My memory of the 23rd of June 1985

By Richard Murphy, Irish Naval Service, April 2026

It's hard to know how to begin such a story particularly as the ending is so horribly brutal for the people who were murdered and for their families and friends who've had to endure the pain and loss for so many years.

I write this more than 40 years after that horrific day in June 1985, not from research or notes taken by me at that time, but solely from memory. As we all know, memory is prone to inaccuracies, but these are my memories of that day.

I apologise if I err in some recollections, but I write with the confidence that the 23rd of June 1985, is the one day in my life I have revisited thousands of times.

Like so many of my colleagues that day, I have never spoken openly about these events. I believe we do this as a mark of respect for the victims and their families. I also believe it is not our story to tell. We were simply part of the process that was activated after Flight 182 disappeared off of the radar.

In 2010, I was involved in an incident that brought me close to death. A combination of nearby medics, an available air ambulance, and luck are the reasons that I survived. I later met the people who had been present at the incident, and I found hearing their recollections of the incident to be somehow comforting and also brought me some clarity. It's because of this that I dare to write this in the hope that someone will get something from these recollections. I can say at the outset that I didn't do anything heroic, like so many of my colleagues that day. We simply did what we could to help bring dignity to the deceased, before returning to shore.

So, who am I? My name is Richard Murphy and on the 23rd of June 1985, I was an 18-year-old trainee electrician. It was my first week at sea, having joined the crew of the Irish naval vessel LE Aisling on Monday the 17th of June. Whilst it was part of the Irish defence forces, this Irish Naval vessel was more often than not engaged in fishery patrol in the Irish Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. LE Aisling had a crew of approximately 50.

In the early hours of the 23rd of June 1985, a fishing trawler had been detained with two naval crew on board. As a result, the LE Aisling was tasked with escorting the trawler to the port of Castletown Bere on the South Coast of Ireland. The plan was to anchor nearby for the Sunday afternoon, allow the crew to go ashore for a short time to play a game of football, and then head back out to patrol Sunday evening.

As a trainee who was only going to be on board the ship for my summer months back from college, I was essentially surplus to the standard crew establishment. There was a Sick Bay on board which had a set of bunk beds in it, and this was my cabin for the summer.

At approximately 8:20 AM on the morning of the 23rd of June, an officer entered the sick Bay in a very hurried manner, which in itself was most unusual. I was startled by the manner that he came in and my presence there appeared to startle him. He did a quick check of a medical supplies press, and almost as quickly as he had entered, left while referencing that something was missing. I assumed he was talking about medical supplies. It wasn't until he returned and spoke to me 10 minutes later that I realised he was referencing a plane that had gone missing off radar at Shannon. We then travelled at full speed to the area where the plane was last detected. Word spread among the crew. I don't believe anyone on board could have imagined what had occurred. We were told that it would be 3 to 4 hours before we reached the site, so we needed to start preparing the ship.

At this stage, we were preparing the ship for survivors. It's hard to reconcile now, but we were doing simple jobs like making sure the ship was spotless, that nothing was out of place, etc. One simple job I was given was to ensure that wires behind the music speakers were tidied up so it would all look immaculate. We wondered how cold these people would be, were there enough blankets for them, and what they would want to eat. The cooks got busy maximising the output of hot food for the people we expected to be bringing on board.

My memory of the first two to three hours is that there was an air of anticipation on board that we would have all these people with us shortly. We were told that there were radio signatures of SOS and we were heading in that direction. Life rafts back then had boxes which were communication devices with a telescopic ariel and a hand-wound power generator. They allowed any suitably trained person to communicate by morse code. Equally, an automatic SOS could be transmitted by turning the handle. We were expecting to see life rafts. As I now know, planes are equipped with safety equipment and emergency SOS transmitters – it was this transmission signal that we picked up.

Up on deck, the crew who operated and manned the RIB and launch craft were busy fuelling the engines and ensuring they were ready to be used as soon as we arrived on the scene. The bosun of the LE Aisling was talking us through various scenarios we might face on arrival, including who might come on board and how those situations would be handled. As he was briefing us on the deck, we felt the ship slow down. It was at that moment that everything changed.

We were now passing close by to clearly identifiable plane wreckage. There were aeroplane seats, overhead storage units, air tanks, and even one of the plane's wheels. Shortly after, we saw the first deceased person floating in the water. It was clear that our plans and anticipations were now gone, as more and more bodies appeared in the water.

A rigid inflatable boat commonly known as a RIB was launched with a coxswain, a bowman, and two divers. It soon became clear that the bowman had to be removed to make as much room as possible for the deceased bodies as some clusters came into view. I understand that the RIB was launched 14 times. Each time the RIB returned to the ship, it was lifted from the water to the afterdeck. There were two stretchers. Each deceased person was wrapped in a sheet and placed on a stretcher before being brought into the ship. The deceased were initially placed in a room known as the engineer's office, which was on the same level as the after deck. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for the office to fill up, and the remaining deceased were brought further up to the shipwright's store.

