Am jet was forced to taxi along the main runway because the usual taxiing strip was crowded with planes as a result of the diversions.

The chief pilot, Captain Victor Grubbs, 56, had been instructed by the control tower to turn off into a side lane but, before he could do so, the KLM jumbo came roaring towards him at nearly 300kmh.

Captain Grubbs, who survived with first and second-degree burns, tried desperately to swerve off the runway, while his opposite number, Captain Jacob Veldhuizen Van Zanten, tried to lift his plane's nose wheel over the Clipper.

But both efforts were futile. The Dutch jet slammed into the other almost head on, ripping off the roof of the fuselage from nose to tail.

The refuelled Rhine River skidded to a halt 200 metres further down the runway — as a 2000-degree inferno erupted. Other explosions ripped the American plane into three sections.

All 248 aboard the Dutch plane perished but, miraculously, 61 passengers on the Pan Am aircraft survived, 15 of them escaping unhurt.

Eyewitnesses were horrified to see people engulfed in flames run screaming out of the fog. Except for their shoes, some were completely naked as they staggered towards the airport terminal, desperately seeking relief from their shocking burns.

In past eras, the volcanic string of seven Canary Islands, situated 100km off the coast of southern Morocco, were known by Greeks and Romans as The Fortunate Islands, but they were embroiled in nothing but misfortune on March 27, 1977.

The bomb planted in an airport flower shop at Las Palmas seriously injured a salesgirl and caused minor injuries to seven others.

It was the work of the Movement for the Self-Determination and Independence of the Canary Archipelago, which was conducting a campaign to turn the islands into a socialist African republic.

A telephone caller gave a 15-minute warning to evacuate the airport.

With the re-routing of all air traffic, a huge burden was placed on Los Rodeos, a wind-swept airfield, situated on a 600m-high plateau and already bearing a chequered history.

Four air crashes had occurred there in the past 12 years, the worst killing 155 when a plane carrying tourists home to Germany crashed and burst into flames on takeoff.

The airport lacked ground radar, meaning traffic controllers had to track runway movements physically. With the number of takeoffs and land-

583 died in world's worst air disaster

HISTORICAL *Feature*

ings doubled to 400 that day, it stretched the already inadequate facilities to breaking point.

When the all-clear was given for diverted aircraft to return to Las Palmas, visibility was down to about 450m.

Late that afternoon, local time, the KLM jet, which had arrived from Amsterdam, was given permission by the control tower to proceed to the end of the 3400m runway and to get ready for takeoff in a north-westerly direction.

Three minutes later, the Pan Am jumbo, from Los Angeles, followed it off the tarmac and began taxiing south-easterly along the runway, with instructions to take a turnoff to allow the other plane to get off the ground safely.

The co-pilot, First Officer Robert Bragg, had confirmed that he would tell the control tower when his plane was clear of the runway.

The Clipper was still 150m short of the exit, however, when he and Captain Grubbs saw the lights of the Dutch plane approaching through the fog.

"I think he's taking off," the captain exclaimed. Then the control tower heard: "What's he doing? He'll kill us all."

Terrified passengers saw the other plane coming straight at them and instinctively placed their heads between their knees as Captain Grubbs



All that was left of the Pan Am 747, above. Miraculously, 61 survived, including the plane's skipper. The scarred tail of the KLM Jumbo, left. A tragic mix-up in messages resulted in the horrendous collision.

frantically swung his slow-moving giant towards the verge. But he was too late to avoid the inevitable.

The KLM jet, which had begun lifting off the ground, smashed through the Pan Am plane just above its right wing.

A wave of heat swept the runway as flaming wreckage was hurled hundreds of metres. Ninety-five per cent of the bodies later recovered were charred beyond recognition. All on the Dutch plane burned to death.

Aboard the American aircraft, some passengers were thrown from the wreckage as it exploded, while, amid wretched scenes of panic and screaming, others managed to leap from the flames only to be met by a sea of burning fuel.

Most of the survivors were in the front section of the aircraft. "It exploded from the back," said Lynda Daniel, a 20-year-old Los Angeles college student, who was travelling with her parents and five friends. "Most of the people sitting in the first six rows made it."

A few started to run away from the carnage across the grass, only for flames to catch up with them.

"It was a shocking sight," said a Spanish journalist, who had been in the airport terminal when the crash occurred. "They

were on fire and their screams shattered us. Most of them were shockingly burnt."

Local radio interrupted programs with calls for all military and civilian doctors and nurses in the islands to report to the disaster scene as soon as possible.

Police closed all roads leading to the airport, except for authorised traffic, but the persistent fog hampered rescuers and ambulance staff in their race to get the survivors to hospital.

Black-hatted Guardia police and firemen joined in the grisly task of removing corpses to a hangar, where they formed two rows, each 50m long.

