

Crash: Possible software malfunction forced planes to nosedive

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dived into the ocean.

Investigators suspect a malfunction of software designed to prevent the risk of a stall, but instead pushed the noses of the planes earthward.

Max planes are grounded all around the world. This week, two major U.S. airlines that fly Boeings — American and United — announced it would be until at least November before they start flying Max planes again.

Tangney won't soon forget the day of the crash. Someone from the American Embassy in Ethiopia called Ike and Susan Riffel to tell them their sons were aboard the doomed flight. The news quickly spread throughout the family. Tangney remembers feeling shaken and stunned.

"I knew they were on an adventure, but I didn't think about Ethiopia," she said. "They were on their way to Nairobi, Kenya, to do a safari."

At first, she refused to believe, not able to wrap her mind around a world without the brothers.

She described them as polar opposites. Mel Riffel, 29, was an ebullient people person. He wore crazy Hawaiian shirts, enjoyed extreme sports and preferred to hug instead of shake hands. He once skied Mount Shasta and waterskied Shasta Lake in the same day. Bennett, 26, more bookish and cerebral, was a minimalist and a vegan who rode a motorcycle and nurtured strong beliefs about the environment, religion and philosophy.

"They were different, but they loved each other," Tangney said.

The globe-trotting adventure was a last hurrah before Mel's wife Brittney gave birth.

In the aftermath of the



Mary Ann Tangney (third from right) and other family members model their Live (Riff)ully T-shirts to honor family members Mel and Bennett Riffel, who died in the crash of a Boeing Max plane in March.

Contributed photo

crash, news reports drew Tangney even as she tried to stay away. She learned the plane had hit the ground at 575 mph and dug a crater 32 feet deep and 131 feet long. She saw images of grieving family members and smiling faces of those who had died. She learned that the passenger list included people from 35 countries, many humanitarians and one Canadian family of three.

"I couldn't keep away from it, but I didn't want to see it anymore," she said. "It was so sad."

The family gathered in Redding, California, to celebrate the brothers' lives. Many attended wear-

ing bright Hawaiian shirts in Mel's honor. The men's bodies were absent.

"There never will be bodies. There's a big hole in the ground," Tangney said. "There are bits and pieces."

Tangney said family members did mouth swabs for DNA for identification purposes, but that "they said we might not get anything for six months or ever."

Though some victims' family members are rushing to sue Boeing, Ike and Susan are waiting until the investigation wraps up, said Tangney. However, the couple allowed "60 Minutes Australia"

to interview them for an investigatory show about the tragedy. The "60 Minutes" team concluded that the Max had a fatal flaw and that the updated plane was rushed to market to beat Boeing rival Airbus. The plane's flight control system, according to one aviation expert, was a "monster in a cage" that took control of the jets and put them into high-speed dives.

On the show, Susan lamented the lack of response from Boeing.

"Ethiopian Airlines reached out with condolences and offer of assistance," Susan said. "And yet nothing from Boeing

who created the plane?"

Soon after, Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg made a comment to CBS News.

"I do personally apologize to the families," he said. "We feel terrible about these accidents. We apologize for what happened. We are sorry for the loss of lives in both accidents, and that will never change. That will always be with us. I can tell you it affects me directly as a leader of this company, it's very difficult."

He said the company made necessary changes and that he'd put his own family on one of the planes "without hesitation."

Tangent aches for Susan

and for her brother, Ike.

"Ike, he's that guy always taking care of everyone else," she said. "Susan is a caring, loving, beautiful mom who loved her kids unconditionally."

Now both sons are gone. The family misses the outgoing goofball that ruined many a family picture by sticking out his tongue and the super-smart bookworm with an affinity for "Jeopardy."

Tangney's son, Thomas, wrote about his cousins after the crash. "I learned from Mel that you need to embrace every moment and never pass up an opportunity for adventure," he wrote. "From Bennett, I learned to always be an active listener and to not shy away from some of life's most difficult questions."

Mel's wife, Brittney, gave birth to Emma on May 16. Before the birth, she wrote about broken dreams, the promise of new life and her indomitable husband. She will miss Mel's ability to stay chill no matter what.

"No fear, no worries about what anyone thinks," she wrote. "He was so good at being himself."

The family created T-shirts with the words "LIVE (Riff)ULLY" in honor of the two men's ability to live life to the fullest.

Tangney said Ike and Susan may someday visit the crash site, but not in the near future. Legal action is a possibility. They are taking it a day at a time.

She doesn't deny her anger at Boeing and says this is a case of "profits over people."

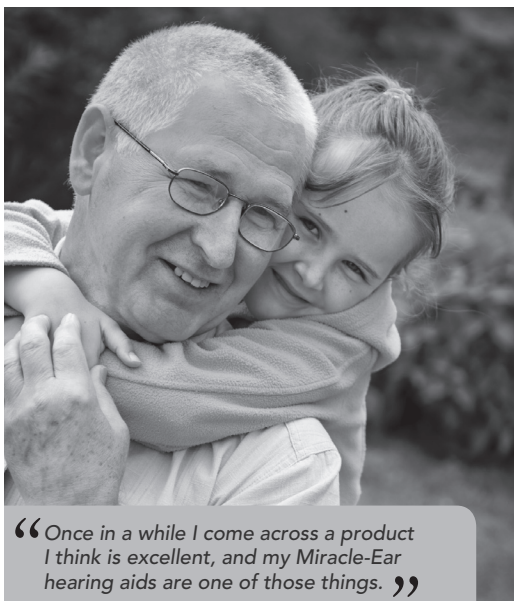
"They knew they had a problem," she said, "but they continued to let people get on those planes."

Contact Kathy Aney at kaney@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0810.

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