



REUTERS

Italian town recalls cablecar horror

By Gideon Long

CAVALESE, Italy, Jan 31 (Reuters) - The glistening new ski lift at Cavalese hums into life.

Its pale blue egg-shaped gondolas glide down their cable, cross the narrow valley and snake upwards through a forest of pine trees, hugging the frosty contours of the Cermis mountain.

Above, there is only sky and silence.

Not a single plane has passed this way since February 3 last year, when a U.S. jet screamed up this corridor of rock in the Italian Dolomites, sliced through the wire of the old ski lift and sent 20 people plunging to their deaths.

Two of the crew face a court martial. The pilot goes before military judges on February 4, the day after Cavalese marks the first anniversary of one of the world's most terrible cablecar disasters.

Astonishingly, the worst such tragedy happened just 30 metres up the same line on March 9, 1976, when a wire snapped and a cabin carrying 42 people plummeted onto the icy mountain.

The people of Cavalese will tell you that both tragedies were caused by negligence and recklessness.

In the 1976 disaster, a cablecar operator, keen to shuttle hundreds of paying tourists up the mountain as quickly as possible, switched off a safety mechanism designed to slow the cabin down automatically in strong winds.

The same mechanism also controlled an emergency brake which, had it been working, could have jolted the cabin to a halt and held it in place.

In 1998 the victims stood no chance.

The U.S. surveillance plane struck the cable at 3:12 p.m., just metres from the cabin, which slithered down the wire like a bead on a piece of string.

The snowy field where it landed was stained red with the blood of a 13-year-old boy from Poland, a 57-year-old local cablecar worker and tourists from Germany, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Austria.

Shards of metal from the bright yellow cabin and blood-soaked woolly hats littered the slope. It took medics days to identify bodies.

A U.S. military inquiry found the plane was just 111-113 metres (364-370 feet) from the ground when it slashed the wire.

The four-man crew had been briefed to fly at 1,000 feet (305 metres), even though the limit for the area was 2,000 feet (610 metres), and they broke speed restrictions on at least two of the six legs of the flight.

"(They) flew lower and faster than authorised whenever the terrain permitted," the inquiry concluded.

While the U.S. investigation clarified what happened on that fateful February day, its findings did not satisfy everyone in Cavalese.

Was the cablecar marked on the crew's flight chart? The U.S. military said it was but the pilot Captain Richard Ashby insists it was not. The Cavalese-based citizens group "February 3 Justice Committee" supports his claim.

"I've seen the maps and the cablecar is not there," the group's president Werner Pichler told Reuters.

"Ashby is not guilty, or rather, Ashby is only one of the guilty partners. He had orders to fly this route and to fly at low level to simulate situations pilots might face in Bosnia. There were flights of this kind up the Val di Fiemme each week."

Then there is the question of what happened to the jet's flight recorder in the days after the accident.

Italian magistrates say it was removed from the cabin after the crash. The U.S. military handed it over for inspection only three days later. It revealed nothing.

And the most delicate question of all remains unanswered. Why was the crew flying so low?

Ashby and his fellow crew members, Captains Joseph Schweitzer, William Raney and Chandler Seagraves, vehemently deny they were "flat-hatting" - performing daredevil stunts - but the suspicion has refused to die.

Pichler claims that NATO planes used to roar up the Val di Fiemme in pairs performing acrobatics.

"One of the jets would fly under the cablecar while the crew of the other jet would record it on video camera," he said. "They did it for bets. They deny it at the U.S. airbase at Aviano but there was a video in Ashby's plane."

Such unsubstantiated theories are likely to live on long after Ashby and Schweitzer have been sentenced for their part in the Cavalese tragedy.

The two Marine captains, both aged 31, are each charged with 20 counts of involuntary manslaughter and negligent homicide as well as damage to property and dereliction of duty.

They are also charged with conspiracy and obstruction of justice for having allegedly spirited a video tape from their jet after landing at Aviano.

They face up to life in military prison if convicted.

The marines escaped trial in Italy because of a NATO pact which gives the United States jurisdiction over U.S. officers who commit offences while on official duty on foreign soil.

But the "February 3 Justice Committee" is still seeking a trial in Italy.

"These men were flying too fast. They were flying recklessly low. They ignored their briefings which in any case took no account of Italian air safety rules," Pichler says. "How can they possibly claim that is official duty?"

Many of the relatives of the victims are still seeking compensation.

Within weeks of the disaster they received 100 million lire (\$59,000) from the Italian government for each life lost and funeral costs from local authorities.

"But we have yet to see a single lira from a \$20 million fund pledged by the American government," says Klaus Stampfl, whose mother was killed at Cavalese.

"As I understand it, it was promised simply to the Val di Fiemme," he told Reuters. "But who is the Val di Fiemme?"

Stampfl says he suspects the money, when it finally trickles through to Cavalese, will be used primarily to offset the cost of the new cablecar.

"That new ski lift has been built with the blood of 20 people," he says.

The disaster convulsed the local tourist-based economy.

"It was, for us, like it would be for Turin if someone bombed the Fiat factory," says mayor Mauro Gilmozzi.

Hoteliers say that in the weeks after the incident they were flooded with faxes from ski parties cancelling reservations.

But this winter things are back to normal and, walking through the town's snow-lined streets, it is difficult to picture what happened here a year ago.

On the Cermis mountain, the only reminder of the cablecar is a white stripe of snow which veers up through the pine trees on the cleared ground where the lift's pylons used to stand.

The low-key opening of the new ski lift serves as perhaps the most eloquent symbol of Cavalese's recovery.

"It's part of the return to normality," Gilmozzi said as the lift wheels turned for the first time on January 23.

"Out of respect for the 20 victims it would have been completely inappropriate to celebrate the event."

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