

AN SAA pilot has for the first time described the dramatic scenes in the control tower at Plaisance airport in Mauritius when the stricken Helderberg Boeing 747 made its fiery dive into the sea.

Captain Tony Snelgar was the relief pilot waiting to fly Flight 295, en route from Taipei, on the last leg of its journey from Mauritius to Johannesburg in December 1987.

This is the first time it has been revealed that an SAA pilot was in the control tower at the time of the crash.

Captain Snelgar, who tried to speak to the captain of the Helderberg, criticised press reports claiming that the tape of the Boeing's last moments had been seized by Mauritian special branch policemen and "tampered with".

The reports claimed the policemen arrived at the control tower, seized the tape and locked an SAA flight engineer who was listening to it in a room, warning him of dire consequences if he repeated what he had heard.

Captain Snelgar described the reports as totally false.

His denial of the reports is backed by Captain Paul Pienaar, a former Air Mauritius chief pilot who, with Captain Snelgar and co-pilot Jan Fenenga, were the first to establish that the Helderberg had crashed further out to sea than was originally thought.

Captain Pienaar was on the first search aircraft to find floating debris from the Helderberg.

Among one of the first to hear the tape, he also disclosed unpublished information about the "continuous and panic-stricken voices" in the cockpit.

He heard Captain Dawie

# I listened in as Helderberg went down, says SAA pilot

kom "n dominee" ongeluk. ("We're headed for a bloody crash.") less than two minutes before all transmissions ceased.

Captain Snelgar said from Singapore this week that he was at the airport awaiting the arrival of the Helderberg when he was told by the station manager that the aircraft had been delayed. Ten minutes later the manager told him the aircraft was in trouble.

"I rushed to the control tower and arrived as Dawie was making his last transmission."

Captain Snelgar tried to communicate with the Helderberg, but received no reply.

"I had the air traffic controller replay the tapes

to establish the Helderberg's position. We also set up emergency communications with my flight engineer, who was in the flight operations building talking to Jan Smuts.

"Jan (Fenenga) and I were the only SAA crew in the control tower. We were never approached by security men."

Captain Snelgar said he remained there for the next few hours listening to reruns of the tape. He got the impression that the Helderberg's co-pilot was not in the cockpit but probably in the hold, fighting the fire. The tape did not mention an earlier fire.

He was adamant that at no time did anyone interfere with or remove the tape and he was prepared

to testify to this in court.

Captain Pienaar said that when he was summoned to the tower about nine hours after the crash, several officials were present, including Captain Snelgar, listening to the tape.

"I also listened and, after a few calculations, was able to determine the aircraft was further out to sea than was thought."

"By law, the tape of a crash has to be sealed and kept for two years. That tape did not fall into unauthorised hands."

It was also "highly improbable" that anyone "ordered" Captain Dawie Uys to take off from Taipei after he allegedly refused to do so because of dangerous cargo, and un-

believable that he would have been "ordered" to continue his flight rather than divert after a fire was extinguished in the cargo hold.

Captain Mickey Mitchell, who in 1987 was SAA's executive director, flight operations, and Dawie Uys's boss, said: "The captain is the supreme authority on an aircraft and allegations that he was threatened with dismissal if he did not proceed with the flight are ludicrous."

"I knew Dawie. He was a good man and not stupid. He would have had a field day in an industrial court had he been dismissed and he knew that; so did the airline," said Captain Mitchell, who retired from

Speaking from Mauritius, where he is chief flight safety officer for Air Mauritius, Captain Mitchell said any pilot who did not divert after an in-flight fire "would have to have a hole in his head".

"Fire is the one thing pilots fear most; pilots would seek to put the aircraft down as soon as possible, not only for the passengers' sake, but for their own as well."

Captain Mitchell also doubted whether a pilot would know that dangerous cargo had been placed on an aircraft.

"Pilots accept the word of the agent who brings them a manifest to sign. To check, the hold would have to be unpacked and pallets examined."

He added that if Captain Uys had refused to take off and had informed flight operations at Jan Smuts of his decision, the duty operator would have called him (Captain Mitchell).

"The first I knew of a problem with Flight 295 was when I was called at 2am SA time and informed that the flight was overdue," he said.