

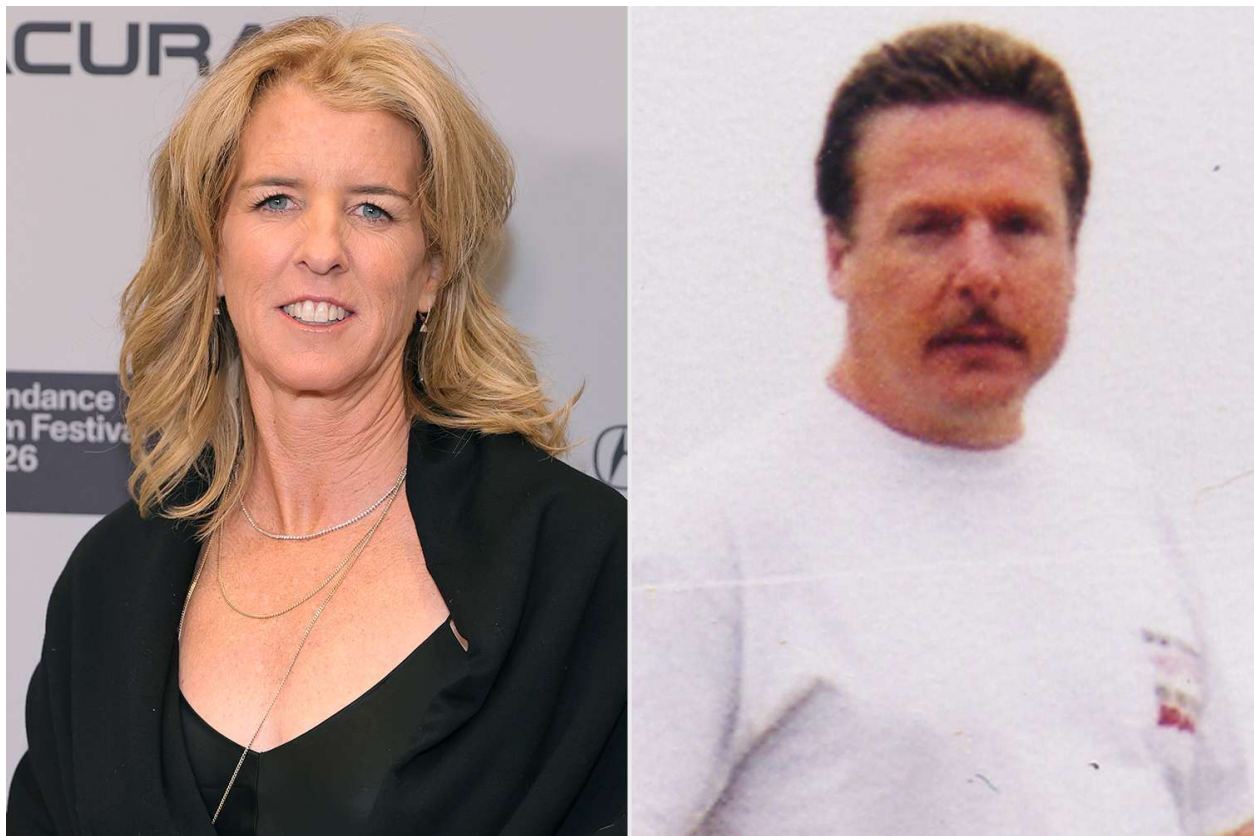
Exclusive

Boeing Whistleblowers Who ‘Sacrificed So Much’ and One’s Death ‘Compelled’ Rory Kennedy to Make New Exposé e)

‘Freefall: A Reckoning for Boeing’, out Aug. 19 on Netflix, comes four years after Kennedy’s first documentary on the topic, ‘Downfall: The Case Against Boeing’

By [Alexandra Schonfeld](#)

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Rory Kennedy (left) and **John Barnett**. Credit : Neilson Barnard/Getty; Courtesy of Vicky Stokes/Netflix

NEED TO KNOW

- Rory Kennedy is putting the spotlight on Boeing once more in her latest documentary *Freefall: A Reckoning for Boeing*
- The director says she was “compelled” to make her second film on the subject following the death of her friend, whistleblower John Barnett
- The documentary premieres on Netflix Aug. 19

Four years after releasing her first deep dive behind the scenes of Boeing, director Rory Kennedy is once again putting a spotlight on the “once great” aerospace manufacturer.