Among the harrowing finds was that of a mother clutching a baby to her breast. Human limbs were still being found in the smouldering wreckage a couple of days later.

The majority of the Pan Am passengers were from southern California. They included 34 residents of an idyllic retirement village in Laguna, of whom only nine returned to pick up lives haunted by the memories of dead friends.

Then there was the curious case of a 49-year-old housewife, Mrs Martha Burke, who lost her twin sister, Mrs Margaret Fox, in the disaster.

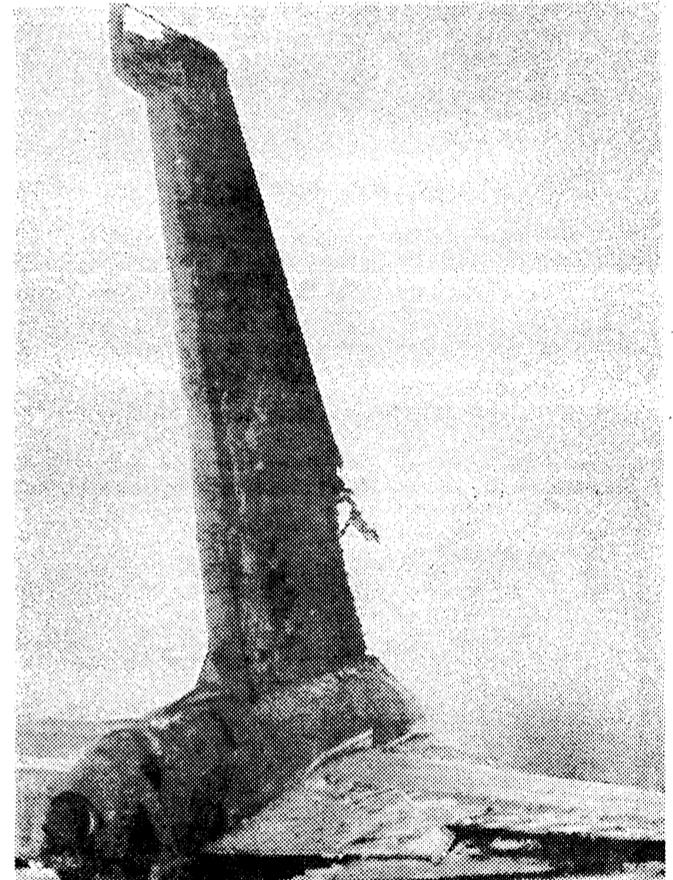
Mrs Burke, who was prevented from accompanying her sister on the flight because of a family illness, revealed how she had shared the agony of that day back home in California.

As soon as she got up on March 27, she began to feel nervous and uneasy. She then started getting "this terrible burning inside" and told her husband: "Something's wrong, something's terribly wrong with Margaret."

When she eventually discovered the fate of her sister's plane later that day, she felt a burning sensation in her stomach and chest for 15 or 20 minutes.

Scientists confirmed that Mrs Burke had suffered the phenomenon of extra-sensory empathy, whereby twins can transmit pain to each other even over vast distances.

Helped by the recovery of the



"black box" recorders from both aircraft, the investigation began into what was the cause of the horrendous crash.

After an 18-month probe, the verdict was delivered: the "fundamental cause" of the accident was the Dutch pilot's failure to gain clearance before starting his takeoff run.

Captain Veldhuizen had told his co-pilot to ask for takeoff clearance but inexplicably had opened the throttles — before getting an answer.

The flustered co-pilot then radioed the tower: "We are now at takeoff." Since clearance had not been given, the tower assumed the KLM jet was simply at takeoff position and replied: "Standby . . . I will call you."

That order coincided with the Pan Am message that the Clipper was still taxiing on the runway but the information was garbled by an unexplained whistling sound.

In the rolling Dutch jumbo, the flight engineer twice asked: "Is he (Pan Am) not clear then?" Emphatically, Captain Veldhuizen replied: "Yes." People were mystified how

such an experienced pilot could have made such a drastic mistake.

The report even speculated that, after a delay of several hours in Tenerife, the pilot might have rushed his takeoff to avoid a KLM rule against crew overtime.

The erratic weather conditions might also have put pressure on him. Other contributing factors could have been the blipping out of essential communications and the use of imprecise language between the control tower and the two airliners.

Immediately after the accident, the Spanish Government announced the installation of new and improved air traffic control equipment throughout the country, in response to "reports on the alleged danger of Spanish airspace".

For the air travel industry as a whole, the crash was a sobering reminder of the new responsibilities it faced in the then still relatively young age of mass-capacity, wide-bodied aircraft.

The force of two jumbos colliding on a holiday island could indeed be felt around the world.