

## 4/524 by Naonori Kohira

It was Summer 1985. It was dusk on the day before *Obon*, the festival of the dead. I was in downtown Tokyo, at the intersection of Eitaibashi, with one hand on the steering wheel, I was staring blankly along the road. The traffic light soon changed, and the cars began to move slowly. While following the shadow of bridge girder, which looked like someone had drawn with a black marker pen, I tried to take a slow shutter shot with the camera.

Inside my Volvo the air-conditioning was blowing quietly, while outside the Sumida River below was shining a dazzling orange. The tank was still about half full, but as a professional photographer, I tried to ensure that I filled up each day. I finished refuelling in the petrol station that I always used, then turned back on to the road while being seen off by the young petrol attendants whose voices I somehow found refreshing.

My work for the day had finished. The summer holidays were about to start. That night I could relax and have a bath with my one-year-old daughter. After that I could have a nice cold beer. I did not need to rush in particular and drove to my home in Fukugawa.

At that moment, the unique ring tone of the car phone rang out. These days everyone takes having a mobile phone for granted, but in the mid-1980s, the only civilians who had a mobile phone were journalists and Yakuza, and those phones were either in car or came with a heavy battery carried in a shoulder bag.

I was a bit upset at how the sound broke my relaxed mood, and after checking my rear view mirror, I stopped the car and picked up the handset with my left hand. It was Mr W, another photographer, who was one year my senior.

'Hey, Kohi, it looks like a plane has gone missing.' I was used to suddenly hearing about incidents and accidents like this, but this time he sounded particularly serious. 'Quick, turn on NHK.' The words struck me like an alarm. I put the car's gear into parking, pulled the hand-brake and then turned on the radio.

'JAL123 on a flight from Haneda to Ōsaka appears to have vanished over Shizuoka at around 18:56.' This was the only information and it was repeated many times.

'I'm in Hokkaidō now,' Mr W said in a slightly annoyed way, 'It's probably going to be awful, but please take care of everything.' 'Understood. To start of with, I will head to the editorial department,' I answered. I then did a U-turn and went back along the road I had just come and headed towards Kagurazaka. As I passed Kayabachō I got a call from Mr T, a reporter, who wanted confirm that we would meet at the editorial department.

It was terrible. I hoped that it was all a mistake. But...

A plane crash involves the life and death of many passengers of course. If it crashed on land, then there may be some miracle of survivors. Suddenly the words of a racing driver who was a best friend of mine came to mind; 'Sit back a little, then you can feel the flow of the rear of the car in your backside.' I straightened my back a bit and flexed my elbows, then I held the steering wheel gently.

As I muttered myself, I checked my knees were OK so it would be easy to put my foot on the brake at the traffic lights.

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At that time, I was a contract photographer for a weekly photo magazine called *Focus*. At first the sales had been sluggish, but it gained momentum with the rise of the new photo journalism, triggered by the New Japan Hotel fire. Let me try to go back to that time.

It was 3:24am on 8th February 1982. I received a phone call from Mr Tajima, a copy editor, who said 'Come along and just take some pictures of anything.' I put a jacket and some jeans on top of my pyjamas and jumped in the car. I took the back roads through Hiroo and Roppongi, and rushed to the back of the Nissho Iwai Corporation building in Akasaka. There were many photographers from the newspaper and television companies. They were taking pictures as though it was something they were used to seeing.

'This is dreadful.' I had little on-site experience and watched the confusion of the fire in a quandary. Then an ambulance stopped right in front of me with its red light revolving. Nurses and doctors carrying bags quickly ran to the gloom of the building. Without thinking, I followed them. On the road there was a stretcher covered with a blanket. The figure seemed to have lost its life already. Using torch light, doctors began what was more an autopsy than an examination.

Suddenly the scene was lit up by the lights of a TV camera crew. I opened the lens and took a whole roll of film. The police immediately stopped us and the scene returned to darkness. I tried to hang around the site for about two hours, but there was little for a news photographer.

