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00:00:00,000 --> 00:00:10,000

MUSIC

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00:00:10,000 --> 00:00:14,000

Tonight, one of the worst aviation disasters in American history.

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00:00:14,000 --> 00:00:18,000

Planes don't just disappear from the air.

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00:00:18,000 --> 00:00:20,000

We just saw a Korean out here.

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00:00:20,000 --> 00:00:25,000

Two hundred and thirty people killed when their jetliner explodes off the coast of Long Island.

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00:00:25,000 --> 00:00:29,000

Virtually anything on the water in the vicinity is moving into the rescue area,

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00:00:29,000 --> 00:00:33,000

and they're there so quickly that there's actually falling wreckage

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00:00:33,000 --> 00:00:35,000

still coming out of the sky.

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00:00:35,000 --> 00:00:38,000

We'll uncover the top theories for why the plane blew up.

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00:00:38,000 --> 00:00:40,000

Maybe a bomb was placed on this airplane.

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00:00:40,000 --> 00:00:43,000

Aircraft fuel tanks are considered explosive environments,

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00:00:43,000 --> 00:00:46,000

and they have to be isolated from ignition sources.

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00:00:46,000 --> 00:00:50,000

Is the US government engaged in an actual government cover-up?

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00:00:50,000 --> 00:00:54,000

And explore new clues that might offer the answers.

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00:00:54,000 --> 00:00:58,000

Two missiles fired to hit another target, but they went awry.

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00:00:58,000 --> 00:01:02,000

What really happened to TWA Flight 800?

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00:01:17,000 --> 00:01:20,000

July 17th, 1996.

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00:01:20,000 --> 00:01:22,000

JFK International Airport.

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00:01:22,000 --> 00:01:26,000

It's a hot, humid summer night in New York City.

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00:01:26,000 --> 00:01:30,000

TWA Flight 800 sits at the gate awaiting departure.

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00:01:30,000 --> 00:01:35,000

TWA 800 had a flight plan to go from New York to Rome

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00:01:35,000 --> 00:01:37,000

with a layover in Paris.

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00:01:37,000 --> 00:01:41,000

On board the flight that day, there was a total of 230 people.

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00:01:41,000 --> 00:01:46,000

There were 192 passengers, 18 crew members, and 20 off-duty employees.

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00:01:46,000 --> 00:01:50,000

Most of them, they were there because they were working the second leg of the flight.

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00:01:51,000 --> 00:01:54,000

The crew, they are by the book professional.

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00:01:54,000 --> 00:01:58,000

Chief pilot Ralph Kovorkian is experienced on other aircraft,

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00:01:58,000 --> 00:02:02,000

but he's moved into the biggest airplane in TWA's fleet.

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00:02:02,000 --> 00:02:04,000

The Boeing 747.

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00:02:05,000 --> 00:02:08,000

Flight engineer Richard Campbell is also well-trained.

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00:02:08,000 --> 00:02:11,000

Because Richard had reached the age of 60,

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00:02:11,000 --> 00:02:14,000

which at the time that was the pilot retirement age,

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00:02:14,000 --> 00:02:18,000

he decided to stay on with the airline as a flight engineer.

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00:02:18,000 --> 00:02:21,000

The first leg of the flight from JFK to Paris

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00:02:21,000 --> 00:02:24,000

is projected to last just over seven hours.

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00:02:24,000 --> 00:02:28,000

But the flight is delayed for 62 minutes.

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00:02:30,000 --> 00:02:32,000

There was a baggage issue.

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00:02:33,000 --> 00:02:35,000

Apparently, the flight attendants had found a bag,

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00:02:35,000 --> 00:02:38,000

and they were not sure who the baggage belonged to.

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00:02:38,000 --> 00:02:41,000

So it took quite a while to match that piece of baggage

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00:02:41,000 --> 00:02:44,000

to the appropriate passenger.

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00:02:44,000 --> 00:02:47,000

As you can imagine, the passengers are getting restless.

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00:02:47,000 --> 00:02:51,000

They're all sitting in the airplane, ready to take off.

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00:02:52,000 --> 00:02:56,000

At 8.07 p.m., the crew fires up the engines.

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00:02:56,000 --> 00:02:59,000

The plane taxis out to the runway.

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00:02:59,000 --> 00:03:07,000

And at 8.19 p.m., TWA Flight 800 takes off into mostly clear skies.

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00:03:09,000 --> 00:03:13,000

The air traffic controller is communicating directly with these airplanes.

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00:03:13,000 --> 00:03:15,000

Each one has a call sign.

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00:03:15,000 --> 00:03:20,000

Each one has a transponder, which tells the plane position to air traffic controllers.

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00:03:21,000 --> 00:03:26,000

At 8.30 p.m., air traffic controllers give TWA 800 clearance

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00:03:26,000 --> 00:03:29,000

to go from 13,000 to 15,000 feet.

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00:03:29,000 --> 00:03:33,000

This is their last communication with the plane.

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00:03:33,000 --> 00:03:37,000

So Flight Engineer Campbell goes ahead and adds climb thrust.

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00:03:38,000 --> 00:03:41,000

And they start climbing up to 15,000 feet.

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00:03:42,000 --> 00:03:45,000

At 8.31 in 12 seconds, there's a transponder ping

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00:03:45,000 --> 00:03:48,000

with a Pennsylvania air traffic control station.

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00:03:48,000 --> 00:03:51,000

Then something strange happens.

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00:03:51,000 --> 00:03:58,000

Just 12 minutes after takeoff, Flight 800 disappears from radar.

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00:04:00,000 --> 00:04:04,000

A disappearing blip is pretty alarming for an air traffic controller.

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00:04:04,000 --> 00:04:08,000

So they tried to contact them, but there was no response.

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00:04:09,000 --> 00:04:13,000

And then they were asking for nearby airplanes to tell us what was going on.

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00:04:16,000 --> 00:04:21,000

This pilot flying over Long Island calls in and says he's seen an explosion in the air.

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00:04:21,000 --> 00:04:27,000

The pilot reports that this explosion occurred at about 16,000 feet over Long Island Sound.

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00:04:29,000 --> 00:04:33,000

And suddenly reports start coming in from pilots all over the area.

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00:04:33,000 --> 00:04:37,000

We saw two fireballs go down to the water. There's a big smoke coming up from that.