Freefall: A Reckoning for Boeing, streaming Aug. 19 on Netflix, opens with footage of former Boeing quality manager and whistleblower John Barnett’s deposition the day before he was found dead in his truck in March 2024 at age 62. His cause of death was later determined to be suicide, though there has been some speculation of foul play.

Kennedy got to know Barnett while making her first film on the subject, 2022’s *Downfall: The Case Against Boeing*, and she says news of his death “compelled” her to revisit her investigation.



John Barnett Courtesy of Vicky Stokes / Netflix

“[Boeing] seemed to change their ways and learn their lesson and create systems to ensure that safety was the focal point, not just profits,” Kennedy tells PEOPLE, referring to how the company addressed the 346 people who died from two Boeing 737 MAX 8 crashes in 2018 and 2019, resulting in the grounding of the models, after “not [taking] responsibility” initially. “But then pretty soon after, the MAX went up into the air [again]. It seemed like they were reverting back to their old ways.”

“We started seeing incident after incident in the press of engines falling off of airplanes, cabins filling up with smoke,” Kennedy adds, noting the time a door plug blew off during an Alaska Airlines 737 MAX 9 flight in 2024. “Around that time, my friend John Barnett, who had been a whistleblower and who I had interviewed for *Downfall*, had died while testifying about what he had seen with Boeing. That was really the thing that compelled me more than anything to make this film.”

At the time of Barnett’s death, whistleblower Merle Meyers had already been speaking to *The New York Times* about what he’d witnessed at the company for years. While he hadn’t decided yet if he wanted to remain anonymous, after Barnett’s death, he told the outlet to use his name.

“It pissed me off,” Meyers tells PEOPLE of his friend’s death, later adding, “But what really got me angry was the treatment that he had received from his managers. And I’ve seen that. And there’s never any corrective action for this kind of behavior.”

In recordings featured in the film, Barnett says he had “multiple managers berating me,” after reporting concerns he witnessed in the factory.



Merle Meyers in ‘Freefall: A Reckoning for Boeing’. Long View Productions / Netflix

“On my performance management review I was downgraded and my pay was docked for putting quality concerns in writing,” he claims. “They said flat out, they do not want anything in documentation so they can maintain culpable deniability. That’s exact words.”

“The stress and the humiliation and the hostility towards me, it just wore me down,” Barnett says in the film, adding that he opted to take retirement. “After I left, I knew issues continued to exist. That weighs heavy on my heart.”

He went public with his concerns, giving interviews to the press about what he said he had witnessed. He ultimately filed a case against Boeing that “involved exposure to a hostile work environment, with allegations of retaliation by Boeing against him,” his lawyer Brian Knowles says in the documentary.

“I saw so many whistleblowers and others who had sacrificed so much, who really faced extreme retribution for their bravery and courage, and I felt very compelled to tell their stories,” Kennedy says.

In the film, journalist Dominic Gates says “a lot” of Boeing’s “decline” can be traced back to 2005 when Jim McNerney was hired as the CEO. At this point, journalist David Gelles says, the company began to prioritize “profits above all else.”

McNerney had been tasked with building a new airplane that would ultimately become the 787 Dreamliner. Though it was set to cost the company around \$10B, Gates says a source shared internal documents with him that said Boeing had a plan to make it cost just \$5B.



