

The heartache behind the headlines

In his new documentary, Sturla Gunnarsson delves beyond the mammoth court case, the public inquiry and the mountains of press coverage to tell the harrowing stories of those who lost loved ones in Canada's largest act of mass murder

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An uncanny string of events led to the biggest mass murder in Canadian history.



A suitcase was checked at Vancouver International Airport and tagged, at the passenger's insistence, to connect to an Air India flight leaving from Toronto and bound eventually for New Delhi. This wasn't normal policy, because the passenger's seat on that connecting flight wasn't confirmed; in fact, the passenger never boarded the Vancouver

flight. Meanwhile, the baggage X-ray machine in Toronto was broken.

Then there was the fact that British Columbia militant Sikh leader Talwinder Singh Parmar, later widely believed to be the mastermind of the 1985 bombing of Air India Flight 182, was no longer under surveillance by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service: An around-the-clock watch had been called off - mere days before the Air India flight was blown up, midair, over the coast of Ireland - after a North American visit by Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi went by without incident.

"It was like a perfect storm. Every moment, when a simple action would have averted it,

it didn't happen," says Sturla Gunnarsson, writer and director of the new documentary *Air India 182*, screening tonight on the opening evening of Toronto's Hot Docs film festival.

These events form the plot line of the film, which will also air on CBC in June. Although countless news reports of the investigation, as well as the mammoth court case and a public inquiry, have provided mountains of information about the bombing, the tragedy itself, Gunnarsson believes, has been almost obscured in the process. "There has been an overload, an overwhelming amount of information, but I don't believe there has been a clear narrative," he says. "I tried to distill a clear narrative. And I'm quite preoccupied with terror in the modern world, what it means."

It's a story he believes should be given much more prominence: a story of 329 passengers and crew, 280 of them Canadian, mainly from Indian families, killed over the coast of Ireland. Some are believed to have survived the actual explosion, only to fall thousands of feet to their deaths. As well, another suitcase, due to connect to an Air India flight out of Japan's Narita Airport, blew up in the baggage-handling area, killing two airport workers.

How can anyone come to terms with these deaths, Gunnarsson asks: It's the problem of "trying to make meaning out of something that has no meaning, and that's really the essence of the terrorist experience."

The film uses first-person accounts from investigators, including retired CSIS and RCMP task-force officers, to recreate the events leading up to the bombing. But it's the stories told by the family members, talking directly to the camera, that provide the deepest insights. "There's an element throughout the story of people looking back trying to ascribe meaning," Gunnarsson says.

For the families, it's often about trying to stop time, to remember how loved ones said goodbye: how, for instance, one son, a serene young man, repeatedly said goodbye to his mother, as if it were the last time they would see each other. One father even desperately tried to reconnect with his family in the terminal after saying farewell, but they had already gone through the security check.

Many also talk of premonitions before the flight. "It's partly cultural, in the sense that some of the people are coming from a place where the subconscious plays a role, where intuition plays a greater role," Gunnarsson

says. But he also sees at play a kind of viscosity of time - a way in which those left behind try to stop time in their heads, and relive, again and again, the last moments they saw their children or parents.

Most difficult for the surviving family members is the lack of connection between the deaths of innocents and the political conflict between the Indian government and Sikh militants. The plane was full of families, many going to India for the summer. How is it possible to connect their killing with a conflict that has lasted hundreds of years, originating on the other side of the world?

Gunnarsson, who grew up in Vancouver, married into a Sikh family. His wife, Judy Koonar, is one of the film's associate producers. He feels that he learned something about himself making the film: the difficulty in not feeling outrage toward those who planted the bomb, but also the knowledge that anger, for him, isn't the answer. "It really caused me to question some of my values, and it made me understand the big nervous breakdown they had in the United States after 9/11. I'm not advocating what they did, I think that was horrible," he says. "The anger, the outrage, the irrational response has been tempered [in me] in the process of making this film. And it has become more of a meditation. It has become more about thinking about my values."

Much of the film relies on re-enactments that show the covert activities of Parmar and his associates connected with the Sikh group Babbar Khalsa. However, the truth about Parmar has never been fully revealed, and probably never will. He was killed in India in 1992 by Indian police. And no one was found guilty of the Air India bombing, except for bomb maker Inderjit Singh Reyat, who was convicted of manslaughter for his role, and now faces perjury charges.

The 2005 B.C. court decision by Mr. Justice Ian Bruce Josephson, which acquitted Vancouver businessman Ripudaman Singh Malik and Kamloops mill worker Ajaib Singh Bagri in the deaths of all the passengers and crew, is what Gunnarsson calls the film's "Rosetta stone.

"That's what allowed us to make the film. Everything came out in the public record at that point, all the tapes, all that stuff. And his ruling was that the plane was bombed, and the bombing was a result of a conspiracy ... and that

Talwinder Singh Parmar was the mastermind," he argues. "That's been determined by a court in Canada, and I take that to be the truth. So that's the starting point.

"Then you get into the realm of 'What am I allowed to say?' because the court also determined there was not sufficient evidence to convict Malik and Bagri on those 331 counts of murder. So we go back to what does exist on the public record."

Ultimately, Gunnarsson wanted to personalize the tragedy, to show the people involved, and give much more of a voice to the victims' families, whom he believes didn't get enough political recognition. "I felt at the time that people in Vancouver in the Punjabi community were being deprived of their rights as citizens of Canada. They did not have the same relationship to law enforcement or to political leadership as I did. It was being brokered through so-called community leaders, and the brokerage tended to happen at temples," he says.

After the bombing, he adds, there was the sense that the tragedy had to do merely with the South Asian community, "that it wasn't in the general population. I think that it would be fair to say that if there had been [more than 200] blue-eyed and blond-haired people on that plane - I still think the plane would have gone down; I don't think that racism played a part in the failure to prevent it - but I do think there would have been outrage across the country, and it would have been the topic of discussion on Parliament Hill for weeks," Gunnarsson says.

"I don't believe that Canada ... I don't believe that we were prepared to acknowledge that this was a terrorist attack that had taken place in Canada against Canadians, and required contemplation and thought. I don't believe that any of that happened until after 9/11."

Air India 182 premieres as part of the Hot Docs festival tonight at 9:30 at Toronto's Winter Garden Theatre, and shows tomorrow at 1:30 p.m. at the Isabel Bader Theatre. For more information, go to HotDocs.ca.