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00:04:37,000 --> 00:04:41,000

Something has exploded and the debris just rained down into the water.

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00:04:41,000 --> 00:04:44,000

They just went down to the water.

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00:04:44,000 --> 00:04:49,000

And then there's an outpouring of reports from people on the ground.

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00:04:49,000 --> 00:04:54,000

They report seeing a big fireball and also debris just raining out of the sky.

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00:04:55,000 --> 00:04:57,000

Emergency radios sound the alert.

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00:04:57,000 --> 00:05:02,000

There's a major plane crash into the ocean, and the search is on for survivors.

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00:05:03,000 --> 00:05:07,000

Virtually anything on the water in the vicinity is moving into the rescue area.

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00:05:07,000 --> 00:05:12,000

And they're there so quickly that there's actually falling wreckage still coming out of the sky.

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00:05:12,000 --> 00:05:15,000

There's burning debris. It's mass chaos.

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00:05:15,000 --> 00:05:23,000

And from all of this wreckage, they can actually see that this was the 747 from Flight 800.

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00:05:24,000 --> 00:05:30,000

It begins one of the longest and most expensive aviation accident investigations in history.

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00:05:31,000 --> 00:05:38,000

Within 20 minutes of the initial reports, people in Washington, DC begin to take action.

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00:05:38,000 --> 00:05:44,000

Our government is doing everything we can to continue the search for survivors and to find out the causes of this accident.

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00:05:44,000 --> 00:05:49,000

For the next two days, Navy divers calm the area searching for survivors.

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00:05:49,000 --> 00:05:53,000

But they don't find any.

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00:05:53,000 --> 00:06:01,000

When the families first learn that something has happened to the airplane, they gather at JFK to try and find out what happened.

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00:06:01,000 --> 00:06:07,000

And all the news photographers and cameramen are out there and they put the families on edge.

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00:06:07,000 --> 00:06:10,000

It's a terribly traumatic moment for them.

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00:06:10,000 --> 00:06:16,000

So they make the decision to move them into the airport hotel, which is about a mile away.

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00:06:16,000 --> 00:06:19,000

And that comes to be known as Huffman.

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00:06:19,000 --> 00:06:26,000

Along with the grief, there are also questions. What happened to TWA Flight 800?

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00:06:26,000 --> 00:06:32,000

This is a very tense time. The bombing in Oklahoma City had just occurred in 1995.

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00:06:32,000 --> 00:06:37,000

Terrorism was everybody's mind, so people had this idea that terrorists were targeting aircrafts.

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00:06:37,000 --> 00:06:44,000

We were a heightened alert because we had all these things that happened prior.

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00:06:44,000 --> 00:06:53,000

Just before this happened, we had the World Trade Center bombing and also the Kobar bombing in Saudi Arabia.

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00:06:53,000 --> 00:06:59,000

In the 1990s, the idea of a major terror attack was a huge blow.

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00:06:59,000 --> 00:07:03,000

So it was the first thought that this was a terrorist attack.

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00:07:03,000 --> 00:07:07,000

Investigators look into how terrorists could have brought down the plane,

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00:07:07,000 --> 00:07:11,000

focusing their attention on what happened before takeoff.

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00:07:11,000 --> 00:07:14,000

There was the big 62-minute delay for a bag.

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00:07:14,000 --> 00:07:17,000

So people wondered, what happened to the plane?

97

00:07:17,000 --> 00:07:20,000

The plane was in a very dangerous situation.

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00:07:20,000 --> 00:07:23,000

The plane was in a very dangerous situation.

99

00:07:23,000 --> 00:07:27,000

There was the big 62-minute delay for a bag.

100

00:07:27,000 --> 00:07:31,000

So people wondered, was there a bomb in that bag?

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00:07:31,000 --> 00:07:36,000

It happened earlier with Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

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00:07:36,000 --> 00:07:44,000

That bomb, which was in a bag, killed 259 passengers and 11 people on the ground.

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00:07:44,000 --> 00:07:51,000

So new high-tech scanners were put in place to find even thin layers of plastic explosives.

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00:07:51,000 --> 00:07:56,000

But unfortunately, JFK did not yet have such a system installed and working.

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00:07:58,000 --> 00:08:06,000

The National Transportation Safety Board begins the long process of reassembling the aircraft to determine a possible cause for the crash.

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00:08:06,000 --> 00:08:12,000

They were able to recover close to 95% of this aircraft from the bottom of the ocean.

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00:08:12,000 --> 00:08:19,000

And once that process was done, the FBI was able to send samples of the aircraft into the lab

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00:08:19,000 --> 00:08:22,000

to check for any sort of residue.

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00:08:22,000 --> 00:08:29,000

And there was a very small trace of an explosive residue that was on a floor panel.

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00:08:29,000 --> 00:08:39,000

Because trace amounts of explosives were found, the FBI focused on the possibility that maybe a bomb was placed on this airplane.

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00:08:39,000 --> 00:08:44,000

But there's another possibility, based on eyewitness accounts.

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00:08:45,000 --> 00:08:48,000

Many of the eyewitnesses reported seeing an actual streak of light.

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00:08:48,000 --> 00:08:53,000

So that made the FBI think that maybe it's not just a bomb on board.

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00:08:53,000 --> 00:08:56,000

Perhaps it was instead a missile attack.

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00:08:56,000 --> 00:08:58,000

The question is, where was the missile launched from?

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00:08:58,000 --> 00:09:02,000

The leading idea was that it was launched from a boat.

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00:09:08,000 --> 00:09:13,000

Once the residue is reported and then the idea of a missile is reported,

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00:09:13,000 --> 00:09:16,000

oh, that leads to widespread tension.

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00:09:16,000 --> 00:09:17,000

People are on edge.

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00:09:17,000 --> 00:09:21,000

Airport and other security around the world is now tightened.

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00:09:21,000 --> 00:09:23,000

It's just a matter of trigonometry.

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00:09:23,000 --> 00:09:25,000

I mean, any high school kid can figure it out.

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00:09:25,000 --> 00:09:26,000

It's a missile.

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00:09:26,000 --> 00:09:27,000

It's got to be a missile.

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00:09:27,000 --> 00:09:32,000

People really believe that this was some sort of terrorist attack.

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00:09:32,000 --> 00:09:34,000

But some raised doubts.

