

Machel-plane mystery deepens

Scrap dealer claims pieces held by police are not from late president's crashed jet

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White River, Mpumalanga

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's investigation into the plane crash that killed Mozambican president Samora Machel in 1986 took a bizarre turn yesterday when a Mpumalanga scrapyard owner claimed that wreckage in the possession of police was fake.

Greg Duffey of Duffey's metal scrapyard in White River insisted he had bought the wreckage of the plane from a church group in the border town of Komatipoort in 1987.

Duffey said he was told at the time that the mangled Russian Tupolev was Machel's. He recycled it at his scrapyard.

"It was definitely Machel's plane. I still have a copy of the cheque I used to pay this

strange Eljon church for the wreckage, and am convinced that the wreckage and engine parts the police say is Machel's are fake," he said.

Duffey said the wreckage he bought included the plane's engines and fuselage. The tail section was missing, he said.

"I chopped it all up and recycled it. I was therefore very surprised when I saw a Tonga police officer on TV recently claiming that they had the plane's wreckage at their police station. It has to be fake," said Duffey.

Meanwhile, Ngwenya Lodge owner Dave Fourie said yesterday he would be prepared to sell the tail section of the plane, being displayed as a trophy in his lodge bar, for R250 000.

He said the bullet holes in the Mozambican state crest were the result of "target prac-

tice" by one of his employees firing a shotgun.

Fourie said he had found the wreckage on the game farm when he bought it in 1989.

Tonga police station commander Captain Andrew Mtiwane said yesterday he had no way of verifying whether the wreckage at his station was actually from Machel's plane.

"The problem is that the plane wreckage was originally taken to Komatipoort after the accident and stored there until it was brought here on February 20 1989. That's two years after the accident, and we have no idea what happened in the interim," said Mtiwane.

Mpumalanga special investigator Director Agrippa Mabuza said two wheels from Machel's Tupolev jet had also been found on another farm in the Komatipoort area.

The farmer told investigators that they were given to him as a gift by the South African police who initially investigated the case.

TRC investigation head Christelle Terreblanche said earlier this week that the wreckage was not really central to her investigation.

"We're trying to establish whether South African forces used a decoy beacon to lure Machel's plane away from the Maputo airport and into the hillside at Mbuzini near Komatipoort," she said.

"While we'd obviously try to convince people with pieces of the plane to return them for a monument, this isn't the aim of what I'm doing."

A number of people who claim to have seen the wreckage at Duffey's scrapyard during 1987 have also come forward.