NEW ORLEANS — Heyward Jeffers had watched men burn to death in Vietnam, but he wasn't prepared for the trauma that followed his mother's death.

Evelyn Jeffers died when her vacation flight to Las Vegas cartwheeled into Kenner in 1982. The crash of Pan Am Flight 759 began a long nightmare for Jeffers, one filled not only with grief for his mother but also with agony caused by pushy lawyers.

His mother's life became an issue as attorneys scrutinized her past, looking for ways to discredit her worth.

Jeffers lost sleep, lost his fiancée and nearly lost control of his life. He and other relatives of victims say the trauma of losing a loved one in a major disaster is compounded by the ordeal of trying to get compensation.

"Sometimes I felt like getting a gun and going to Pan Am headquarters in New York and letting them know how angry I was," he said.

Jeffers, a press liaison with the Louisiana Senate, drove from Baton Rouge to New Orleans after learning of the crash and immediately was confronted by television cameras, Pan Am representatives trying to ward off lawsuits and hungry lawyers offering their services in exchange for one-third of any award.

"The whole thing was bothersome. You have these real slick attorneys who are approaching you. Many people were called up and solicited. I was solicited," Jeffers said.

Within a week of the crash, after just he buried his 56-year-old mother, Jeffers received a letter signed by Robert Alpert, chief counsel for Pan Am's insurance carrier, urging him not to file suit because "there is nothing to be gained by a precipitous lawsuit."

"It's guys like that that really make the whole process distasteful and bad in every sense of the word," Jeffers said.

Jeffers did file suit. Pan Am then upped its settlement offer, but Jeffers' attorney rejected it without consulting his client — a move that eventually led Jeffers to find another attorney.

As the case proceeded toward trial, depositions were taken and investigations were begun. Attorneys for Pan Am's insurers delved into Mrs. Jeffers' background looking for reasons a jury would believe her life was worth less cash.

"The attorneys for the airline really try to smear the person," Jeffers said.

In February 1984, Jeffers and his second attorney agreed to a settlement before trial. Under terms of the agreement, Jeffers may not disclose the amount.

By the time the settlement was reached, Jeffers' fiancée had ended their engagement and he had turned to professional counseling to deal with his anger. Only in the last year, he said, has he come to terms with the tragedy. Recently, he and his fiancée got back together after a two-year separation.

"The frustration is that you can't handle it yourself. You react. You're not a player; you're just a watcher," he said. "I'm just now able to talk about it. I couldn't have talked about it with you a year ago. It's been three years, and now my anger has subsided."

"They throw money at you to rub on your wounds, and it's supposed to be OK. But the anger takes a long time to get over. It's only now that I can accept that my mother is gone. But for some of those other people, it may never be over."