I returned to the editorial department, developed the pictures in the dark room in the basement and handed them over to Mr Tajima. In the morning, the photographers who had been used got together, and monochrome prints that were just developed were strewn on a large desk editorial department. After some silence, Akio Gotō, who was the editor-in-chief, took up one picture and with severe eye said 'We'll use this one'. It was of the autopsy in the shadow of the building. The title attached to it was 'No pupil reflection' and it was the photo on the magazine cover. Gotō said 'The headline which can be made by the photo is *Focus*' type of photo.'

The editing group was divided into the *Focus* group in charge of incidents, accidents, and scandals, and the column group which centred on events and so on. I was in the latter group first, but after the New Japan Hotel fire, I soon became a part of the *Focus* group. I was also beginning to feel like a news cameraman.

So, even when two days after the New Japan Hotel fire, I got a phone call saying that a JAL plane had crashed at Haneda Airport, my body moved naturally and followed the police cars along the Metropolitan Expressway to rush to the site without any resistance at all.

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As I rushed to the editorial department at Kagurazaka in 1985, I remembered that JAL accident and how the captain had used the reverse thrusters and 24 people died after the plane crashed in to Tōkyō Bay.

I passed the intersection at Ushigome, and arrived at Shinchōsha, the publishers. Mr T was already with the editorial group and was with Tajima, who was responsible for the *Focus* group, sitting on the sofa watching the TV with fearful faces. Tazawa, the photo editor, came up from the dark room in the basement.

'This is terrible. Here, take this.' Tazawa gave me a heavy bag that of 24 packs of Tri-X Pro film. 'Kohira. Your car's got a phone, so is it OK to use your Volvo?' Mr T who had a rucksack on his back asked. 'Of course, let's go...' I said to Tajima, but he was already on the phone giving various instructions. 'Since it's you, we'll be fine, but be careful of the dark!' Tazawa said like a typical city boy, sending me on my way.

We got in the car, and as I checked the map, I could feel some tension and anxiety, and sweat was on my hands and forehead. Once again, I check the position in the seat and then stepped on the accelerator. Just after 8:00, as I looked to the right at the Keio hospital, we got on the Metropolitan Expressway entrance bound for the Chūō Expressway. The traffic was flowing smoothly, and whether it was because of concentrating on the news or, the feeling of tension drifted away.

The radio gave fragmentary information about the crash(?) location.

'According to a report from a US military plane from Yokota Air Base, it has crashed in mountains in the area of Minamiaki-mura, Mikuni Pass, and Ueno-mura on the borders of Nagano and Gunma prefectures. The search has also started...'

When I heard the name Minamiaki-mura, it made me think of the Kawakami, the neighbouring village, where there is a campground which was made by the village and the outdoor magazine of Shogakukan called *Bepal*. Exactly a week earlier, I was there doing a PR shoot for Toyota as *Focus*, a partner magazine, had a week off.

Immediately, I tried to phone the *Bepal* editorial department. I knew they would be glued to the TV. A freelance writer friend who answered the phone told me tell warmly, 'It's not clear where the plane crashed, but it seems to be before Kawakami-mura, in the area of Minamiaki-mura.'

If that was the case, then taking the Chūō Expressway from the Metropolitan Expressway at Shinjuku, and getting off at the Kobuchizawa junction to go towards Kawakami-mura as usual would be fastest. With the car at full throttle, the engine growled like a lorry as we proceeded along the Chūō Expressway, which had many inclines. It was a good thing that I filled the car up with fuel.

We exited the expressway, and taking the mountain road I had used many times, I arrived at the destination of Minamiaki-mura at half past midnight. A police Jeep and a group of firemen caught my eye. When we went down the road, I could see police in the grounds of the elementary school. As for the news media, we seemed to be the only ones, and the grounds felt really large. Anyway I parked in the corner of the grounds, and hanging my Rights Minolta CLE round my neck, I peeked into a place that looked like the tent for sports day organisers.

People who looked like the village volunteer firemen and policemen were sipping tea. 'Where is the site, have you found it?' They shook their heads and replied something like 'no'.

There was nothing else we could do, we could not go on, we had to wait and get an understanding of what was going on. There was no signal for the car phone. The two of us wandered around helplessly trying to find a telephone so that we could get information and report back our situation.

As the night deepened, there was no new information from the radio and it just repeated the same manuscript. It read through the passenger list in order. 'They are only names, but they were a variety of lives...' Mr T murmured as he dozed a little.

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'A search and rescue group of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) will be ready at about four, before dawn.' Mr T came back from the headquarters in a fluster. 'Right, let's go,' I replied, although I was unsure whether we could go with the SDF into the unknown mountains. I had some confidence in my physical strength, but given the neglect of my health and lack of daily exercise, I was a bit unsure. Mr T had a larger body, and was a heavy smoker to whom a plain cigarette was indispensable.

To try to shake off the anxiety, I opened the boot of the car, and I took out my camera which was chilly. The SLR was a Nikon FM2 motor drive. Another camera was a Nikon F, which was more mechanical but which I was used to. The lenses, which I had selected to lighten the load as much as possible, were a 20mm wide angle and 300mm for close ups, with a 1.4 converter mounted on the 300mm lens. In my rucksack was the flash, which was a San Pack SR25 with the special specification for high-speed continuous shooting. I rolled up the equipment in a towel and T-shirt. I then tightly packed in seven rolls of film. Mr T had crammed into his rucksack some squashed bread, work gloves, a towel, a notepad and a pen.

When I went to the tent of the search team, it looked like they would be leaving soon. To keep up with an SDF jeep on the mountain roads in my Volvo would be impossible. When I wondered whether it would be possible to go in the SDF jeep, a jeep with a photographer of *Focus* on its bonnet turned up.

'Quick, get on! There's no other way to go than with the SDF.' It was incredible timing. The two of us jumped on, I don't know how long we drove for but in the end the SDF vehicle stopped and we were listening to the instructions of the commanding officer who was surrounded by ten or so men. Trying to understand the situation on the ground is completely different to doing it from the air. I dare say that for them the words were hard to appreciate. In a world where civilization has progressed so much, to not be able to find a jumbo jet would be... still, there is no choice but to get on with it, and prepare yourself for the worst.

The other photographer decided to wait there, but a number of other companies' people and the two of us followed the search team. The SDF teams proceeded in silence up the steep, pathless, hillside as if on exercise. Soon our breathing became harder, and the number in the group gradually got smaller. It was like trying to drag your body up a cliff. It was bad. All too soon, a newspaper reporter in a suit and leather shoes and a TV reporter with his heavy load gave up and began to descend the mountain.

Soon the figures of the SDF men were gone from sight, but we still kept climbing further up and we seemed to reach the top. Looking out, I could see a helicopter flying below our line of sight.

‘Kohira! Smoke!’ When I looked at where Mr T was pointing, I could just see something drifting up. I quickly took the 300mm lens and attached it to the converter, and when I looked through the viewfinder I was able to see some letters. ‘JAL’. It was a wing of an airplane. Quickly I released the shutter a few times. After that I used the Minolta Rights with a wide angle lens to get the state of the whole mountain and weather. In total I took about 20 pictures. Thinking of what I might still need to photograph, I could not waste any film. ‘What shall we do?’ ‘If we go straight down, we may end up close by.’ This time we went down a pathless route towards the valley. Both of us were amateurs, not veteran climbers at all. After we had gone about 100m, we didn’t even know what direction we were going in. We became thirsty, but we didn’t even have the most basic of things like a water bottle. So using the small case for a camera film many times, we drank spring water off the bare rock. We climbed past rocks of mountain streams, while saying if we were unlucky in following this stream, we may end up at a river and coming out in the town. Although we had no water bottle, it was our jogging shoes that saved us.

Soon, when the field of view opened up, I noticed that there was dust moving around as though it was dancing. On the ground around us, there were more and more machine-like parts. When we went further, there were larger parts. Mr T’s facial expression didn’t only show tiredness, but it seemed stiff. As we proceeded defiantly on, I saw a playing card fallen on a rock. The Ace of Spades. It gave me an unpleasant feeling. I realised the plane has crashed. I got the background in to the shot and took the picture. As I was paying attention to the card, the scenery became blurred, as dust rolled in like deep-sea plankton in the sunshine.

I saw a blue thing. When I approached it, I saw that it was a passenger seat. Are we there??? I suppose we had been aiming for this spot from the night before, but honestly, I didn’t want to admit it. From among the fallen trees, I could see big chunks of debris which looked like an airplane wing. We were at the crash site at last. It was as though the trees were wrapping to hide the aircraft. Amongst the smell of being immersed in the forest, the stench of oil hit the nose.

When we came out in to a place where many of the trees had been flattened, I could see there were people wearing the short coat worn by local firemen, shouting something while looking in our direction. Both of us waved our hands while shouting ‘Oi!’

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‘You surprised us. We thought you were survivors!’ said some of the firemen, to which we briefly replied, ‘No, we’re media’. ‘Well, come and sit down over here. You did well to get here. We’re lumber jacks, but hardly anybody has ever set foot in these remote mountains.’

I gratefully received a cigarette like it was a reward. ‘It’s said that there may be a radioactive isotope on board, but do you guys have any idea what that means?’ ‘No, we also heard that, but we don’t really understand.’

But what on Earth should I take pictures of? What should I photograph in a place that looks like Yumenoshima, the island in Tōkyō Bay where rubbish is dumped? I took out my camera, and somewhat carelessly, I just took a number of 360-degree panoramic pictures. I learned later that this

place is called Sugeno-sawa and was the place where the rear of the aircraft slipped down to from Osutaka-no-One. We spent some time sitting on top of the felled trees there, aimlessly watching the middle-aged firemen.

But, I think it was just a few minutes. When I casually looked to bottom of the dale, in amongst the piles of what looked like rubbish and the trees, something was moving and glistened.

'Hey, just then, something moved!' I searched with my 300mm lens, but found nothing. But, I couldn't help searching some more. Along with the lumber jacks, we ran that way together at once. I remember that it was like running in a frenzied dream, but like a daydream, I cannot remember what happened clearly. Everybody forgot about the things like the radioactive isotopes.

'Help me...' a weak voice could be heard saying. 'Back here!' someone shouted. In this tragedy, there was a survivor. Or were there more survivors? Everyone's hopes were raised, and everyone was excited. When we took a look around, we notice that the SDF and rescue teams had appeared out of nowhere.

We moved down the slope a little and watched the rescue work. I was equipped with the 20mm lens Nikon FM2, with the focus at 3m, and a sync cord attached to the flash with tape to so it would not come off. There was a very slight drizzle, so I set the aperture to F8 and shutter timing to 1/250s to fit with the Tri-X film ASA800. I don't know what I captured, but I was concentrating so that hopefully, I would shoot the moment of the rescue.

I've no idea how much time passed. 'You're in the way! Get out of my way! Do you want to get hit?' screamed a members of the Nagano Prefectural Police carrying a woman on his back. Without a viewfinder, I took a burst of six or seven pictures from a low angle, but didn't go after them. That was because, behind them, a girl of around elementary school age was about to be rescued soon. I lent a little from where I was and released the shutter looking down from above, without using the viewfinder. I noticed that the girl's eyes were not focused, probably due to the shock and impact. The first five shots were taken with the flash.

As I took a silicon cloth from my pocket to wipe the water droplets off the lens, a hand waved at us and we saw the woman who had shouted 'Help!' being carried away. She had a navy blue polka dot dress, and took a close-up shot using the 300mm lens through a gap in the rescue team, but she was soon covered up with a blanket as she was carried on the stretcher. When I looked around again, I saw the SDF team were making a stretcher out of a door of the plane for rescuing the next survivor.

When I looked at the last one to be rescued, at first the facial features looked like a boy, but when I looked more closely I could see it was a girl. Of course she was a bit dazed, and she was like a child who had woken up from a dream. That's probably it, because she lived through this tragedy. That was great, really great, I honestly felt so. The middle-aged lumber jacks who made up the fire brigade were smiling with their kind faces. Beside them a young SDF officer started speaking 'Why did the plane...' but he was lost for words. The atmosphere, which was a mixture of relief and peace of mind, enveloped the rescue site.

The first to be rescued was Mrs Yoshizaki and her daughter (aged 35 and 8 years old at that time), then the stewardess Yumi Ochiai (then 26 years old), and finally Keiko Kawakami (then 12 years old).

