

'After all these years, I find myself still in limbo. A horrible limbo'

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"I felt responsible for what I had done. For a long time, I couldn't sleep. I cried. I still get headaches. I can't seem to stop the yama yama, the mind chatter, that goes around in my brain. You can't help it."

Like the grieving relatives of those who perished in the explosion, Ms. Bakermans had hoped to get closure from last week's verdict in the exhaustive court proceedings against Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri, who were charged with conspiring to bomb the plane.

"I expected they would be found guilty. That this dark cloud would be lifted off me and off the victims' families. That there would be justice," she said.

Instead, she listened with disbelief as Mr. Justice Ian Bruce Josephson rejected the credibility of key prosecution witnesses. "I thought, 'No, no, no, this can't be happening.' By the time he said they were not guilty, I was just sobbing. I couldn't believe it. I was devastated."

Shortly after the verdict, a reporter found Ms. Bakermans leaning against a wall outside the courtroom, a glazed look in her eyes.

"I am in absolute shock," she said. "I came here expecting closure. Now, after all these years, I find myself still in limbo. A horrible limbo."

On June 22, 1985, Ms. Bakermans had been filling in for another employee when an insistent business-class passenger demanded that his bag be tagged for New Delhi. Although he had purchased, with

cash, a ticket from Vancouver to Toronto to New Delhi, he was confirmed only as far as Toronto.

There was little worry about airplane bombings in those days, so Ms. Bakermans yielded and re-tagged the passenger's bag to Air-India Flight 182 to New Delhi.

"I remember he had longish hair and dark, sparkling eyes. He was East Indian, maybe 25 to 35 years old. He wasn't obnoxious. He just wanted to have his baggage transferred in Toronto," she recalled.

"He said: 'I paid business class for my ticket so I would not have to transfer my own bags.' And I agreed with him. We do help business class customers. I'm just a normal person. I was doing my job, trying to help a passenger.

"Why did I do it? Because I be-

lieved him," she said. "It was probably the biggest mistake of my life."

Friends who suggest the bombing wasn't her fault don't understand, Ms. Bakermans said. She likens her feelings to those of someone involved in a car crash that kills a family of five.

"Even if you are only partially at fault, you never forget it."

As one of the few people known, for sure, to have seen one of the Air-India conspirators, Ms. Bakermans' memory was a large part of the police investigation.

At one point, she was hypnotized to try and improve her recollection. In 1992, she was flown to India on what she describes as a surreal trip to see whether she could identify Air-India suspect Lal Singh, who had been arrested for another crime

by Indian police.

Surrounded by Indian police with bullet-laden bandoliers and brandishing assault rifles, Ms. Bakermans failed to pick out Mr. Singh from a lineup as the passenger with the lethal luggage.

Through all her sleepless nights and agonizing days, Ms. Bakermans has persevered, staying at her airline job despite the frequent whispers from other staff questioning her decision.

Last year, she found some peace from the Dalai Lama. Passing through the Vancouver airport, the Tibetan holy leader was alerted to Ms. Bakermans' ordeal. He came over to talk to her.

"He said it was my karma, that I should not feel responsible. He told me to believe in God and gave my

shoulder a pat. It was like a blessing," she said. "I felt better."

And recently, she had an emotional meeting with some relatives of the Air-India victims.

"I'm the one who checked the bag and switched the tag," she said, tears streaming down her face. "But they all said: 'We don't blame you.' It was hard, but they were good to me."

After 35 years with CP Air, which became Canadian Airlines, and is now Air Canada, Ms. Bakermans retires later this month. It will be bittersweet.

"I'm a good ticket agent and this is what I will be remembered for," she said. "I'm walking away from my career with this cloud still over my head. Somehow, I have to learn to forgive myself and find peace."