

NN 40
YEARS ANNIVERSARY

THE STORY

As *New Vision* celebrates 40 years of existence, we bring you some of the most outstanding stories that the newspaper has covered over the years. **Joseph Batte**, brings you the story of what transpired in 1988 when a Uganda Airlines plane carrying 52 from London's Gatwick Airport destined for Entebbe Airport, crashed.

It was a cold Sunday night on October 16, 1988, when Uganda Airlines Flight 775 set off from London's Gatwick Airport, carrying 52 souls (45 passengers, 7 crew members) bound for a refuelling stop in Rome, Italy, before heading to Entebbe airport.

What started as a routine journey turned into a nightmare amid thick fog, claiming 33 lives in a fiery crash just short of the runway in Rome.

Uganda was still healing from years of turmoil when the Uganda Airlines plane crashed. Most passengers were Ugandans heading home after trips abroad. Captain Steven Walusimbi, a respected pilot born in 1945, was in charge.

Justine Rutabyama, a housewife and mother of six, is one of the survivors, who was traveling with her one-year-old son, Noble. Her husband, Henry Rutabyama, was the chief engineer at Uganda Airlines. That day, she had stopped at a church near Gatwick airport to pray and buy some scapulars and statues for friends back home.

The priest blessed her for a safe journey and she felt at peace. "I wondered, you know, priests do not usually have that kind of time, but he had time with me," Justine recalled. At the airport, she even helped a pregnant woman with her luggage.

Justine remembered the hostess, Sis Chance, moving her to the front for more space with the baby. Little did anyone know that the seat change might have saved her life.

The flight from London to Rome was smooth, lasting about an hour. Justine put Noble to sleep in the seat next to her, securing him with a seat belt and started her rosary prayers. She planned to nap during the longer leg to Entebbe. But as they approached Rome's Fiumicino Airport at around 12:30am, things got tricky. "Thick fog blanketed the area, reducing visibility to almost nothing," she recollected.

Air traffic controllers cleared them for an Instrument Landing System approach to runway 16L. The crew descended, but the fog was

WHEN UGANDA AIRLINES FLIGHT 775 CRASHED



Uganda Airlines Flight 775 was a Boeing 707-338C, registration 5X-UBC, that crashed while attempting to land at Rome-Fiumicino Airport in Rome, Italy on October 17, 1988

too dense. They could not see the runway. The captain aborted and climbed back up for another try.

Fr Anthony Andrew Zziwa, a Catholic priest, who had been in England for two months was another passenger. He was eager to get back to his students at the National Teachers College in Nkozi. The flight was delayed by four hours, but eventually, they boarded around 10:45pm.

Fr Zziwa noticed the plane circling at Fiumicino Airport. "The plane was going around the airport several times," he said. A second attempt on runway 25 also failed due to the poor weather.

By then, the crew was likely feeling the strain. Two missed approaches in tough conditions can wear anyone down. They requested radar vectoring for a third try on runway 34L, a non-precision approach that relied more on instruments and less on automated guidance.

Justine did not feel scared at first.

"We noticed the plane was going as if it is going to land — of course, they had already announced we are landing — but again, I saw it was going up. I asked; what is it? And of course, there were other people who looked at each other. It tried to land three times. Then people started mumbling, but me, I just said, 'God is in control'."

But on that third descent, something went wrong. The plane established on the localiser, but the crew kept descending below the Minimum Descent Altitude of 420 feet without spotting the runway lights or markings.

Suddenly, the Ground Proximity Warning System blared. Too late. The Boeing clipped the roof of a house about 1,300 metres short of the runway and 100 metres off to the right. It then slammed into another building 85 metres away.

The plane established on the localiser, but the crew kept descending below the Minimum Descent Altitude of 420 feet

breaking apart and erupting in flames. The wreckage skidded across a highway, igniting over 100 cars in a parking lot and scattering debris over 25km.

Italian police officer Angelo Scopa, on patrol nearby, saw it unfold: "I heard engines of a plane and saw lights close to the ground. The plane flew right overhead. Then there was this deafening explosion and blinding flames."

Fr Zziwa remembered hearing a thud and thought it was the landing gear. Then came the fire. He freed himself and, despite his injuries, pulled others from the wreckage. He saw heartbreaking sights, a woman with her abdomen torn open, dead. Another holding her dead baby, crying.

Justine's story is gut-wrenching. The plane broke into pieces and she was alone in her section. "I heard screams. When I looked down, that is when I realised the ground was near. I released my belt and jumped down." That is when she remembered Noble. The child was hanging in his overturned seat, suffocating amid the flames.

She grabbed him, but the seat was collapsing. "It was hot. I got hold of him. When I pulled, I realised he was stuck in the seat belt." Rescue came quickly, but Noble was gone.

Survival was a mix of luck and sheer will. Prince John Barigye, Uganda's ambassador to the Vatican, was thrown around. "There was an extremely violent shock and then suddenly, there were flames. I felt something burning and I tried to protect myself with my hands. My seat was upside down. But I was able to unfasten my belt and open the security exit," he recounted. Barigye survived with burns.

Monicah Nakisige remembered no warning. "The pilot told us to fasten our belts as usual, about 10 minutes before landing. The plane turned on its side as it crashed and I was left hanging in my seat. The seat belt hurt me and I could not get out. And then fire started, but someone helped me and I managed to break free."

The crew did not make it. Captain Walusimbi and his team perished. Among the dead were families like the Adlams and Justine's son.

On the ground, families like carpenter Domenico Dolente's escaped their damaged home with minor injuries.

The joint Ugandan-Italian investigation pinned the blame on pilot error. Investigators said the pilots might have mistaken the nearby highway lights for the runway. Fatigue from the previous attempts, a faulty radio altimeter without its acoustic warning and too much focus on outside lights, instead of instruments all played a part. But some disagreed, pointing to air traffic control for not diverting the flight.

In the aftermath, survivors like Justine spent days in Rome hospitals. She was visited by a Ugandan team led by D. Ruhakana Rugunda. Fr Zziwa battled Post Traumatic Stress Disorder for years, noises and smoke triggered him and he avoided funerals. "Word had reached home that I had died and they held a requiem mass for me," he said.

On October 23, 1988, the remains of 28 Ugandans arrived in Entebbe on another Uganda Airlines flight. Thousands gathered, including President Yoweri Museveni, who handed over flag-draped coffins. "is not enough to fly the flag at half mast. These families will remain in a crisis," he said, promising support amid the nation's struggles. Pope John Paul II joined world leaders to send condolences.

Years on, the crash lingers in memories. Although she lost her son, Justine testifies to God's grace. "I used to travel a lot. My husband felt that I had many children, so I wanted me always to have a break. Fr Zziwa is grateful: 'I am alive by the grace of God.'"

In Uganda, *The New Vision* newspaper chronicled several stories surrounding the tragedy.

FROM WHEN MUSEVENI WON THE FIRST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS