

Inquiry sought after near-miss rocks airliner

From George Armstrong in Rome.

The captain of an Italian airliner has reported a near-miss with an unidentified object which later was seen to explode. Captain Salvatore Murabito, and his 110 passengers, aboard a DC9 flight from Milan to Palermo on Saturday, made a safe landing in Palermo.

There was a four-hour NATO exercise in the area on Saturday morning, involving the US aircraft carrier, Eisenhower, and Italian and German-based fighter planes. Firing was supposed to be simulated, and what nearly hit the airliner may have been a signal rocket.

Officials called yesterday for an investigation of the incident, which took place over the Tyrrhenian Sea. The Transport Minister, Mr Vincenzo Balzamo, asked the Defence Minister, Mr Lelio Lagorio, to appoint a special investigative commission and to file a complete report on the incident, Government sources said.

Mr Balzamo also said that he would press to include the issue in Friday's Cabinet meeting, the sources said.

Two years ago next month, another Italian airliner, flying from Bologna to Palermo, dived into the sea after an explosion in the same area,

near the island of Ustica, which is roughly midway between Sardinia and Palermo. All 81 people aboard were killed.

An official inquiry, completed only last month, said that the disaster either had been caused by an explosion on board, or, more probably, by an external explosion, which could only mean that it had been shot down.

The water around Ustica is deep and complete salvage of the DC9 plane has not been undertaken.

Some of the passengers on last Saturday's flight said they saw something pass under their aircraft, which was flying at 27,000 feet, followed by a detonation, which caused unusual vibrations in their plane.

The pilot of an Italian Air Force transport plane flying in the area at the same time, but at a lower altitude, also reportedly saw explosions in the sky.

The over-water area between the Italian mainland, Sardinia, and Sicily, could be called the Mediterranean's Bermuda Triangle. Last September, another DC9, flying a postal cargo from Palermo to Rome, reported a near-miss with a missile above the island of Ustica. Five years ago, a Palermo man flying a private jet also vanished while in that area.