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00:09:34,000 --> 00:09:37,000

There's one huge problem here.

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00:09:37,000 --> 00:09:41,000

No terrorist organization is taking credit for this attack.

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00:09:43,000 --> 00:09:45,000

Isn't that what terrorist organizations do?

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00:09:45,000 --> 00:09:50,000

Because if they want to create terror, you need to know who they are and why they did it.

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00:09:50,000 --> 00:09:52,000

And we're not seeing that here.

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00:09:53,000 --> 00:10:00,000

It's not the first time that the NTSB has investigated an aircraft that might have been brought down by a bomb.

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00:10:00,000 --> 00:10:08,000

But the NTSB is a lot more hesitant than the FBI to leap to conclusions about the causes of a specific incident.

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00:10:08,000 --> 00:10:12,000

They have institutionally a long history of carrying out accident investigations.

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00:10:12,000 --> 00:10:17,000

And they understand that by following their procedures, they're likely to be able to draw the most accurate conclusions.

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00:10:17,000 --> 00:10:20,000

The FBI's purpose is to enforce laws.

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00:10:20,000 --> 00:10:23,000

And as a result, these two are going to come into conflict.

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00:10:23,000 --> 00:10:31,000

So the NTSB's explanation to this is that this aircraft was used before to transport troops from the Gulf.

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00:10:31,000 --> 00:10:36,000

And those troops could have had some sort of explosive residue on them.

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00:10:36,000 --> 00:10:44,000

While explosive residue might have been left over from the Gulf War, investigators also consider something else.

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00:10:44,000 --> 00:10:51,000

So they look at the history of the aircraft, where was the plane before that, and maybe a month and a half before the accident.

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00:10:51,000 --> 00:10:55,000

The NTSB found that the airplane has been used for training.

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00:10:55,000 --> 00:10:57,000

K9 explosive destruction dogs.

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00:10:57,000 --> 00:11:04,000

And when they checked with the dog handlers, one of the pouches that carry RDX explosive was punctured.

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00:11:05,000 --> 00:11:10,000

And traces of it may have wound up on the back of the seat or on the floor in the front side.

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00:11:10,000 --> 00:11:21,000

With regards to the people who were on the ground who saw this all unfold, the NTSB said they didn't see any sort of missile-like impact on the aircraft.

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00:11:21,000 --> 00:11:27,000

And those people were mistaken based on their perspective on the ground seeing this all happen.

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00:11:27,000 --> 00:11:36,000

The safety board has found no evidence that the crash of Flight 800 could have been caused by a bomb or missile.

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00:11:37,000 --> 00:11:43,000

The families that are grieving are really looking for closure that they can't get from the NTSB.

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00:11:43,000 --> 00:11:47,000

They want to know what happened, but sometimes there's no way to really rush the process.

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00:11:47,000 --> 00:11:55,000

The transportation board has no firm estimate of when its findings will be ready, but cautions that it could take years.

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00:11:56,000 --> 00:12:03,000

Our work will continue, and we will spare no effort to determine the cause of the crash of TWA-800.

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00:12:03,000 --> 00:12:08,000

That makes a lot of Americans very nervous. They want answers.

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00:12:08,000 --> 00:12:11,000

The NTSB is slow delivering answers.

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00:12:11,000 --> 00:12:18,000

So, independent researchers are doing their thing. They're looking at the data, and they come to the conclusion that maybe we're not looking broadly enough.

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00:12:18,000 --> 00:12:22,000

Maybe there are other ideas that have not yet been considered.

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00:12:25,000 --> 00:12:35,000

September 1996. It's just two months since Flight 800 crashed, but the two federal agencies investigating the disaster are at odds.

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00:12:35,000 --> 00:12:44,000

The FBI says it's likely a terrorist attack. The transportation board doesn't agree, but insists it's too early to speculate.

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00:12:44,000 --> 00:12:49,000

Then, researchers from outside the government propose their own theory.

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00:12:49,000 --> 00:12:57,000

An NTSB official makes an offhanded comment in the media about the remoteness of a missile strike being about the same as a meteorite strike.

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00:12:57,000 --> 00:13:03,000

And so, that comment actually does send people off looking at the possibility that it was a meteorite.

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00:13:08,000 --> 00:13:12,000

News corporations are reporting on TWA-800.

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00:13:12,000 --> 00:13:18,000

This is a sensational story, and as a result, a lot of different theories are really starting to circulate.

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00:13:18,000 --> 00:13:29,000

In particular, there are astronomers that contact the NTSB to raise the possibility that this was in fact a meteorite strike based on eyewitness accounts.

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00:13:31,000 --> 00:13:36,000

The eyewitnesses report seeing a streak of light and a fireball. Well, guess what does both?

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00:13:36,000 --> 00:13:42,000

Meteors across Earth. People report seeing fireballs all the time.

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00:13:43,000 --> 00:13:48,000

There's over two tons of meteoritic material falling to Earth every day.

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00:13:48,000 --> 00:13:51,000

And sometimes those meteors make impact.

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00:13:51,000 --> 00:13:58,000

In America specifically, we know of three cases where cars were hit with meteors in the last century.

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00:13:58,000 --> 00:14:00,000

That could cause real damage.

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00:14:00,000 --> 00:14:05,000

Take, for example, a recent fireball over Chellumens, Russia.

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00:14:06,000 --> 00:14:10,000

It broke windows and injured people on the ground.

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00:14:10,000 --> 00:14:13,000

So, yeah, you could bring down an airplane from a meteor.

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00:14:14,000 --> 00:14:18,000

Statisticians collect the data and crunch the numbers about meteorites.

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00:14:18,000 --> 00:14:21,000

To calculate the odds, one could strike a plane.

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00:14:22,000 --> 00:14:26,000

About 3,000 meteorites make it through the Earth's atmosphere every year.

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00:14:26,000 --> 00:14:28,000

About 125 a day.

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00:14:28,000 --> 00:14:32,000

And on any given day, there might be 5,000 aircraft flying over the United States.

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00:14:32,000 --> 00:14:38,000

Which sounds like a lot, but the odds of a small meteorite hitting an aircraft are still extremely small.

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00:14:39,000 --> 00:14:45,000

In a 100-year span, the chance of a meteor bringing down a plane is just 1%.