After the four survivors out of 525 were carried away, I, as considerately as possible, photographed trees that had been knocked down, life jackets which hung in trees, and the wreckage of the aircraft.

Next was the recovery of the remains. First was a boy who looked as though he would begin moving at any moment, then a young girl, and a salaryman wearing open-necked short-sleeved shirt. They were all still seated in the blue seat, with the seat belts looking as though it was causing them pain. Paratroopers and SDF soldiers from the Funabashi garrison in Chiba silently and carefully collected the remains. They continued their work without paying any attention to my camera. If they had they would probably would have been disciplined, I suppose. I have the upmost respect for them.

We could only just stare at the scene. I asked Mr T, who had a small camera, 'Aren't you going to take any pictures?' 'No, I will leave it to you', he replied. I had no strength left, but while thinking that I tried to look at every corner of the site with my viewfinder. I had to accurately record the site – that was all I kept on telling myself.

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At about half past one in the afternoon, we were advised by the firemen and a person who looked like a captain of the SDF, 'You should start going back down the mountain now. You cannot camp here.' When we thought about what they said, we realised they were right. I had taken all the photos that I could take. No, actually I felt like there were more things that should be taken, but my heart was telling me to quickly escape from this place.

'Kohira, let's go'. Mr T decided it was time to descend the mountain. We put our bags on our backs and we started to go down the mountain. Then, in the bushes, we saw an object that looked like an engine. It looked like spaceship debris from a science fiction film. I took out my camera again and using the 20mm lens I released the shutter. I then got as close as possible and, from every angle possible, took pictures of the heart of the burnt body. As I released the shutter it seemed to nail on the feelings of the people involved in the accident; sad, painful, and unanswerable. I exhausted all the film that I had brought with me soon. No more ammunition. The limit. No, I cannot shoot anymore, so time to go home.

I was suddenly attacked by strong feeling of fatigue and my legs became heavy. We pushed through some sharply pointed bamboo leaves, and while exchanging silent greetings with some SDF personnel who were climbing up the mountain in the rain, we continued down in silence. We came across an abandoned trolley line; the soft, rotten sleepers made my feelings sink even more. I went back out to the dale of rugged rocks again. My throat was dry, but I didn't want to drink the water flowing from the dale any more.

My shoes were soaking wet and heavy. How long would we need to struggle on to the village at the base of the mountain? After the sun set, it didn't take long for it to become pitch black. Of course we didn't have a water bottle or a torch. But when I thought of the people who died in the crash, I could not drop dead like this. But even so, that day's 24 hours seemed particularly long. The words I heard from a monk, who was a childhood friend, stuck in my mind, 'A news cameraman's job is a tough one, but even if you met the people who died in the accident or incident, without any compassion, please don't tell them that it's OK.'

So the pair of us got in to a tempo where silently we walked on, resting once every five minutes, for probably about five hours. At last I could see something like a road in front of us. There was a small concrete bridge crossing the dale, we clambered out on to the road. We'd been rescued. The two of us slumped down on the ground. Mr T sat down and soon took one of his bent Gauloises cigarettes, straightened it and lit it. The sweet smell was soothing, but *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*.

After sitting in a daze for a while, a small old fire engine approached us with its red light rotating. As it slowed down, the fireman in the driver's seat beckoned us to jump in. In fact, I don't think we could have walked without that ride. Together we said 'Please excuse us' as we pulled ourselves in to the back of the truck using the rail.

The bell of the fire engine seemed to sadly clip-clop like a requiem. Once every few seconds, the revolving light dyed each other's faces red. I hardly had any strength in my hand, but somehow I clung on to the iron flap and I said as cheerfully as possible, 'It's like we've jumped on to the back of London double decker bus.'

We entered the mountain village and jumped out near the village hall. Nearby there was a small restaurant that was full of reporters. Five people were lined up behind a single red pay-phone. When I thought about it, I realised that I had not eaten anything since the night before. There was just mashed up bread. We entered the store anyway and Mr T got a ¥10 coin so he could call the editorial department. As I started counting the films as I put them in a plastic bag, I got worried that they may be ruined if they were not developed soon.

