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Flight 93 crash site combed for clues

It could be key to terrorist attack, lawmaker says. Victims' kin arriving.

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By LISA KOZLESKI
 Of The Morning Call

SHANKSVILLE -- Fog-shrouded hills gave way to sunflowers and sweet summer smells Wednesday morning near this rural southwestern Pennsylvania community as investigators and others began the hardest work of responding to the crash of United Airlines Flight 93.

For more than 200 state police, FBI agents, transportation specialists and United Airlines officials, that effort started with a painstaking search for evidence amid the pulverized wreckage of the plane, which crashed Tuesday en route from Newark, N.J., to San Francisco, killing 38 passengers and seven crew members.

The investigators, who included personnel from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the National Transportation Safety Board, the Federal Aviation Administration and Somerset County, got to work "gridding and mapping" the three-mile area around the crash site.

Roland Corvington of the Pittsburgh FBI office said that finding critical evidence such as the plane's "black box," personal effects, airplane parts and victims could take three to five weeks.

The procedure involves combing the area for pieces of the wreckage that could point to the likely terrorist culprits and serve as evidence at a possible trial, all the while maintaining respect for the "sanctity of the place where 45 souls were lost," he said.

The first families of the crash victims to come to

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Stonycreek Township arrived late Wednesday afternoon and were housed in a nearby hotel, according to FBI officials.

When they visit the site, they will find an instant village surrounding the deep crater in the field where the plane crashed, a quickly built hub of towers, telephone trucks and trailers where the investigators are coordinating their work.

Those officials have been joined by volunteers from groups such as the Red Cross and Salvation Army disaster response teams, as well as authorities from PennDOT, various county departments, the National Guard and even a dozen state troopers on horseback.

U.S. Rep John Murtha of Johnstown said the site holds the best hope for finding an intact flight data recorder, or black box, among the four hijacked and crashed airplanes.

"This site could be the key," said Murtha, whose 12th District includes Somerset County and who is the ranking Democrat on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. "I believe there was a struggle to make that plane come down here. Some heroic individual must have brought that plane down here, because the target was not rural Pennsylvania."

The Associated Press reported there was speculation that passengers attempted to wrest control of the Boeing 757 from terrorists to save it from being used in a more devastating attack. The three other hijacked planes were deliberately slammed into the World Trade Center's twin towers and the Pentagon.

Whatever happened to bring the plane down, the congressman added, there is no question that the terrorist attack will leave an indelible mark on America in general and on the families of the victims in particular.

"I kept thinking about the families as I saw the wreckage," Murtha said. "This is a very, very tragic event, and long after we've stopped talking about it, the families will suffer. I stood on the hillside today and looked down on the debris and thought of the tremendous suffering the families are going through."

Taking in this scene was 9-year-old Marissa Pluta, whose home is less than a half-mile away. As Marissa rode her bike around the edges of the crash site, her mother, Paula, recounted the horror she saw Tuesday morning.

"I was watching TV and heard a very loud roar over the house, a very loud whining noise, like a plane that was too close to the ground," Pluta said. She ran

outside, looked up and saw "the plane take a nose dive into those trees over there."

"It happened so quick," she said. "There was a 100-foot fireball above the trees."

She called 911 and drove to the site to see if she could help any victims.

"There was a huge hole in the ground," she recalled. "It looked like something had pushed its way in and then got covered up with dirt. There were little tiny pieces of metal everywhere. Some of it had blown into the trees. Had I not known what had happened, I wouldn't have known it was a plane."

Susan Yachere of Frieders said, "It's devastating to think something like this could happen practically in your back yard. This is unbelievable. But I am a person of faith, and while this is a terrible thing, a violent, horrible thing, I believe God will help us in the end."

For the hundreds of neighbors, religious leaders, county officials and volunteers in this former mining community, the work of recovery was less defined but no less difficult.

The Rev. Larry Hoover held a special service Tuesday night at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church in Boswell, about 12 miles away. Sixty people attended.

"I guess I felt the need to do something as a Christian body, to be together, to talk about how there is evil in the world, but that church is one place yet where the devil and evil cannot come," Hoover said.

"I think the common theme of the people there was to just come and be in the quiet and embrace each other and to try to make sense out of what has happened. But I don't know if we can make sense of it."

Since 1968, Hoover has owned two cottages, including one where his 34-year-old son lives, near the former strip mine where the plane plummeted to earth. He and his son have not been able to visit the cottages since the crash, and early television images showed them to be damaged.

The natural beauty of the area where his cottages stand and police now sort through plastic and metal, Hoover added, is breathtaking.

"Back there, it's probably the prettiest spot you'll ever find," he said.

The fields are surrounded by old-growth trees, including hemlock, birch, red oak and maple, which

tower over the rolling fields at 80 to 100 feet.

During his service, Hoover urged congregants to look to their faith when contemplating the horrific events of this week. He drew from Bible readings that addressed anger, suffering, forgiveness and frustration. He reminded the churchgoers of people who have been persecuted for their faith, and recalled the biblical response Jesus gave as he was dying on the cross.

"He said, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,'" Hoover said. "And that is what we must say. We must say, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

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