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00:14:45,000 --> 00:14:50,000

A meteor not large enough to be detected by NASA, but yet not too small,

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00:14:50,000 --> 00:14:54,000

that it would completely burn as it's going through the atmosphere.

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00:14:54,000 --> 00:15:01,000

The possibility of that small enough meteor to impact a plane that's traveling about half the speed of sound

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00:15:01,000 --> 00:15:03,000

is minor.

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00:15:03,000 --> 00:15:08,000

That said, it's still worth a pause.

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00:15:09,000 --> 00:15:15,000

Searching for proof that a meteor strike took down the plane, theorists consider the wreckage of Flight 800.

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00:15:15,000 --> 00:15:19,000

Based on what we understand about meteorites entering the atmosphere,

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00:15:19,000 --> 00:15:24,000

the size of meteor needed to take down an airplane is only about the size of a baseball.

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00:15:24,000 --> 00:15:31,000

And if the meteor hits the fuel tank and the wing, it could definitely trigger a big explosion like the eyewitnesses saw.

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00:15:31,000 --> 00:15:36,000

Some suggest the plane may have been hit by fragments from a meteor.

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00:15:36,000 --> 00:15:43,000

Some scientists' analysis of the wreckage did lend to the theory of Ebolaid, which is a meteorite that explodes in the air.

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00:15:43,000 --> 00:15:46,000

And some of the wreckage did reveal puncture points.

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00:15:46,000 --> 00:15:52,000

If a meteorite happened to explode near the aircraft, perhaps some of the meteorite shrapnel could have punctured the 747.

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00:15:52,000 --> 00:15:59,000

But many witnesses say they saw a streak of light coming up toward the plane, not coming down on it from above.

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00:15:59,000 --> 00:16:04,000

Taking together is all a quirk of perspective and how it enters the atmosphere.

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00:16:04,000 --> 00:16:12,000

Remember, the Earth's surface is curved, so that adds another dimension to perceiving exactly where things occurred in the night sky.

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00:16:12,000 --> 00:16:19,000

Scientists raising the meteorite theory urged the NTSB to do further research, but they resist.

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00:16:20,000 --> 00:16:22,000

They just found it highly unlikely.

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00:16:22,000 --> 00:16:36,000

And because these experts are essentially inserting themselves into a well-established investigation, this is another case of non-experts trying to dictate how an aviation accident investigation will be carried out.

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00:16:36,000 --> 00:16:48,000

Not only is there a very low expected frequency for this kind of occurrence, but also, even if it did occur, that it would have caused the damage that we saw.

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00:16:49,000 --> 00:16:55,000

If it wasn't a terrorist attack or a meteorite, then what could have caused the explosion?

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00:16:55,000 --> 00:17:00,000

A few months into the investigation, the safety board is convinced of one thing.

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00:17:01,000 --> 00:17:07,000

So if they put forward a theory that the airplane actually broke in half...

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00:17:07,000 --> 00:17:13,000

When the explosion happens, the front of the aircraft is severed from the back of the airplane.

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00:17:13,000 --> 00:17:20,000

So imagine the front of this Boeing 747 like a bullet shearing off and collapsing.

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00:17:20,000 --> 00:17:26,000

The back end of the aircraft starts heading upwards because the engines are still spinning.

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00:17:27,000 --> 00:17:29,000

Inside, it's a nightmare.

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00:17:30,000 --> 00:17:34,000

They're looking at the sky, and there is no front end.

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00:17:35,000 --> 00:17:45,000

So they come to the conclusion that maybe the streak of light that I witnessed this saw going upwards was this second half of the airplane on fire still moving upwards in the sky.

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00:17:45,000 --> 00:17:50,000

And that's why the pilots did not have time to call in to say there was a problem.

211

00:17:50,000 --> 00:17:53,000

Because this was a sudden event.

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00:18:04,000 --> 00:18:10,000

Could the answer lie hidden in the recovered wreckage of the Dune 747?

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00:18:10,000 --> 00:18:24,000

This reassembled airplane in that hangar in Calverton, I've heard the term Frankstein aircraft, which looked like literally tiny pieces, big pieces.

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00:18:24,000 --> 00:18:27,000

Whatever they could find, they put together.

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00:18:27,000 --> 00:18:32,000

Just trying to find answers about what happened that day.

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00:18:33,000 --> 00:18:38,000

Two important factors may be the age and condition of the airplane.

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00:18:38,000 --> 00:18:43,000

The Boeing 747 that is TWA Flight 800, it's a relatively old aircraft.

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00:18:43,000 --> 00:18:52,000

It's 25 years old. It's flown for over 93,000 hours, which is the equivalent of flying continuously for 10 and a half years.

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00:18:52,000 --> 00:18:56,000

It's one of the earlier versions of the famous 747.

220

00:18:56,000 --> 00:19:06,000

And if properly maintained, the plane could last many, many, many years before it reaches an age where you can no longer repair the parts and you decommission it.

221

00:19:07,000 --> 00:19:16,000

Around the 1980s, airline mechanics started to notice that there were cracks on old Boeing 747 airplanes.

222

00:19:16,000 --> 00:19:24,000

And this was really on the structural part of the aircraft, in the upper deck, the lower deck, as well as the nose of the aircraft.

223

00:19:24,000 --> 00:19:31,000

On TWA 800, the NTSB find cracks that are an inch to one and a half inch.

224

00:19:31,000 --> 00:19:40,000

Now, an old airplane like this 747 that was almost 25 years old, you get cracks.

225

00:19:40,000 --> 00:19:45,000

But every airplane that has worked that long has cracks.

226

00:19:45,000 --> 00:19:50,000

It comes from the routine pressurization and unpressurizing of the airplane cabin.

227

00:19:50,000 --> 00:19:53,000

So if you shake up a soda, you do the same thing.

228

00:19:53,000 --> 00:19:55,000

You pressurize the container.

229

00:19:55,000 --> 00:19:59,000

And what happens if that container is punctured? Boom.

230

00:20:03,000 --> 00:20:05,000

Cracks are extremely dangerous.

231

00:20:05,000 --> 00:20:14,000

Any sort of crack to the fuselage of the aircraft, when the airplane is experiencing any sort of stress, that crack can just tear the airplane apart.

232

00:20:15,000 --> 00:20:20,000

So if they're not addressed, cracks could really lead to catastrophic results.

