

Lockerbie: A Search for Truth: TV series dramatises Lockerbie relatives' campaign for justice

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A new powerful and moving five part docu-drama series, *Lockerbie: A Search for Truth*, on Sky Atlantic in the UK and Peacock in the US explores the circumstances around the violent destruction of Pan Am flight PA103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, December 21 1988; and the subsequent trial of two Libyans accused of the atrocity.

All 259 passengers and crew along with 11 people in Lockerbie were killed when the Boeing 747 “Clipper Maid of the Seas” was blown out of the sky, 38 minutes into a flight from London’s Heathrow airport to New York JFK. The bombing remains the worst terrorist attack in British history, and the worst case of aircraft terrorism anywhere until the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre.

The new production, which raises many of the unanswered questions around Lockerbie, centres on the experiences of Dr. Jim Swire, a GP in the town of Bromsgrove, near Birmingham, whose daughter Flora died in the disaster. It is largely based on Swire’s 2021 book, co-written with journalist Peter Biddulph, *The Lockerbie Bombing—a Father’s Search for Justice*. The production seeks to bring together Swire’s determined search for answers with an exposition of what Swire has concluded about what did, and did not, happen. Joint directors are Otto Bathurst (*Peaky Blinders, His Dark Materials*) and Jim Loach (*Measure of a Man*) The writer is Scottish playwright David Harrower.

During production, Swire compared the Lockerbie case to the UK Post Office Horizon computer system scandal, brought into public awareness by Toby Jones’ portrayal of campaigner Alan Bates in the 2024 ITV series *Mr Bates vs The Post Office*. Swire told the *Daily Express*, “Not only have people in power not listened to those of us who have looked for the truth for 35 years, successive governments have locked away documents relating to the bombing in the National Archives in Kew.”

Episode One opens in 2002, with Swire, memorably played by Colin Firth, about to meet, in a Scottish prison visiting room, the only man ever convicted of the bombing,

Abdelbaset Ali Mohamed Al Megrahi (Ardalan Esmaili). A prison warder asks Swire, as keys clunk in locks, “How can you, of all people, bear to be in the same room as him?” The series sets out to answer that question, explaining how Swire came to be convinced that Megrahi was entirely innocent of the horrible crime for which he was sentenced to 20, later increased to 27, years’ imprisonment.

The drama shows Flora Squire departing Heathrow Terminal 3 to meet her boyfriend in New York. Luggage containers are being loaded into PA103, including one numbered AVE4041, which contains the suitcase carrying a bomb concealed in a Toshiba radio cassette recorder. Just over half an hour into the half-empty flight, the plane disintegrates, pitching everyone into the night sky. The scenes are shocking. No one has a clue what is going on. Emergency responders and volunteers search for survivors in the fire and chaos, there are none.

Later, when the UK families finally meet newly installed Conservative government Transport Secretary Cecil Parkinson to demand a public inquiry, Jane Swire (Catherine McCormack) explains to Parkinson that Flora would have been unconscious immediately due to lack of oxygen at the flight’s cruising altitude. As she fell, however, she might have regained consciousness for perhaps 15 seconds before impact. Jane counts the endless seconds out to Parkinson who caves in and agrees to raise the inquiry request with then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher denies the request and to this day no public inquiry has been held.

A great deal is condensed into the five episodes, but the writer and directors find a largely successful balance in exploring Swire’s dogged struggle and the complex issues of evidence and geo-politics thrown up.

Swire, a rather shy GP from a conservative, military family background, becomes a campaigner for improved aircraft security. Leader of the UK relatives’ group, he carries a fake bomb onto a transatlantic flight, to general consternation.

All initial reports, as well as prior warnings, suggest that the Lockerbie bomb was planted by individuals associated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC), a Syrian backed Palestinian militant group. The PFLP-GC were tasked by Iran to launch a revenge attack for the July 1988 massacre by the USS Vincennes of 290 passengers and crew on Iran Air 655.

A scene shows Swire and his family in a pub on the Isle of Skye when the unexpected news comes on the TV that two Libyans have instead been accused of the bombing. Swire, increasingly a public figure, which adds to the terrible pressures on the family, becomes an advocate for a legal process to try those accused of the crime. He makes an extraordinary trip to Libya, set up by an Egyptian journalist, seeking support for a trial from then Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

When the trial eventually opens, May 3, 2000, in a former US base in the Netherlands, Camp Zeist—designated to be part of Scotland for the duration—the Swires rent a flat in Utrecht to attend the proceedings. Swire intends to be there every day.

Across 36 weeks, Megrahi was subjected to a show trial well captured by the production. Its purpose, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has written elsewhere, “was to allow the then-Gaddafi government to be brought in from the cold of international isolation in which it had been languishing for years by taking the rap for Lockerbie. In 2004, Gaddafi and then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair concluded their ‘deal in the desert’ allowing Libyan oil fields to open up to the operations of US and European oil companies.”

The series show how US Department of Justice prosecutor Brian Murtaugh welcomes all the relatives, exuding confidence in getting a conviction. But a fragment of circuit board, known as PT/35b, becomes contentious. Its provenance is questioned by key prosecution witness, Edmund Bollier.

A series of ever more disastrous witnesses for the prosecution are called to the stand. Their evidence is either hopelessly vague, clearly motivated by a search for financial reward, or both; or directly contradicts the prosecution case. Two witnesses give shattering evidence calling into question the entire basis of the prosecution case.

Nevertheless, nine months after the trial begins, the judges rule Megrahi guilty, and another suspected of the crime—Lamin Khalifah Fhimah—innocent. Swire collapses in court, convinced he is witnessing a terrible and inexplicable frame-up and adds Megrahi to the list of Lockerbie victims. Swire also feels a personal responsibility for Megrahi’s incarceration in Scotland. He meets Megrahi and offers to help him prove his innocence.

The series also makes an effort to place the disaster and the manoeuvres around the trial and Megrahi in a geopolitical context. This is generally provided through the comments of Murray Guthrie (Sam Troughton), a fictional character serving as a sort of composite journalist.

Swire also meets ex-CIA man Robert Baer, who explains that, while the PFLP-GC were initially suspected of the Lockerbie bombing, the US wanted Iran and Syria to acquiesce to its planned “Desert Storm” war on Iraq. Libya was made a scapegoat, “a bone” to throw to the victim’s families.

The final episodes deal with Megrahi’s appeal, including powerful evidence hidden from the defence, after he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, which eventually saw his release on “compassionate grounds” in 2009. He returns to a hero’s welcome in Libya.

After Gaddafi’s 2011 overthrow and murder at the hands of Western-backed militias, Swire made a final dangerous trip to meet the dying man who was now his friend. Megrahi presents Swire with further crucial evidence on the fabricated character of the evidence against him.

There is a moving scene when, abandoned by journalist Guthrie, but committed to continuing the fight, Swire is asked by a young woman serving in a restaurant what his badge is about. He answers, “The Lockerbie disaster,” but she does not know what he is talking about.

The series will undoubtedly contribute to a broader understanding of the monstrous and ongoing cover/frame-up perpetrated in full public view at Camp Zeist and maintained to this day by the authorities on both sides of the Atlantic.



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