A 787 Dreamliner Netflix

Merle says in the documentary that during the building of the 787, a “shift” occurred. According to him, the company began outsourcing parts of the airplane to save money. As parts started to arrive, pieces weren’t fitting as they should, creating delays. After years of only building planes in Seattle, they expanded to Charleston, S.C. — where workers were not unionized — to help speed up the process of completing the 787.

Bill Seitz, a former Boeing quality investigator who is interviewed in the documentary, says he recalls seeing a manager use a sledgehammer to nail a pin into landing gear. He filmed the action and showed it to Barnett, who said to bring it to upper management. Seitz claims they instructed him to erase the footage.

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In an audio recording from 2020, Barnett also claims he once found metal slivers on electric wiring under the floorboards of a Dreamliner. “Over time, this metal sliver’s gonna vibrate down in there and it’s gonna short wires out,” he explains. “It’s been known that just a little short will bring down a whole plane.”

He says he brought it to his boss, who told him it would “cost too much and take too much time to clean it.”

“I said ‘I will not put my name on this airplane saying it’s safe and airworthy,’ ” he adds. “But they didn’t want to hear it.”

Barnett claimed he communicated his concerns with HR, the vice president of corporate ethics and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), but that didn't change anything. In an audio recording, he remembers thinking, "Is it gonna take an airplane to go down before some people say, 'Wow, guess we should have listened.'"

In October 2018, a Lion Air flight crashed, killing everyone on board. Just months later, in March 2019, an Ethiopian Airlines flight crashed. Both planes were 737 MAX aircrafts, a model Boeing first announced in 2011.

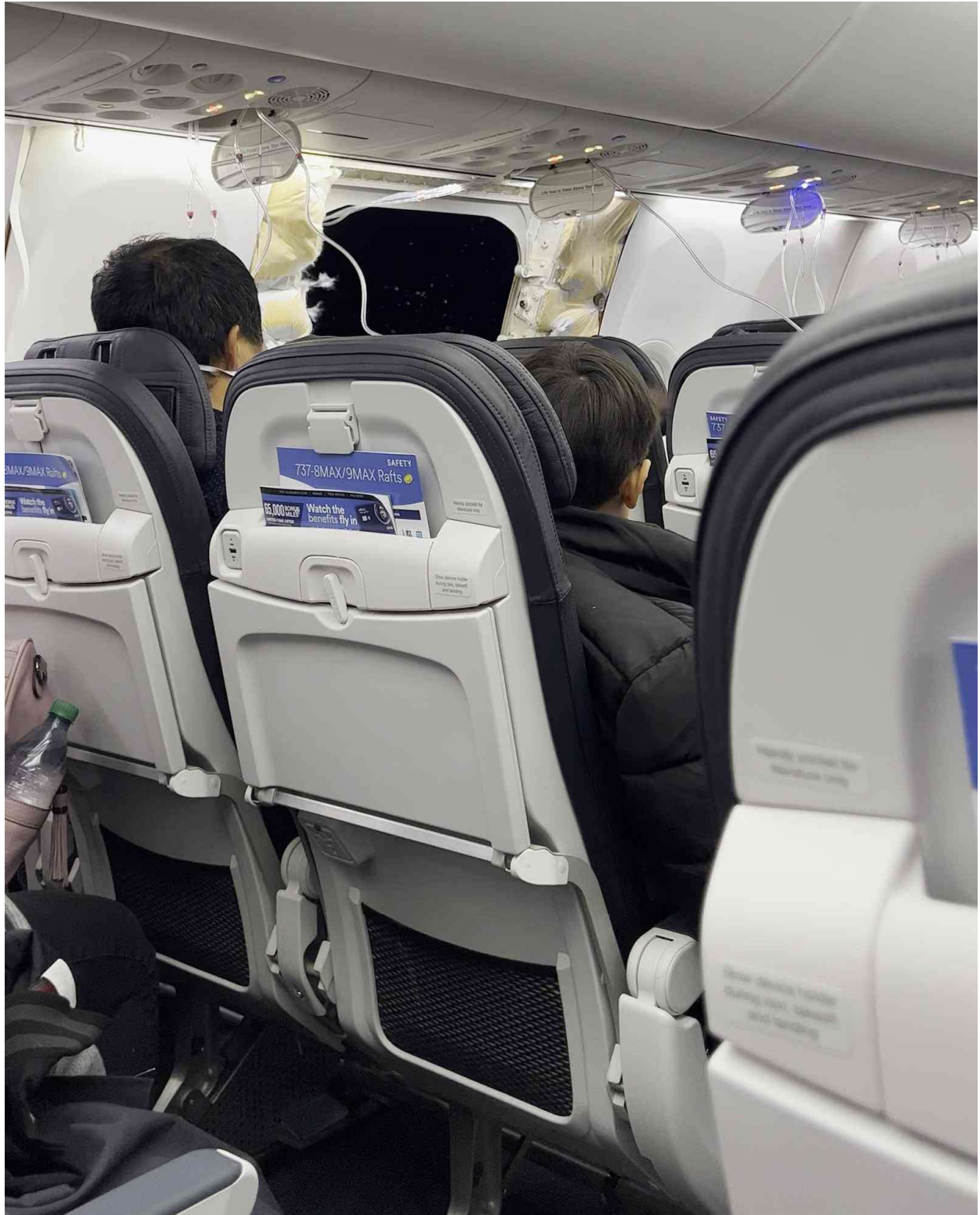
Sam Mohawk, a current Boeing quality investigator, tears up when talking about the crashes.

