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Searching for closure, Kansas City man attends 1959 Italian plane crash remembrance

By BRIAN BURNES - The Kansas City Star

On Friday, Don Lueke said one last goodbye.

It had been 50 years in coming.

Lueke was among hundreds who gathered for ceremonies near Milan, Italy, commemorating the June 26, 1959, crash of a TWA Constellation.

Lueke's father, Donald A. Lueke, a flight engineer for Trans World Airlines, was one of 68 who died.

Lueke believes his trip to Italy represented a final opportunity to reconcile the complicated emotions he's wrestled with over the past 50 years. He believes much of his professional life — which included 31 years with TWA, some as a flight engineer on international routes — has been a tribute to his father. But this week's trip is also acknowledgment of his mother, Virginia.

She reared Lueke and his three younger siblings after her husband's death but struggled with the loss until her death in 2001.

"I don't know what closure is," Lueke said earlier this week at his home in Kansas City, North.

"But I know my mother never had it."

On Friday, he joined a procession to the crash site in Olgiate Olona, the small community near Milan where the plane crashed in 1959. The ceremonies — scheduled at the same time of the crash 50 years ago — included a formal reading of the names of all who perished.

When the tragedy occurred in 1959, his family endured the tragedy in comparative isolation. While nine TWA employees died on the flight, Donald A. Lueke was the only Kansas City area resident.

But the younger Lueke said he and his wife, Rosine, met many family members of those who had died on the flight and who had traveled from the United States and across Europe to attend the ceremonies. Lueke also met longtime residents of Olgiate Olona who had recollections.

"The crash was a traumatic event for this community," Lueke said by telephone Friday. "I'm here now in the Olgiate Olona city hall, which in 1959 was an orphanage.

"The plane flew right over the orphanage before crashing."

"The 1959 tragedy remains of interest to aviation historians in part because it was one of the few commercial airline disasters in which the probable cause was thought to be a lightning strike", said Bob Woodling, a Kansas City native who today is a retired aeronautical engineer near Seattle.



CHRIS OBERHOLTZ/Kansas City Star

Donald Lueke and his wife, Rosine, learned online that the Italian community where the TWA plane crash occurred was planning a commemoration.

“That is a very rare event,” Woodling said.

It also involved the Lockheed Constellation, an iconic propeller aircraft with a triple-fin tail. The plane still recalls the era of passenger airliner service of the late 1940s and 1950s.

“It was the ultimate in propeller airliners at the time,” Woodling said.

Lueke said he was pleased to represent the still-active community of TWA veterans. Company representatives, eager to help the Lueke family after the accident, hired him as a ticket agent after he graduated from the University of Kansas in 1964.

Litigation following the crash resulted in a \$3,000 payment, which Lueke invested in pilot training. He served several years as a TWA flight engineer – just like his father.

“There would be times when I was walking across a runway somewhere in Europe and I would think, ‘I am doing the same thing Dad did.’”

Although Lueke considered upgrading to co-pilot or first officer, a TWA executive gently told him after a training flight that he should reconsider.

“There was a sense of failure,” Lueke said. “It took me until I was about 30 years old before I didn’t have to be Donald A. Lueke, I could be Donald E. Lueke.”

Lueke transferred into inventory control and other ground-based duties. He left TWA in 1995 and spent four years at Vanguard Airlines.

Today, at 67, Lueke is semi-retired.

Yet over the years a sense of satisfying resolution has eluded him, Lueke said, in part for reasons he acknowledged some might consider morbid.

“It was a closed casket,” Lueke said.

“The bodies had been badly burned and a TWA flight engineer told us that my father first was identified by his belt buckle, which he had made with his name and the TWA logo. An uncle of mine asked that the casket be opened, but one of the mortuary guys wouldn’t do it.”

Lueke’s family didn’t press the matter, Lueke said. But he’s wondered about that in the 50 years since.

“It was like my father just never came back. We always kind of half-expected to see him driving up the road, coming home. But it never happened.

“I’m only an amateur psychologist, but it was like he never did say goodbye.”

It made a difference, Lueke said Friday, to be present for the ceremonies.

“I don’t know if it was closure,” he said. “But it was good to be in the last place my father was.”