233

00:20:20,000 --> 00:20:27,000

In 1986, the FAA required investigations of older aircraft, including TWA flight 800.

234

00:20:27,000 --> 00:20:33,000

So when you look at the NTSB report, they went through the maintenance logbooks for this aircraft.

235

00:20:33,000 --> 00:20:37,000

And there were no major mechanical issues.

236

00:20:38,000 --> 00:20:45,000

This was an aircraft that had flown tens of thousands of hours, and components do break down over time.

237

00:20:45,000 --> 00:20:51,000

In the spring of 1997, investigators learned of problems with the Dune Plains maintenance.

238

00:20:51,000 --> 00:20:59,000

The inspectors who evaluated the wreckage found that the people who regularly inspected the airplane actually missed some cracks.

239

00:20:59,000 --> 00:21:05,000

It had gone through the normal safety checks, but still the plane wasn't fully sound.

240

00:21:05,000 --> 00:21:13,000

The NTSB found evidence of metal fatigue, of some stress cracks caused by pressurization of the

aircraft.

241

00:21:13,000 --> 00:21:22,000

They found some hairline cracks in what we call shear ties that keep the skin attached to the airplane.

242

00:21:22,000 --> 00:21:26,000

And they also found several hairline cracks in the winged spar.

243

00:21:26,000 --> 00:21:33,000

Spars are connected to the keel beam that basically keeps the wings attached to the airplane.

244

00:21:33,000 --> 00:21:40,000

But were these cracks big enough and in areas that could cause a plane to break apart?

245

00:21:40,000 --> 00:21:50,000

Part of the investigation led them to take a deep dive of the fuselage, and they found that there were cracks in the shear ties that were on the wing,

246

00:21:50,000 --> 00:21:54,000

but it wasn't anything that would have caused an explosion of any kind.

247

00:21:54,000 --> 00:22:00,000

The investigators reported that none of these cracks were serious enough to have contributed to this tragedy.

248

00:22:00,000 --> 00:22:05,000

Just like you can have a rock hit your windshield, at first it's just a little tiny star, looks like an asterisk,

249

00:22:05,000 --> 00:22:08,000

but what makes it dangerous is when it travels.

250

00:22:08,000 --> 00:22:11,000

Well, the same thing is true with the cracks in the airplane.

251

00:22:11,000 --> 00:22:16,000

They had not combined with each other to create a slung crack in the structure,

252

00:22:16,000 --> 00:22:22,000

and therefore could have not contributed to the catastrophic breakup of the airplane while in flight.

253

00:22:22,000 --> 00:22:30,000

Analysis of the wreckage confirms for the NTSB that structural defects didn't take down Flight 800,

254

00:22:30,000 --> 00:22:33,000

so they looked to the flight data recorder for clues.

255

00:22:33,000 --> 00:22:38,000

Along with all the wreckage that they found, they found the airplane's black box,

256

00:22:38,000 --> 00:22:43,000

and the black box keeps a record of the data that the airplane is producing,

257

00:22:43,000 --> 00:22:47,000

as well as all the conversations between the pilot, co-pilot, and crew.

258

00:22:47,000 --> 00:22:51,000

Initially, they were concerned that because the casing was cracked,

259

00:22:51,000 --> 00:22:55,000

they would never be able to recover any of the conversations that was going on the cockpit,

260

00:22:55,000 --> 00:22:59,000

but as soon as they got it back to DC and they put it in a tape,

261

00:22:59,000 --> 00:23:02,000

they were able to play that full communication.

262

00:23:03,000 --> 00:23:05,000

I'm sure it was a very emotional moment,

263

00:23:05,000 --> 00:23:12,000

but it was in their final words that the crew was able to communicate what was going on,

264

00:23:12,000 --> 00:23:19,000

and that really helped investigators get closer to what they believed caused the aircraft to explode.

265

00:23:21,000 --> 00:23:29,000

The 1996 flight 800 disaster remains under investigation for four long years,

266

00:23:29,000 --> 00:23:35,000

as government officials clash and families of victims grow increasingly frustrated.

267

00:23:35,000 --> 00:23:44,000

Then, in August of 2000, the National Transportation Safety Board announces it finally has what it says

268

00:23:44,000 --> 00:23:47,000

are the answers so many are waiting for.

269

00:23:47,000 --> 00:23:52,000

Answers gleam from the airplane's black box.

270

00:23:52,000 --> 00:23:54,000

There's a lot of routine chatter.

271

00:23:54,000 --> 00:23:59,000

It's the type of things that you would expect to hear on any civilian airline flight.

272

00:23:59,000 --> 00:24:06,000

Everything seemed routine, with the exception of just before they were ready to close the doors.

273

00:24:06,000 --> 00:24:12,000

There was this hour delay because of this mismatch of the bag and the passenger,

274

00:24:12,000 --> 00:24:15,000

but the passenger was on board all the time.

275

00:24:15,000 --> 00:24:19,000

On the black box, we can hear Captain Ralph Kivorkian joke like,

276

00:24:19,000 --> 00:24:23,000

all right, we won't tell them that, talking about telling the passengers that they made an oops.

277

00:24:23,000 --> 00:24:25,000

Flight engineer Campbell responds,

278

00:24:25,000 --> 00:24:28,000

if we knew that, we'd have a mutiny back there.

279

00:24:30,000 --> 00:24:33,000

At around 8.19 p.m., they take off uneventfully,

280

00:24:33,000 --> 00:24:38,000

and from the point of view of air traffic control, everything is going fine with Flight 800.

281

00:24:38,000 --> 00:24:41,000

At some point, Captain Kivorkian made a comment to,

282

00:24:41,000 --> 00:24:45,000

boy, look at her, she's climbing like a homesick angel.

283

00:24:45,000 --> 00:24:49,000

That's a term we use when the aircraft climbs very rapidly.

284

00:24:49,000 --> 00:24:53,000

In other words, she's really climbing high towards the sky.

285

00:24:53,000 --> 00:24:57,000

After this was said, the second pilot in the flight deck, Captain Snyder,

286

00:24:57,000 --> 00:25:00,000

had said that the airspeed was bleeding off,

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00:25:00,000 --> 00:25:04,000

which means the aircraft is flying faster than usual,

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00:25:04,000 --> 00:25:08,000

and it really wasn't anything to be worried about.

