

Beat: Travel

50th anniversary of the worst air disaster in Slovenia

In 1966 aircraft crashed

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USPA NEWS - Today, 1 September, marks the 50th anniversary of the worst air disaster in Slovenia. In 1966 a Bristol 175 Britannia aircraft operated by Britannia Airways crashed 2,300 meters short of the runway while on approach for landing. Aerodrom Ljubljana will organise a commemorative ceremony to mark the event.

The Britannia Airways plane on route from London-Luton Airport to Brnik never arrived at its destination. It crashed at 12.47 am near Lahovše, 2,300 meters short of the runway. The plane was carrying 117 people, including 110 passengers and seven crew members. A total of 19 people survived the crash, while 98 perished. An official announcement was made two years after the crash sighting an incorrect altimeter setting, which caused the plane to descend too early for landing.

The then head of the fire rescue service at the barely three-year old airport, 86-year-old Franc Košnjek, remembers the event as follows: "I had just fallen asleep when one of the cleaning staff from the airport called me and informed me of the accident. I didn't have a car at the time, so I rushed over to the Kranj firefighting unit hoping to accompany them to the scene of the accident. Unfortunately, I was too late, so I took a municipal firefighting vehicle to the scene. When I had assessed the situation, I began shouting orders as to which passengers to save first. We rescued the majority of passengers from the plane. Those who survived were sitting in the rear of the aircraft. The passengers up front were severely injured; many were burned."

Witnesses to the accident included retired Aerodrom Ljubljana employee Martin Šilar. At the time, he was a young boy working in baggage handling. "I was at work that night. We waited for the aircraft for quite some time before we found out that we were waiting in vain; the plane had crashed. When day broke, they took our shift to the sight of the accident. It was a terrible sight; smoke was everywhere and a burning odour filled the air," he remembers today.

A memorial was erected at the accident site long ago. In order to find it, employees from the fire-rescue service cleared the overgrown site in April this year, with the help of the maintenance service. The original memorial was not found. At 11 am on 13 September 2016, Aerodrom Ljubljana will therefore organise a commemorative ceremony and unveil a new memorial to honour those who lost their lives and to serve as a lasting memory of the event.

A booklet by Bine Periš, Arff Officer at Aerodrom Ljubljana, on the history of the airport rescue and firefighting unit will also be published to commemorate the event. At his own initiative, Mr Periš has prepared a comprehensive and valuable history of the airport rescue and firefighting unit at Brnik. While researching the past, he was unable to avoid the Britannia Airways crash, which has its own rather extensive chapter due to the dimensions and high-profile nature of the event.

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