

# The Journal

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## Documentary tells the story of TWA Flight 514

CHARLES TOWN-As a journalist, Charles Town resident Van Applegate can recognize a good story. Now, with the 41st anniversary of the TWA flight 514 crash at Mount Weather, Virginia approaching, Applegate and fellow television reporter Jay Korff, have released a documentary telling the largely forgotten story of the incident.

On Dec. 1, 1974, TWA flight 514 was diverted from its original course to Reagan National Airport, and the pilots onboard were instructed to make a landing at Dulles airport.

Due to miscommunication between the plane's pilots and flight engineer and air traffic controllers, the plane made its descent too soon and crashed into the side of Mount Weather, killing 92 people onboard.

Applegate said he stumbled across the story of TWA flight 514 by chance when hiking along the Appalachian Trail in Virginia. He saw small wooden crosses by the roadside, and thought a car crash had occurred. Taking a closer look, Applegate saw the words *"TWA 514, 92 lives lost" on one of the crosses.*

Applegate said he did a quick internet search when he got home, and shortly after, called reporter Jay Korff, a colleague at ABC 7 news, where Applegate was working at the time, saying he found a story that "had to be told."

"We spent the better part of three years working on telling this incredible

story that is all but forgotten about unless you lived it,” Applegate said. “There are a lot of people that remember this crash and remember the effect it had on aviation, but there wasn’t a large knowledge base about how much this (incident) changed aviation as we know it and it happened in our own backyard.”

What began as a short news clip, intended to air on the 40th anniversary of the crash, soon became a much larger, in-depth project that Applegate and Korff worked on in their spare time.

It took them approximately four and a half months to do some preliminary research, and the following years were spent finding and interviewing people who responded to the plane crash, investigated the incident and lost family members and friends in the crash.

Among those interviewed were Oliver Dube, fire marshal of Loudoun County, Virginia and one of the first people to respond to the scene of the crash, as well as Dick Rodriguez, who investigated the incident for the National Transportation Safety Board. George Speese, whose mother died in the flight 514 crash, was also featured in the documentary film.

Dube died shortly after Applegate and Korff interviewed him, and Applegate said it cemented his determination to tell the story of TWA flight 514 before time ran out and the people involved in the investigation and grieving that followed the crash were no longer around to share the story.

In the documentary, several of the people who experienced the deaths of friends and family members as a result of the plane crash say they have found ways to remember the loved ones they lost. One man learned to play the guitar in memory of his mother, a music teacher. Another family named their children after parents who died in the crash.

“A lot of people lived this every day. For the people we interviewed, you could tell it was so rewarding to be able to talk about it,” Applegate said. “The ripple effect is unreal when you think about children and grandchildren to this day named after the people that were on this

plane.”

“At the time, reporters were saying there was no one important on that plane, because there wasn’t a senator or someone like that. The highest-ranking African-American military member, two FBI agents and a woman from the CIA were on board. This plane was loaded not only with prominent people, but everybody was somebody.”

In addition to the personal effect the plane crash had on the lives of those who knew someone who died in it, Applegate said the crash changed aviation history.

Applegate said he learned large plane crashes were not uncommon in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and that many crashes during that time period, including the Marshall University football team’s plane, could have been prevented if the changes the NTSB made after the TWA flight 514 crash had occurred sooner.

Miscommunication and misunderstanding between pilots, flight engineers and air traffic controllers were frequent, since terms used by pilots meant something slightly different to air traffic controllers and vice versa.

Applegate and Korff reviewed the audio recordings of the final moments in the cockpit on TWA flight 514, and discovered air traffic control told the pilot they were “cleared for the approach,” a term used “universally” in 1974 to mean descent to an altitude of 1800 feet and stay on-course until landing.

The plane descended too low, too soon, and in the snowstorm that was taking place at the time, the pilot could not see the side of Mount Weather until it was too late.

“It blows your mind to think that planes were basically flying blind in this jet era. This (particular incident) was kind of the linchpin in a system-wide change. If you get on a plane today, you don’t have to worry about this happening,” Applegate said.

As a result of the following investigation into the crash, the NTSB standardized the terms used by pilots and air traffic controllers.

Applegate said “Diverted: TWA 514” was his first time making a long-format documentary, and said he could not have done it without the hard work of Korff and Jefferson County resident Robert Perks.

Perks, a school teacher in Jefferson County whom Applegate said sparked his interest and later, career in broadcast media, composed the soundtrack that accompanies the 28-minute documentary—a big deal, Applegate said, considering it can cost thousands of dollars to use pre-recorded music for a film.

“Diverted: TWA 514” can be viewed online at [www.wjla.com/news/local/diverted-twa-514](http://www.wjla.com/news/local/diverted-twa-514). Applegate said he is considering screening the documentary at local film festivals in the near future.

Though he and Korff missed their original deadline of finishing the film by the 40th anniversary of the crash, Applegate said meeting their larger goal of sharing the story is enough for him.

“It doesn’t matter when (the story) is told, what matters is that it’s told. Our only concern was that people were still here to tell about it,” he said. “If all I get out of this is bringing attention to what happened and call the memory of these people, who were all important people, my job is done.”

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