289

00:25:09,000 --> 00:25:12,000

Cross-checking the transcript with the flight data,

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00:25:12,000 --> 00:25:17,000

it just confirms that nothing out of the ordinary is really happening here.

291

00:25:17,000 --> 00:25:25,000

So at around 8.30, Boston Air Traffic Control advises TWA to climb from 1.000 to 1.500,

292

00:25:25,000 --> 00:25:29,000

and at this point, Captain Kivorkian says, climb thrust.

293

00:25:30,000 --> 00:25:34,000

Flight engineer Campbell responds, the power's set,

294

00:25:34,000 --> 00:25:37,000

power's set were the last words that were heard in the flight deck,

295

00:25:37,000 --> 00:25:42,000

and then 37 seconds later, the airplane explodes.

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00:25:43,000 --> 00:25:47,000

But while most of this is all normal chatter on a flight deck,

297

00:25:47,000 --> 00:25:52,000

there's one earlier exchange that intrigues crash investigators.

298

00:25:53,000 --> 00:25:56,000

Just a few moments before the CVRS stops recording,

299

00:25:56,000 --> 00:26:00,000

Captain Kivorkian comments, check out that crazy indication on number four.

300

00:26:01,000 --> 00:26:03,000

What he's saying is sort of equivalent to

301

00:26:03,000 --> 00:26:07,000

riding in your car and having your gas gauge malfunction.

302

00:26:08,000 --> 00:26:13,000

Because this is an old airplane, and the 747 has so many fuel tanks

303

00:26:13,000 --> 00:26:15,000

that are interconnected in each wing.

304

00:26:15,000 --> 00:26:21,000

Those gauges were not that reliable, so you occasionally get some weird indications.

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00:26:22,000 --> 00:26:28,000

But this time, the safety board believes it's a sign of trouble inside one of the fuel tanks.

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00:26:29,000 --> 00:26:32,000

Just a few days after the accident,

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00:26:32,000 --> 00:26:38,000

one of the investigators sees that the center wing tank bowed out.

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00:26:38,000 --> 00:26:43,000

So something happened to make the center tank explode from the inside out.

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00:26:48,000 --> 00:26:51,000

Aircraft fuel tanks are considered explosive environments,

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00:26:51,000 --> 00:26:54,000

and they have to be isolated from ignition sources

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00:26:54,000 --> 00:26:59,000

because you don't want to have any chance that something will ignite in those areas

312

00:26:59,000 --> 00:27:01,000

because there's fuel there.

313

00:27:01,000 --> 00:27:05,000

Captain Kivorkian's statement about the strange readings from the fuel tank

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00:27:05,000 --> 00:27:10,000

gives investigators a clue as to the source of this fuel tank explosion.

315

00:27:10,000 --> 00:27:14,000

You have electrical components inside the central fuel tank

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00:27:14,000 --> 00:27:16,000

to tell you if they're running short on fuel.

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00:27:16,000 --> 00:27:20,000

But if a short circuit somewhere causes a high amount of voltage

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00:27:20,000 --> 00:27:26,000

to arc between two pieces of metal inside an area filled with fuel vapor,

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00:27:26,000 --> 00:27:29,000

a catastrophic explosion is likely to occur.

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00:27:29,000 --> 00:27:33,000

The NTSB believes that's exactly what happened.

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00:27:33,000 --> 00:27:42,000

So the NTSB theory is that there was an electrical spark that exploded the tank outward

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00:27:42,000 --> 00:27:45,000

and blew the aircraft apart.

323

00:27:46,000 --> 00:27:54,000

The inescapable conclusion that the cause of the in-flight break-up of TWA Flight 800

324

00:27:54,000 --> 00:27:58,000

was a fuel-air explosion in the center wing tank.

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00:27:59,000 --> 00:28:04,000

Investigators hone in on the electrical system, which connects the fuel gauges to the tank.

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00:28:04,000 --> 00:28:07,000

Looking for what could have caused the explosion,

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00:28:07,000 --> 00:28:12,000

they find evidence of frayed wiring and damaged installation in the maintenance reports.

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00:28:12,000 --> 00:28:16,000

They see that there are anomalies in the electrical system.

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00:28:16,000 --> 00:28:23,000

The wire, which has gone in 25 years earlier, has been subjected to vibration and salt

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00:28:23,000 --> 00:28:27,000

and chemicals and pressurization and abrasion.

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00:28:28,000 --> 00:28:34,000

The wires were the ones installed back in 1976 or so and hasn't been replaced.

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00:28:34,000 --> 00:28:38,000

Some of those wires would fray, some of the installations start to break,

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00:28:38,000 --> 00:28:42,000

and if they're short, now you have your ignition source.

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00:28:42,000 --> 00:28:46,000

Not everybody is satisfied with these conclusions.

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00:28:46,000 --> 00:28:48,000

This explanation faces a couple problems.

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00:28:48,000 --> 00:28:54,000

Number one, it's coming so late, people have gotten used to the idea that perhaps there was a

terrorist involvement.

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00:28:54,000 --> 00:28:59,000

But secondly, it's only their best guess, like a multiple-choice test where you don't know the right answer,

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00:28:59,000 --> 00:29:01,000

but you can rule out most of the rest.

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00:29:01,000 --> 00:29:06,000

They think this is the right answer, but they cannot point to absolutely conclusive evidence.

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00:29:06,000 --> 00:29:10,000

We know that the center fuel tank exploded, we've known that for a long time.

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00:29:10,000 --> 00:29:14,000

We don't know what initiated that explosion.

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00:29:14,000 --> 00:29:22,000

While evidence strongly points to degraded wiring, the NTSB is never able to pinpoint the exact cause of the explosion.

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00:29:22,000 --> 00:29:32,000

It becomes very difficult in the aftermath of TWA Flight 800's destruction to determine how such a spark might have reached the fuel vapors inside the central wing fuel tank.

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00:29:32,000 --> 00:29:37,000

By the time the investigation results are announced, many people are dissatisfied and they wanted answers,

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00:29:37,000 --> 00:29:41,000

and the federal government just wasn't able to give them answers quickly enough.

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00:29:44,000 --> 00:29:51,000

In its August 2000 official report on the crash of Flight 800, investigators at the National Transportation Safety Board

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00:29:51,000 --> 00:29:57,000

said a fuel tank inside the wing caught fire, which triggered the plane's explosion.

