



# A Human Future

VOLUME 12 ■ NUMBER 3 ■ FALL 2013

[WWW.LARCHE.CA/SUBSCRIBE](http://WWW.LARCHE.CA/SUBSCRIBE)



Major John O'Donnell is currently the Senior Army Reserve Chaplain for the Canadian Forces in Atlantic Canada. In this part-time role, he supervises chaplain team leaders and provides pastoral support to soldiers and families during times of difficulty and crisis. In 1998, he was a first responder to the crash of Swissair Flight 111. He has carried various roles with L'Arche and is now Senior Marketing and Public Relations Advisor for L'Arche Canada. He has a B.Sc. from St. F.X., and an M.Div. from Harvard.

## *Trauma and its Unpredictable Legacy*

### An Interview with army chaplain John O'Donnell

Most of us have had to respond to traumatic situations at times, and we are likely to know others who have lived through sudden loss, accidents, war or other very difficult situations. John O'Donnell's account of his involvement in the Swissair disaster and its aftermath, and his experience of dealing with trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder among those who did the recovery work at the Swissair crash site and among returning soldiers is both inspiring and informative. – *Beth Porter, ed.*

**Beth Porter:** It has been 15 years since the Swissair disaster. Since then you have been called to give leadership at anniversary events. How has your experience at and after the disaster affected your outlook and work as a chaplain?

**John O'Donnell:** It's taught me a lot about human beings and life in general, and a lot about community and relationships. It has helped me to appreciate more the gift of life and the capacity of the human spirit to rise above or to pick up and move on from difficulties. Our lives are more meaningful when we are being kind and compassionate and being there for one another.

**What was that time at the crash site like for you?**

I got a call early, before sunrise, to deploy with my unit to St. Margaret's Bay, near where the plane had crashed. It's maybe a kind of protective mechanism, but I realized that something inside of me was working to prevent me from absorbing the full breadth of the disaster during the first several hours. It took at least a day for me to

get my bearings and to begin thinking about how best to function under such unusual circumstances. There were tents set up and we were living and breathing the situation 24 hours a day. We were sleeping, but I remember on the third day someone asking me what I had been doing about eating. I realized I had barely eaten for 3 days. It

wasn't a normal situation. You experience some support from being engaged with others. Everyone had a role to play. As a padre, my job was mainly to connect with the soldiers who were collecting the debris and human remains. If I sensed that they were not doing okay, I would sometimes intervene and recommend that they be

---

**A soldier would recover a child's shoe or item of clothing... and all of a sudden would reach another level of consciousness about the situation...**

---

L'Arche Canada  
10271 Yonge St., Suite 300  
Richmond Hill, ON L4C 3B5

Tel: 800-571-0212

Ed: [eporter@larche.ca](mailto:eporter@larche.ca)

[www.larche.ca](http://www.larche.ca)

Charitable # 88990 9719 RR0001



given different duties. There were some very intense situations. For example, a soldier would recover a child's shoe or some other item of clothing, and because he or she had a child that age, all of a sudden they would reach another level of consciousness about the situation and that would trigger a very difficult moment for them.

### Where did prayer come in during those days?

I was praying, constantly, constantly. There wasn't much time to pray with the soldiers on the beaches, so prayer in that context was, for the most part, non-verbal. But when the families started to arrive and I was asked to accompany them, prayer became an integral part of our time together. Since they couldn't get to the crash site itself, an area at Peggy's Cove was designated for them to view the ships engaged in the recovery operation off shore. Among other things, I was responsible for accompanying families down as close as we could safely get to the water so they could throw flowers in and just mark the moment in prayer or silence. I prayed as best I could with many families from various faith traditions, taking the lead with Christian families and praying silently with non-Christian families as others led prayer.

### Did you sense God was there at that water's edge?

This sense came in unexpected moments. A family might break into a meaningful song for their loved one. It was a way of trying to bring some sense to the situation. One family sang *Nearer My God to Thee* and then *Amazing Grace*. It was incredibly moving, but because only one family at a time could be accompanied down to the water's edge, I remember becoming preoccupied with the thought that other families might become frustrated having to wait for us. When I finally got back up to bring the next family down, I apologized to them for having to wait and the father's response was powerful. "Padre," he said, "that was amazing! You could have taken all day there as far as

## Bayswater Monument

On September 2, 1998, Swissair Flight 111 crashed into St. Margaret's Bay, a few kilometres south of Halifax, Nova Scotia. On impact it broke apart into over a million pieces. There were no survivors. What was at first anticipated to be a rescue mission quickly turned into a painstaking recovery operation.



This is the burial site for the unidentified remains. From Bayswater, the site looks across St. Margaret's Bay, where the plane crashed, towards Peggy's Cove. Names of the victims are inscribed on the monument. John O'Donnell was chair of the Interfaith Committee and, as such, a member of the Swissair Secretariat established by the Province of Nova Scotia to deal with the many logistical details and other facets of the disaster's aftermath. With the family members, his committee planned the burial and memorial services which took place a year after the crash.

we were concerned." I remember as well one family member walked along the line of firefighters and police who formed a kind of safety net, giving each a hug before she came down to where I was. Seeing people exhibiting generosity and compassion and love in spite of their own grief—that was probably one of the more powerful signs of God's presence.

