



# JOURNEY TO HER *father*



SCDS music teacher Sue Ellis was just a little girl in 1959. On June 26th of that year, her mother took her to a dental appointment. Sue recalls the dentist looking at her teeth and then giving her a toy. Afterwards, back in the car and heading for home, her mother turned on the radio. **And life changed forever.**



SCDS  
music  
teacher  
Sue Ellis

As Sue recalls it, “the announcer was relaying the mundane news of the day. Until one piece that was ominously different. An airplane had crashed outside Milan, Italy. It was a TWA plane.” Sue’s father, Frank Ellis, was a TWA pilot. A phone call soon confirmed her mother’s foreboding. Twelve minutes after takeoff, the crew of flight 891 reported the aircraft was climbing through 10,000 feet. A few minutes later, lightning caused a structural failure and the aircraft broke up in mid-air before crashing. All 70 people on board were killed. It was the first fatal aviation accident involving a Lockheed Starliner. It was also the worst air crash of 1959.

Growing up, it was just the three of them: Sue, her sister Kathy, and their widowed mom. Following in her mother’s footsteps Sue became a teacher. Her sister Kathy, like their father, chose work in the airlines. Sue says, “Most people dread turning 30, but I couldn’t wait. My 29th year was filled with associations of my father’s death. Being superstitious, I neither wanted to fly on June 26th, nor visit Italy.” Occasionally she and her sister searched the internet for bits of information. They would “stumble upon a sentence or two in an aviation history book or a site that listed air disasters.” But nothing prepared them for the flood of information when they went online in early July of 2009, just after the 50th anniversary of the event. Far from being an obscure aviation footnote, Flight 891 was a richly remembered and memorialized part of the history of Olgiate Olona, the town where the plane crashed in a field. Sue and Kathy connected with a journalist, Alberto Columbo, who had written two books about the air disaster, and so began an unexpected chapter of life for the sisters.

On June 26, 2010, Sue and Kathy arrived in Olgiate Olona to attend a ceremony for the 51st anniversary of the crash. (Their mother had died in 2006.) Alberto and his wife Anna were their hosts. Sue reports being “so moved just seeing so many people there honoring the victims. Strangers all, yet ‘la familia’.” Prior to the ceremony, they met many townspeople who had actually been at the crash site: the Red Cross volunteer who was the first to call for aid, the fire marshal who stood on the burning fuselage in hopes of recovering survivors, and the gentleman who placed a small object in Sue’s hand—“a piece of the plane that didn’t burn,” he said.

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The ceremony began at 5:33 p.m., the time of the crash. The church bell rang 70 times, once for each person lost. The names of the victims were read, as well as an ecumenical international prayer. The mayor spoke of Sue and Kathy in his speech. Students in the town read poems, a special plaque was unveiled, and children placed beautiful flowers nearby. Reflecting on the experience that brought new life out of tragedy, Sue said, “There were so many photographs and hugs and double-kisses! I was struck by how ‘right’ everything was; that I was meant to be there. It was the closest I’ve ever felt to my father. Each kindness towards us filled us with so much love and beautiful memories of him. We were never able to make our own memories of our father, and this handful of days created a lifetime of connections to him.”