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00:29:57,000 --> 00:30:06,000

Some believe it was a spark created by defective wiring, but others seek clues in a different flight that ended tragically.

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00:30:06,000 --> 00:30:14,000

Two years after the tragedy of Flight 800, there was a Swiss Air 111 that tragically crashed off the east coast of Canada,

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00:30:14,000 --> 00:30:17,000

killing all 229 people on board.

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00:30:17,000 --> 00:30:25,000

Examining these two flights, Flight 800 and Swiss Air 111, there are a lot of similarities that are a bit uncanny.

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00:30:25,000 --> 00:30:34,000

Both flights took off from the same airport, JFK, at the same time, 8.19pm, and the same day of the week, Wednesday.

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00:30:34,000 --> 00:30:39,000

And tragically, both planes went down very early in their flights.

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00:30:39,000 --> 00:30:47,000

Like TWA 800, the Swiss Air plane ignites mid-flight without a definitive cause.

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00:30:47,000 --> 00:30:54,000

The entertainment electronics which was stored next to the cockpit is where the fire started, and then it spread to blankets.

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00:30:54,000 --> 00:30:58,000

And before you know it, the entire plane is engulfed in flames.

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00:30:58,000 --> 00:31:06,000

Like Flight 800, the Canadian officials are unable to figure out exactly what triggered the fire in the first place.

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00:31:06,000 --> 00:31:14,000

Investigators in both crashes speculate that defective wiring is to blame, but aren't able to pinpoint the exact source.

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00:31:14,000 --> 00:31:20,000

Given all the similarities between these two flights, is there something else that could cause both planes to go down?

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00:31:20,000 --> 00:31:25,000

As they were figuring out the factors that led to both of these crashes and what they might have in

common,

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00:31:25,000 --> 00:31:32,000

researchers noted that both pilots on the planes briefly lost radio contact shortly before things went haywire.

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00:31:32,000 --> 00:31:38,000

So given these similarities, the question becomes what could cause communications to go out?

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00:31:38,000 --> 00:31:43,000

And it's the same thing that could create navigational problems and other electronic problems on a flight.

364

00:31:44,000 --> 00:31:48,000

Electromagnetic interference

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00:31:48,000 --> 00:31:51,000

Electromagnetic interference, it's a real problem.

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00:31:51,000 --> 00:31:59,000

There's a reason that you have to put your cell phones into airplane mode, and we try to minimize

other forms of electromagnetic interference.

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00:31:59,000 --> 00:32:03,000

When it comes to aircraft, they're very sensitive. They have a lot of instrumentation.

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00:32:03,000 --> 00:32:09,000

They have a lot of electrical components that are subject to the possibility of interference.

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00:32:09,000 --> 00:32:17,000

Some argue that there's only one source capable of generating enough electromagnetic interference to bring down a plane.

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00:32:17,000 --> 00:32:20,000

The U.S. Military

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00:32:20,000 --> 00:32:25,000

What these researchers found was that when we look at Swiss Air 111, which again took off at the same time,

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00:32:25,000 --> 00:32:30,000

the same day of the week from the same airport, they did find something interesting.

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00:32:30,000 --> 00:32:38,000

The Fleet Area Control and Surveillance Facility is a Navy organization that monitors the air and sea space off the coasts of the United States.

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00:32:38,000 --> 00:32:45,000

Documents provided the first couple of weeks of September 1998 did show military operations off the eastern seaboard.

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00:32:45,000 --> 00:32:55,000

Specifically, the document reports that during that week there was a small-scale ECM notification that stands for Electronic Countermeasure Notification.

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00:32:55,000 --> 00:32:59,000

And that's a training exercise for electronic war games.

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00:32:59,000 --> 00:33:06,000

So instead of using bombs and bullets, what they use was electronic warfare.

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00:33:06,000 --> 00:33:12,000

They're sending out signals that could interfere with the electronics of civilian flights.

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00:33:12,000 --> 00:33:21,000

And the records further show that Navy jets were actually in very similar area to the Swiss 111 flight at the time of this incident.

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00:33:21,000 --> 00:33:29,000

So these independent researchers put forth the idea that the electronic warfare jammy signals sent out by these military jets

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00:33:29,000 --> 00:33:35,000

somehow interfered with the electronics of Swiss Air 111, leading to the fire that ultimately brought down the plane.

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00:33:36,000 --> 00:33:47,000

But even with the presence of the military exercises in the area, debate remains whether there was enough electromagnetic interference to bring down these flights.

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00:33:47,000 --> 00:33:58,000

The EMS spectrum can cause problems, but we really haven't had a lot of incidents where we pointed towards electromagnetic interference as potentially downing an aircraft.

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00:33:59,000 --> 00:34:12,000

Even though the surface of the earth is constantly bombarded in the electromagnetic spectrum, times that it would be most at risk of causing a problem would be in the descent of the aircraft and not in midair.

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00:34:13,000 --> 00:34:19,000

The NTSB report cited about 11 sources of electromagnetic energy in the area.

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00:34:19,000 --> 00:34:24,000

The largest of them emitting about 800 watts with a peak of about a thousand watts.

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00:34:24,000 --> 00:34:37,000

This energy decays with distance and when you tally all the sources at an altitude of 13,000 feet at one airplane, I don't think we have enough energy to trigger an explosion in the center wing tank.

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00:34:38,000 --> 00:34:43,000

Even so, speculation about the military's role in the crash continues.

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00:34:43,000 --> 00:34:55,000

It is unfortunate that a small number of people pursuing their own agendas have persisted in making unfounded charges of a government cover-up in this investigation.

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00:34:57,000 --> 00:35:04,000

A lot of people will point to government cover-ups and government conspiracies because the government isn't always good at dispelling the rumors.

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00:35:05,000 --> 00:35:16,000

Sometimes the government doesn't come out and dispel these conspiracy theories because to do so would require revealing evidence that shouldn't be in the public domain.

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00:35:20,000 --> 00:35:28,000

It's been more than 20 years since the National Transportation Safety Board released its August 2000 report on Flight 800.

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00:35:29,000 --> 00:35:32,000

Some relatives of the victims continue to dispute its findings.

