The crash of TWA 800

On July, 17, 1996, a Boeing 747-100 exploded into a ball of fire 12 minutes after take-off from JFK International Airport, crashing into the Atlantic Ocean off Long Island. **Tony Moore** discusses the persistent doubts as to what caused the explosion

Military, police and civilian vessels were quickly on the scene, but there were no survivors. One helicopter from the New York Air National Guard saw the explosion from eight miles away and arrived on the scene so quickly that debris was still raining down. All 230 people on board this Trans World Airlines (TWA) flight to Rome, with a stopover in Paris, had been killed.

The recovery operation was one of the largest diver-assisted salvage operations ever conducted. A week into the search a robotic video camera on the *USS Grasp*, a Navy salvage tug, found the cockpit voice recorder and the flight data recorder. Working in difficult and dangerous conditions, and using sonar and other equipment, including remotely operated vehicles, over 96 per cent of the wreckage was eventually recovered.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) leased hanger space at the former Grumman Aircraft facility in Calverton, New York, to which all the wreckage was taken for examination and reconstruction. Each piece of wreckage was accompanied by an FBI officer to preserve its evidentiary value.

Relatives centred in on the Ramada Plaza Hotel at Kennedy International Airport, which became a makeshift grief counselling centre as they waited for the bodies to be recovered. The hotel set up videoconferencing with Europe for French and Italian families and provided simultaneous translation for all NTSB briefings.

Investigators were initially subjected to criticism from relatives; TWA was slow to confirm the passenger list and there were conflicting statements from public officials.

When recovered, victims' remains were transported to the Suffolk County Medical Examiner's Office in Hauppauge, New York, but relatives' anger was directed at the Examiner himself

Wreckage of the aircraft being lifted from the sea. TWA flight 800 now shares an anniversary with Malaysia Airlines flight 17 which was shot down by a missile over Ukraine on July 17, 2014

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as a backlog of recovered bodies built up at the morgue. Ultimately, the remains of all 230 people were recovered and identified, the last one over 10 months after the crash.

There has been much speculation as to the cause of the explosion. Initial witness statements suggested it might have been caused by a bomb or a surface-to-air missile. The NTSB investigates aircraft accidents, but not criminal activity, so the FBI conducted its investigations in parallel. The headquarters for both investigative teams were co-located at the Grumman Aircraft facility, although it has been suggested that the two did not always work in harmony.

Report findings reviewed

Sixteen months after the accident, the FBI announced it had found no evidence to suggest the blast was caused by a criminal act and closed its investigation. When the NTSB issued its final report just over four years later, it claimed that the probable cause was an explosion in the centre wing fuel tank, resulting from ignition of the flammable fuel/air mixture, but investigators could not determine with certainty the source of ignition.

Accusations that the investigation was a cover-up have continued; some from knowledgeable parties, including military personnel and former investigators. Nearly 100 of the 700 witnesses interviewed by the FBI described a streak of light moving from the ground leading to the explosion. After the release of a TV documentary in July 2013, the NTSB assembled a team of investigators not involved in the original investigation to review the findings. A year later, it announced that the review team had found no evidence to suggest that the original findings were incorrect. Despite this, doubts as to the cause remain and the missile theory continues to have support. CRJ