Many families came in the days following the crash. There was a prayer service about a week after and it was attended by most of them. Because it took a long



time to recover the human remains, we could not have a memorial service or burial for the unidentified remains until the first anniversary. Most families came back on the first anniversary and quite a few came back for the second anniversary.

The 229 passengers and crew represented 17 different faith communities as well as a fairly large group who had no formal faith connection. Very early, we gathered a group of faith leaders that represented about 90 percent of the people on the plane—Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim and various Protestant Christian denominations. This small group with myself worked with family members to organize the prayer services on the first anniversary and in years after.

**You have followed families who have stayed in touch.**

Yes. A line from a memorial day poem comes to mind: “At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.” That faithful remembering of loved ones gives me hope.

Now, most families mark September 2nd in their private way, but there are a number of families who come back to Nova Scotia each year. I think they are drawn because they made a connection, albeit a tragic one, with local people who tried to embrace and support and love them when they first came. And there is just the place: the natural setting is awe-inspiring and incredibly beautiful. I think that plays a part also in calling people back.

**You worked with soldiers doing recovery work after the crash and also with a number of soldiers returning from war with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). What is life like for these people?**

What most sticks out for me is just the inability to move on from a traumatic event, so that they are daily re-living aspects of it over and over and can’t cope with everyday activities. For example, for a soldier, walking up to and opening a door can trigger thoughts about an instance where they opened up a door to a very difficult scene. They struggle with depression, suicidal thoughts, feeling alienated and alone, even when they experienced a traumatic event with others. Part of their suffering is that their family and friends often don’t understand and just regard their behaviour as anti-social. The experience of General Romeo Dallaire comes to mind. His openness about the effects of PTSD that he suffered after Rwanda helped heighten public awareness of it.

---

**That faithful remembering of loved ones gives me hope.**

---

About 8 to 10 percent of the soldiers returning from Afghanistan and a significant number of those who worked on the Swissair recovery operation have experienced the effects of PTSD—leading to the loss of jobs, families, and marriages. The Canadian Armed Forces has put a lot of time, energy and money into trying to provide various treatments through Integrated Personnel Support Centres across the country. There

## Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

- Nightmares, flashbacks, and intrusive or upsetting thoughts
- Changes in sleep patterns or appetite
- Anxiety and fear, especially when confronted with events or situations that remind you of the trauma
- Feeling “on edge,” easily startled or overly alert
- Crying for no reason, depression, feeling hopeless
- Memory problems, difficulty remembering the trauma
- Irritability, agitation, anger, resentment, guilt
- Feeling scattered, unable to focus on work or daily activities, difficulty making decisions
- Emotional numbness or withdrawal
- Overprotectiveness, fear for safety of loved ones
- Avoidance of situations that remind you of the event
- Physical health problems like dizziness, stomach upset or less ability to fight off sickness



are some success stories, but from what I know, some soldiers do end up unable to function and they leave the military. Some have found other work and new relationships, but some have definitely fallen off the radar altogether.

As far as I know, even the most knowledgeable and experienced medical and other professionals haven't been able to figure out exactly why some people are able to cope with traumatic situations better than others. There are new therapeutic responses but PTSD is still very much a mystery. We encourage people to talk to a counselor or close confidante in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event and not to bottle up what they are experiencing. Talking can act as kind of a valve. Spirituality can be an important resource, though not for everyone. Meditative practices and trying to grow spiritually can help people integrate difficult experiences. Good spiritual guidance can help people connect to a faith community where others accept and support them. All the same, it's hard to say whether that connection enables them to cope better with post-traumatic stress.

I participated in a number of post-traumatic stress management sessions in the immediate aftermath of the Swissair disaster and it's really hard to say whether they had much effect in preventing PTSD in those who attended. Some people cope fine for a few years and then experience difficulties. Maybe they go through another trauma—a marriage break-up or other loss. Their normal reference points are unhinged a bit and all of a sudden this triggers disturbing memories of the event years ago.

### Is PTSD different in civil life?

I don't think so. People experience trauma in other situations—accidents, violence. Either way, we're talking about human beings trying to cope. ■

## For Your Information

- [The Guide to Benefits, Programs, and Services for Serving and Former Canadian Forces Members and their Families](#)

### Websites related to the Swissair disaster

- [On the 15th anniversary: CBC](#)
- [Timeline of the Swissair investigation: CBC](#)
- [Report on psychological effects and de-briefing sessions – 6 months after the crash](#)
- [On a friendship that came from the crash – 5 years later](#)
- [Cdn Transport Safety Investigation – Executive summary](#)

### Websites related to PTSD

- [Romeo Dallaire on his experience of PTSD: CTV](#)
- [Description of symptoms and treatments of PTSD](#)
- [Self-help strategies for dealing with PTSD](#)
- [Ways to help a friend with PTSD](#)
- [Greg Matters – soldier shot by police while exhibiting PTSD symptoms](#)
- [PTSD info for refugees: CAMH](#)
- [Residential School Syndrome \(complex PTSD\): BC Medical Journal \(2007\)](#)

[www.larche.ca/en/inspiration](http://www.larche.ca/en/inspiration)



The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 137 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 29 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with intellectual disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

*A Human Future* is offered as a contribution to the Canadian conversation about values and the fostering of a society where everyone belongs and can make a contribution.