I was one of the stretcher bearers that day. Very often the RIB would return with three adult bodies. We would lift each wrapped body over the inflated chamber of the RIB and place them gently onto the stretcher in the manner we would normally place an injured person. Nobody had issued instructions; it just became the way each person was treated. Even though we knew they were deceased, it felt like we didn't want to hurt them any further. My most vivid image of that day was the sight of one of my colleagues walking towards the shipwright's store, carrying the body of a very young child in his arms. The child was wearing pyjamas with elasticated cuffs and was fully clothed. They looked like they were just asleep.

By now, the whole area was a hive of activity with other ships, trawlers, coast guards, and search-and-rescue helicopters. RAF planes were dropping smoke grenades in areas where they could see bodies in the water to guide those involved in the recovery.

I vividly remember taking a moment to look at all the activity in the sky and thinking it was like a scene from a war film. The air smelt of what I now understand to be aviation fuel. There were sightings of sharks in the area so every time the RIB was launched, we would go up the deck and track the RIB with binoculars, scanning for sharks when the two divers were in the water. All of this activity continued until it became too dark to continue.

On Monday, the scene was busy again. Some pieces of wreckage were taken on board the ship. Everyone on deck was on the lookout for the 'black box,' which in reality is an orange-coloured box, which would contain information vital to the investigation. We then headed back to the naval base in Cork Harbour.

The crew were briefed that there would be journalists on the quay wall in the naval base, and that we were not to speak to them. The crew would remain on board while a detail of men on the base would take the remains of the deceased ashore.

As the LE Aisling sailed up Cork Harbour, I was in the engine control room below deck. When we got alongside the quay and the engines were turned off, I went up on to the afterdeck and joined the small group of colleagues who were already there. I don't know

how many journalists, reporters, and TV crews were on the quay wall. As bizarre as it may sound, for me, I think this was the moment that reality sank in. This was the moment when I consciously realised that this plane disaster was a huge international story.

Of course, to any logical mind, this was a seismic event shaped by the immense horror inflicted on so many people. I can only assume that the human mind, when faced with such a huge devastation of life, can shut off its emotional response to remain functional and carry out what needs to be done as best one can. I remember standing on the deck, numb and in shock, seeing so many TV crews. We were approached by a number of crews from the quay wall asking the usual types of questions – one of my colleagues apologised to them saying that we had nothing to say. At this point, we went back inside the ship to avoid any further media attention.

LE Aisling went back out to sea after all the deceased and plane wreckage had been removed. We came back in again, however, after maybe an hour or so and those not on duty watch were allowed off the ship for the night. In recent years, I have often wondered if going out to sea and returning so quickly was the result of a change in operational order, or a way to ensure that all of the journalists left.

We headed back out to sea early Tuesday morning. While in range of a TV signal, we watched some of the reporting from airports in Cork and Canada and saw the images of the families of the deceased in pain and distress.

We had seen these kinds of images before. Relatives of people killed waiting with hope and trepidation for news of a loved one. Ireland in the ‘80s was very accustomed to reports of bombings in Northern Ireland. This was part of everyday news for us. Apart from a few incidents in the ‘70s, it happened across the border, about 220 miles from Cork. But looking at the news in June 1985 felt different. Maybe it's because the number of innocent people was so huge. To put it into context, the number of people murdered aboard Flight 182 equates to approximately 10% of the total figure of all of those killed in Northern Ireland in 30 years. Maybe it’s because it was a global story, or that we had witnessed in front of our eyes the consequences and devastation of what we now know was an act of terrorism.

Seeing the families on the news struck an emotional chord with the LE Aisling crew that resonates to this day.

In the 40 years since the Air India Flight 182 bombing, I have had little to no contact with my colleagues from that day. I've often gone to the spot of the Memorial Gardens in Ahakista, West Cork, sometimes with family or friends and sometimes on my own. I look at the names on the walls of all the passengers and crew. I see repeating family names, and I wonder how the families are doing. I wonder if after all the time that has

passed, the pain has eased at all. As a father of four, it is my eternal hope that I never find myself in such a position.

I have attended a few of the commemoration ceremonies that take place on the mornings of June the 23rd. I have listened to the speeches of various political dignitaries. It's hard to not be moved by the photos of the victims on display during these ceremonies. Hearing family members speak of their loved ones and putting a character and a sense of what those people were really like is both beautiful and heartbreaking.

In June 2025, my wife and I attended the 40th commemoration ceremony. Unbeknownst to me, about 25 members of the crew from 1985 would also be in attendance – colleagues that I hadn't seen for 40 years. I learned from talking to some of them, that like me, they regularly visit the Memorial Gardens, sit in quiet, and read the names while wondering how the families have coped in the aftermath of that day.

In January 2026, I visited the Cork Harbour Naval Base for the first time in 36 years. About 30 members of the crew attended a religious service in honour of the passengers and crew of Flight 182. Shortly after this religious service, the head of the Irish Naval Service unveiled a plaque to acknowledge and commemorate the events of that day.

I won’t try to imagine the impact that the bombing of Air India Flight 182 has had on the families of all those people who were murdered. I do on occasion wonder if I would have the same strength that so many of the families I have seen in Ahakista seem to have.

I write this as one person's experience and memory of that day. I do so because I believe that when man's inhumanity causes such pain, devastation, and death, all efforts should be taken to ensure that the world never forgets.

May They Rest in Peace.