"Everyone in our factory was in a state of shock," he says. "We take our work seriously.... I was devastated."

In an exclusive clip from the documentary shared with PEOPLE, Roy Irvin, a former Boeing South Carolina employee who worked with Barnett, says he used to have nightmares about plane crashes.

"There's a lot of lives at stake," he says. "I would have nightmares of airplanes crashing very close to me. I've had airplanes crash so close to me [in my dreams], I can feel the heat from them in my sleep."

In 2021, following the Lion Air and Ethiopian Air crashes, it was announced that Boeing had entered into a deferred prosecution agreement. This was essentially a probation period of three years. If the company complied, all charges related to the crashes would be dismissed.



A photo inside the Alaska Airlines flight on Jan. 5, 2024. Courtesy of Elizabeth Le / Netflix

“We were upset about the plea deal; it’s not justice for these families,” Meyers says in the film.

On Jan. 5, 2024, two days before the probation period expired, the Alaska Airlines door plug incident occurred. According to the documentary, Boeing denied liability, saying the products must have been “improperly maintained, or misused.”

Journalist Dominic Gates says the investigation found that Boeing workers had removed the door plug to fix an issue caused by the suppliers, and when they reinstalled it, retaining bolts were not put back into place.

Although Boeing was not officially charged in connection to the incident, in which there were no fatalities, the U.S. Department of Justice determined the company had breached the terms of the 2021 deferred prosecution agreement. This led to Boeing settling a \$1B lawsuit with passengers in 2025; this week, on Aug. 13, a Delaware judge [dismissed](#) a shareholder lawsuit against Boeing.

“The allegations in this film have been widely reported over the past several years. Some remain unfounded claims to this day while others are issues that Boeing thoroughly addressed or continues to improve upon under the rigorous oversight of our regulators,” a Boeing spokesperson tells PEOPLE, adding, “Today, we are grateful that customers, industry experts, policymakers and our employees are seeing improvements in how we work together and deliver quality products. Our team is working every day to meet our commitments and earn the trust of those who depend on us.”

Meyers, who was a third-generation Boeing employee, insists “there will be no fourth generation.” He tells PEOPLE he hopes to “see this once-great company heal.”

“We want it to be a great place to work again, but that’s going to take leadership with integrity,” he says, adding, “We want our Boeing community back, and the company’s worth fighting for.”

Freefall: A Reckoning for Boeing premieres on Netflix Aug. 19.