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00:35:32,000 --> 00:35:46,000

With the help of researchers, these families have discovered evidence allegedly withheld from the NTSB of nearby live-fire military exercises showing an object headed toward the plane just before it exploded.

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00:35:47,000 --> 00:35:57,000

Some of the family of the victims of Flight 800 now think that maybe there is a cover-up going on and maybe this was a direct military attack.

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00:35:58,000 --> 00:36:04,000

The idea that the U.S. military could accidentally shoot down a passenger plane isn't wild speculation.

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00:36:04,000 --> 00:36:10,000

It actually happened just eight years prior to the explosion of Flight 800.

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00:36:10,000 --> 00:36:17,000

In 1988, the USS Vincennes had actually shot down an Iranian airliner originating out of Tehran.

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00:36:17,000 --> 00:36:25,000

They thought that it was actually an Iranian Air Force fighter aircraft and fired two surface-to-air missiles downing the civilian airliner.

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00:36:26,000 --> 00:36:30,000

That occurred in 1988. It was still fairly fresh in the public's mind.

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00:36:31,000 --> 00:36:39,000

Some of the family now say that if the military is responsible for this, then they too should be held accountable for the tragedy of Flight 800.

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00:36:40,000 --> 00:36:48,000

Families of the victims never gave up and they want to bring their own investigators to their investigation.

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00:36:49,000 --> 00:36:59,000

In June of 2022, the family spiled a lawsuit against the U.S. Navy and two government contractors to pursue this theory and hopefully discover the truth.

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00:37:00,000 --> 00:37:05,000

The lawsuit alleges that the government knows full well what happened but covered up that information.

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00:37:05,000 --> 00:37:08,000

Because they allege the government caused a crash.

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00:37:09,000 --> 00:37:18,000

According to this theory, the Navy shot down the plane during war games then covered it up.

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00:37:18,000 --> 00:37:26,000

The lawsuit says that this was a friendly fire. There were two missiles fired from a Navy missile but they went awry.

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00:37:26,000 --> 00:37:34,000

It was supposed to hit another target but hit the bigger airplane with more heat signature. That was a TWA-800.

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00:37:35,000 --> 00:37:51,000

According to their lawsuit, the Navy's radar caught the actual debris from the airplane exploding and measured the velocities of the particles and said that they were moving at 4,000 miles per hour, which is four times faster than the speed of sound.

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00:37:51,000 --> 00:37:57,000

Their allegation states only a U.S. military-grade missile could cause the debris to move at that rate.

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00:37:57,000 --> 00:38:05,000

They allege that the radar data from those tests was withheld from the NTSB but given to the FBI within minutes of the crash.

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00:38:07,000 --> 00:38:13,000

And so without analyzing the radar images, the NTSB concluded there was no evidence of a missile.

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00:38:13,000 --> 00:38:24,000

None of the participating bomb technicians nor myself have seen any indication of high explosive effects on any of the wreckage recovered from Flight 800.

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00:38:25,000 --> 00:38:28,000

This theory has its detractors.

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00:38:28,000 --> 00:38:40,000

They claim that only a missile could create such high velocity debris. I'm not convinced of that. A meteor is going to be moving faster than a missile but the devil's in the detail.

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00:38:41,000 --> 00:38:48,000

The idea that fast-moving debris could only have been caused by a missile strike is contradicted by the facts of physics.

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00:38:48,000 --> 00:38:57,000

Fast-moving debris from the aircraft was almost certainly created by the explosion of that aircraft and not by an intersection with some form of missile.

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00:38:59,000 --> 00:39:03,000

But what about the allegations that the Navy wargames shot down the plane?

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00:39:03,000 --> 00:39:17,000

That scenario also has no merit because a destroyer was alleged to have shot a missile. That destroyer was actually maybe a hundred miles plus south and none of the missiles on it had the

range to bring down the plane.

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00:39:18,000 --> 00:39:24,000

No fragments from any surface-to-air missile have ever been found in the wreckage or near the wreckage of Flight 800.

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00:39:24,000 --> 00:39:31,000

Also, the missile theory does not explain why the aircraft lost communication with the ground.

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00:39:33,000 --> 00:39:38,000

The Transportation Board still insists that the investigation is and should be closed.

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00:39:39,000 --> 00:39:49,000

The recovered wreckage of TWA Flight 800 was kept in a hangar outside Ashburn, Virginia for 25 years and was used as a training aid for other NTSB investigators.

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00:39:51,000 --> 00:39:56,000

Families had nothing. Many of them did not have the remains of their loved ones.

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00:39:56,000 --> 00:40:05,000

Allowing them that opportunity to go into the hangar, seeing the wreckage, had to be a tremendous

relief to them.

426

00:40:06,000 --> 00:40:11,000

You know, losing somebody is extremely hard, especially if you don't get to say goodbye to them.

427

00:40:11,000 --> 00:40:18,000

But this is also such a big moment because Elise is done with this building and they're going to destroy all of the pieces.

428

00:40:18,000 --> 00:40:23,000

So it's kind of forcing a lot of these families to really say goodbye.

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00:40:23,000 --> 00:40:26,000

You know, like the book is closed, the chapter is closed.

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00:40:27,000 --> 00:40:32,000

Perhaps their lawsuit will at last bring the families of the victims the closure they seek.

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00:40:32,000 --> 00:40:37,000

But we may never definitively know why TWA 800 crashed.

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00:40:37,000 --> 00:40:44,000

I think it continues to capture public imagination because it was one of the first real sensational events that happened at the dawn of the internet.

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00:40:44,000 --> 00:40:49,000

And so people got online to share ideas and theories and they wanted answers.

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00:40:49,000 --> 00:40:53,000

So in that narrative void, people came up with their own conjecture and their own answers.

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00:40:53,000 --> 00:40:59,000

History is full of tragedies and in many cases we don't actually ever find a conclusive answer.

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00:40:59,000 --> 00:41:00,000

That's right, down.

437

00:41:00,000 --> 00:41:09,000

And when you have people that are involved because their family members died tragically, people will still wonder about what happened to TWA 800.

438

00:41:10,000 --> 00:41:20,000

While the latest theory gets tested in a court of law, the cause of the crash of TWA 800 continues to ignite debate.

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00:41:20,000 --> 00:41:25,000

I'm Lawrence Fishburne. Thank you for watching History's Greatest Mysteries.