

May 12, 2010, was a fine, clear morning in the Libyan capital, Tripoli. At 6am, the city's airport was slowly waking up. Barely 10 minutes later, the dawn calm was brutally punctured when, out on Runway 09, a flight from

Johannesburg crashed while attempting to land.

Including crew, 104 people were aboard Afriqiyah Airways Flight 771, and 103 of them lost their lives that morning in Tripoli. The exception was Ruben van Assouw, a nine-year-old Dutch boy who somehow emerged intact from the wreckage that claimed his parents and brother.

Little Ruben -- a testament to the human capacity for survival -- came to mind when I first saw pictures from last week's tragic crash at Cork airport.

Upside down, the front section of its fuselage crushed into the ground and its wheels facing the sky, it seemed impossible that anyone could have walked away from the Manx2 flight from Belfast.

Donal Walsh, a student from Waterford returning from a training course in the North, was one of two people who miraculously escaped from the crash with just cuts and bruises. His father, John, spoke for the whole of Ireland when he said: "You look at the scene and you don't know how anyone survived it."

Yet people do come out alive from even the most shocking plane crashes. Sole survivors may hit the headlines, but the reality is that passengers walk away, even the most fatal of air accidents.

A US government study found that of the 568 plane crashes in the US between 1993 and 2000, more than 90pc of those involved survived. Indeed, even in the worst 26 crashes, more than half the passengers and crew survived.

Flying remains one of the safest ways to travel -- your chances of being killed in the air are about one in 800,000, while you have a one in 6,000 chance of dying in a car crash.

Aviation technology has improved immeasurably since the early days of commercial flying, in the 1940s and 1950s. Nowadays, mechanical failure accounts for less than a quarter of fatal accidents, with human error at fault in more than half.

Often in the wake of plane crashes, such as last week's tragic incident at Cork Airport, travellers, quite understandably, experience a heightened sense of fear about taking to the skies.

In the first three months after the 9/11 attacks, fewer people in the US flew and more people chose to drive. The reason for this is simple: control.

As Paul Slovic and Baruch Fischhoff, researchers in psychology, reported back in the 1980s, when we feel that we have control (when we're driving), we're less afraid than when we don't have control (when we're flying).

Likewise, the more we know about a risk, the more worried we are about it. So when we see reports of a plane crash in the news, flying suddenly seems much riskier.

Last Thursday was a black day for Ireland and the aviation industry, but it is worth remembering how rare such crashes are.

And, as the stories of Ruben van Assouw, Donal Walsh and countless others attest, surviving a fatal plane crash is not as outlandish as you might think.

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This article originally appeared in Weekend

Authors: Independent.ie - Travel RSS Feed