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The feelings of shock, hardship, loneliness that caused by losing somebody important suddenly, without warning, is something nobody would want to experience. However, in the time since the crash, I have also reached the age to experience it at first-hand. Time passes little by little every day, but there is no doubt that it can warm a cold heart.

Soon after the crash I was transferred to the United States. But I still had this once in a lifetime experience hanging over me. Two years after the change from the Shōwa Period to the Heisei Period, in 1991, I published the photographic book *4/524* as a record of the accident. Even when I look at the pages now, I get a flash back to the time at the crash site. My father, who had a great understanding of this collection of photographs, which got some criticisms, also passed away that year.

Mr T who was an expert in machines and cars, was put in charge of a series entitled 'Traffic Wars' in *Focus* magazine and he received an award from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. He died suddenly due to lung cancer when he was still in his 40s in 1997. *Focus* at one time boasted average sales of 2 million per issue, but in the Summer of 2001 it stopped printing, scattering many photographers and editors both inside and outside the company.

JAL, which had had the world's worst single plane crash in the world, subsequently had financial difficulties, and in Spring 2010 applied for protection under the Corporate Rehabilitation Law, as it embarked upon the hard route back to being the national flag carrier.



The last of the four survivors to be rescued at Osutaka-no-One, Keiko Kawakami, in order to save other people, became a nurse and in 1995 apparently helped those caught up in the Great Hanshin Earthquake.

Finally, I would like to introduce an e-mail I received after I held a photo exhibition of the accident in 2009 (some parts have been edited):

The JAL crash. This accident has left an impression on my life.

On that day, 24 years ago, I was in the third grade of senior high school. My parents were on a trip, so I invited round some classmates to make dinner and to study. We learned about the accident on TV. As time went on, I remember we watched the TV and I had the feeling that a major accident had happened. As I was washing the dishes in the kitchen, I could not believe my ears when I heard the voice of announcer.

'Kiuchi Shizuko, aged 17'

That's me! But I'm here! I was shocked as though I had been struck by some strange trick.

The feeling that the other me had disappeared from this world came to me in the middle of the night, while I was in bed. I couldn't stop crying. My parents were not there, but I tried crying quietly so my friends would not hear me.

At that time, I decided that I had to do my best for the sake of the Shizuko Kiuchi who had passed away, so that one day I could show the parents of the girl with the same first name and same surname that I had tried to be happy for her. On 12 August, I understood what sort of person I wanted to be.

In a nutshell, I am very happy. I had a great college life, got a job, am blessed with good friends and work colleagues, and have found love.

Exactly 20 years since the accident, I read an article in the *Asahi* newspaper about the Kiuchi family. It said that the older brother is married, and the father is employed in an advertising agency. It's such a coincidence - I also worked for an advertising agency.

Was it also fate that I bought and read that newspaper, which I don't usually get, and find that I work in that same industry?

But, it wasn't possible for me to write a letter. Although I've been happy, I wonder why I cannot confess the feelings about what happened when I was a high school student.

The rescuers which were risking their lives, the families of the victims, and the victims waiting for help, they must all have their own particular memories. As for me, after I saw Kohira's photographs, I have learned that in order to survive, you must thank other people and lend a hand to others.

Next summer, I want to climb to Osutaka-no-One. I would like to be able to tell the Kiuchi family with a big smile that I am doing my best.

Shizuko Kiuchi

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Crash location: 138°41.49E, 35°59.54N

Crash time: 18:56:27.92 12 August 1985

Passengers & Crew: 524

Survivors: 4

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Translation by Christopher Hood

Christopher Hood is a lecturer at Cardiff University. His research interests cover memorialization, symbolism, and transportation. His most recent book, *Dealing with Disaster in Japan: Responses to the Flight JL123 Crash*, about the world's biggest single plane crash was published by Routledge in 2011. His other publications include: *Shinkansen: From Bullet Train to Symbol of Modern Japan* (2006, Routledge), *Japanese Education Reform: Nakasone's Legacy* (2001, Routledge) and (as editor) the four volume *Politics of Modern Japan* (2008, Routledge).