

A HERO AMID HORROR

Gay passenger might have foiled hijackers by Tom Musbach

Amid sketchy reports about the crash of United Airlines Flight 93 on Sept. 11 in Pennsylvania, friends and relatives of a gay passenger think he might have tried to thwart the plane's hijackers.

Before the crash, Thomas Burnett of San Ramon, Calif., called his wife and said that he and two other passengers were prepared to take action against the men who had seized control of the plane, which was en route to San Francisco from Newark, N.J. "I know we're all going to die—there's three of us who are going to do something about it," he told her, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

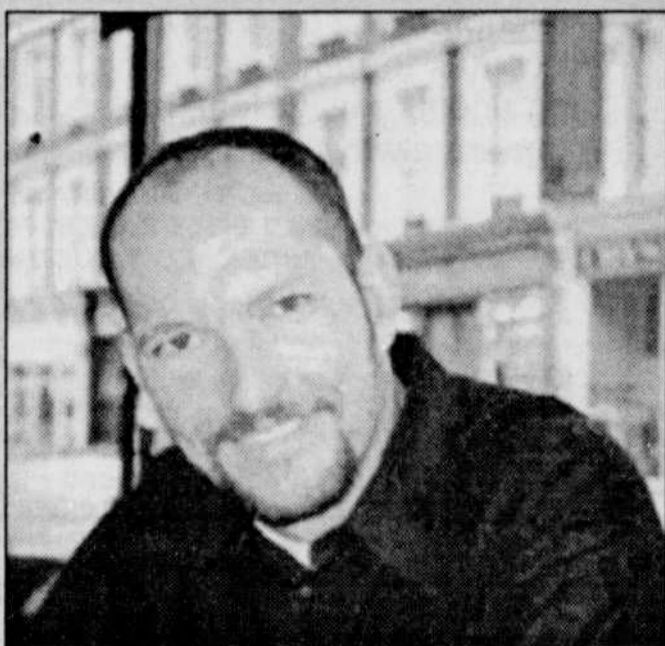
Mark Bingham, a 31-year-old public relations executive, also made a call from the plane. He told his mother, Alice Hoglan, about three men who claimed to have a bomb before the phone connection failed.

What happened between those calls and the plane's nose dive into a wooded field near Pittsburgh is still a matter of speculation. Nobody survived the crash.

Counterintelligence experts speculated the plane was headed toward a Washington, D.C., landmark before it crashed. Moments before the tragedy, three other hijacked planes, also traveling from the East Coast to California, destroyed the World Trade Center in New York and a portion of the Pentagon.

"This was the only flight of the four that did not reach its target, which they believed to be Camp David, and that gives us reason to believe that perhaps Mark was able to help save the lives of people on the ground," Hoglan, a United Airlines flight attendant, told NBC's *Today*.

A senior U.S. intelligence official told MSNBC.com that mobile phone communications from Flight 93 suggest three passengers



Mark Bingham

overpowered the hijackers but were unable to maintain control of the plane. Friends of Bingham, a former Division 1 rugby player who also played in San Francisco's gay rugby and basketball leagues, think he might have been one of the people who confronted the terrorists, but they acknowledge they might never be able to prove it.

"I have no doubt that if there was an opportunity to save lives that Mark would have initiated action," said Lloyd Kinoshita, who played pickup basketball games with Bingham. "He was a competitor and leader, but even more so he was a caring individual."

Friends said Bingham was a large, athletic man who once was gored in the leg while running with the bulls in Pamplona, Spain. He was the type of person, they said, who wouldn't be afraid to take on the hijackers.

"Today, in the face of this great tragedy, I am taking a small amount of comfort in the growing body of evidence indicating that Mark was a hero," said Bryce Eberhart, a PlanetOut Partners employee who played rugby with Bingham. □

TOM MUSBACH is news director of *Gay.com/PlanetOut.com Network*.

of a generation ago is that today many people can openly acknowledge the partners and families they have lost, no longer having to suppress those ties or the reasons for their sorrow. It does not lessen the loss, but it does help in the process of coping with it.

Today organizations are around to help people through the times of trouble. Some legal protections are in place, blood relatives often are more knowledgeable and accepting, and it is less likely that survivors will be thrown out of their homes, compounding the personal losses they have suffered.

Many members of the community are helping console friends in their grieving and maintain the routine of daily life. Christopher Goeken's work for a New York state senator has taken him into the residential complexes of the war zone at the southern tip of Manhattan.

Electricity and phone service are still out in much of the area, food supplies are running low, and seniors in particular are having a hard time coping with the deprivation and isolation. Even the simple act of refilling a medical prescription is a challenge.

Numerous events across the country were canceled or rescheduled because of the attacks, including all professional sporting events and most charitable events.

The National Minority AIDS Council canceled the U.S. Conference on AIDS. Some attendees already were heading for the event scheduled for Sept. 13 to 16 in Miami, but it

quickly became apparent that paralysis of the air transportation system made travel impossible for others.

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, citing safety concerns, canceled its "Teaching Respect for All" conference Sept. 21 to 23. It had been booked into a hotel just three miles from the Pentagon. The nearby Reagan National Airport, which many of the nearly 1,000 participants would have used, remains closed.

The 41st Interscience Conference on Antimicrobial Agents and Chemotherapy, a leading forum focusing on AIDS research, has been moved from Sept. 22 to 25 to Dec. 16 to 19 in Chicago.

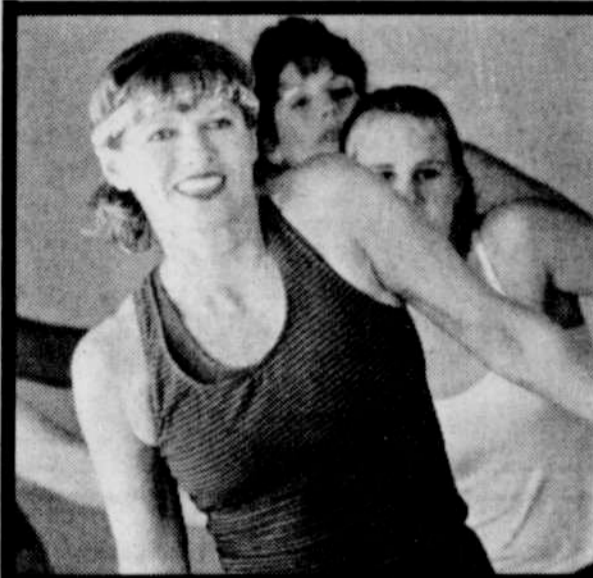
During a Metropolitan Community Church service Sept. 16, one worshiper told of losing a dozen friends in the attack. Among the injured is member Renee Barrett, who remains in a coma with severe burns and lung damage.

Multiple skin grafts will be required if and when her condition improves enough to allow those procedures. Her spouse, Enez Cooper, and teen-age son are keeping a bedside vigil.

Two AIDS fund-raisers did move forward during that first weekend in San Francisco. One was a fashion-oriented event, the other a five-kilometer run.

They prompted outrage from activist Michael Petrelis. "I'm sickened by the greed of AIDS Inc. in San Francisco during this time of turmoil." □

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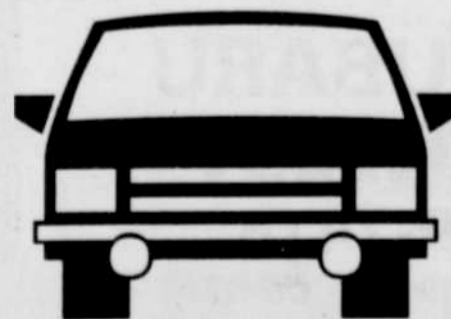
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