



Investigating TWA Flight 800: Interviews with Thomas Stalcup and William Donaldson

Government investigators say that TWA 800 was brought down by a fuel tank explosion, but independent experts point to compelling evidence of a missile attack.

On August 22nd-23rd, 2000, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) met in Washington, D.C. to consider its final report on the crash of TWA Flight 800, off the coast of Long Island, on July 17, 1996. According to the NTSB, the tragedy, which killed all 230 aboard, was caused by a spark in the plane's center fuel tank.

Although the public was invited to attend, only NTSB personnel were allowed to comment. Numerous private investigators who take issue with the NTSB's findings, believing that TWA 800 was destroyed by a missile, were among those present. Of this group, Dr. Thomas Stalcup and Cmdr. William Donaldson, USN (Ret.), were recently interviewed by John F. McManus.

Interview of Dr. Thomas Stalcup

Massachusetts native Dr. Thomas Stalcup recently earned a Ph.D. in Physics from Florida State University. Dr. Stalcup currently devotes his time to investigating the TWA 800 tragedy and is affiliated with the Flight 800 Independent Researchers Organization (FIRO).

Q. *How did you become involved in the investigation of the Flight 800 disaster?*

A. I was watching a CNN broadcast on November 18, 1997, the date of the FBI press conference where the CIA's animated version of what happened was shown. It seemed to me that they were trying to prove what didn't happen rather than what did happen. Words stating "not a missile" were underlined and shown multiple times; there was dramatic music; it was more like propaganda than news. This disturbed me, and I felt something was wrong — especially when the CIA's "cartoon" claimed that part of the plane climbed 3,000 feet after the breakup. Also, there was a claim made during the FBI press conference that no witness saw two objects in the sky. But I remembered reading that witnesses had said exactly the opposite, that one object hit the other. So I started doing a little research and found some eyewitness reports that contradicted what was being stated on TV.

Q. *What did you do then?*

A. I started calling eyewitnesses directly. Several told me they had seen the FBI's press conference and it did not describe what they'd seen. What they'd seen included an object that rose from the surface. These people seemed very credible to me. I then met with some of them, and they repeated to me exactly what they saw. That's what really got me started, and then I began looking at the science end of the incident.

Q. *Who were some of these eyewitnesses?*

A. Paul Runyan watched what happened from the yard at his home. He told me that an object came from the ocean and went straight up. He didn't see it hit the plane, but he saw the explosion high in the sky. Then I talked to Lisa Perry who also saw something rising from the surface, identified the plane as a Boeing 747, and saw an object hit it.

Q. *You examined the radar images taken at the time of the incident. What did these demonstrate to you?*



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A. The data they released actually doesn't show anything merging with the plane. Each radar sweep takes about four seconds so radar doesn't catch everything, especially something moving as fast as a missile. But the radar does show something flying away from the plane at a very high speed just as the explosion occurred. Something left the plane at the speed of Mach 2 (twice the speed of sound) and moved away for 1.5 miles. That something could have been traveling at Mach 3 or Mach 4, but it should have slowed down extremely fast and didn't. This, to me, is evidence of a missile strike.

Q. *Why is this evidence of a missile strike?*

A. First of all, the plane was traveling 385 knots (about 440 miles per hour), and anything moving at Mach 2 is traveling at over 1,200 miles per hour. When something travels at Mach 2 for a distance of over 1.5 miles, it cannot be the result of a center wing tank explosion. Anything that might have flown away from the plane as a result of a center wing tank explosion would have been a small object that would have slowed down almost immediately due to the atmosphere and wouldn't have shown up on the radar. This had to be a massive chunk of something, like something that would have resulted from a missile strike. But what bothered me most about this is that the NTSB completely ignored what this radar showed and consequently refused even to consider that a missile caused the crash.

Q. *Even though the NTSB presenters at the August 22nd meeting were cordoned off, and the rules established that day barred any input from the public, you tried to provide one of the NTSB officials with a letter. What happened?*

A. During the proceedings, NTSB official Charles Perreira stated that there was "an anomaly" on the radar that appeared in a "random fashion." When I heard that, my jaw dropped because what I had seen wasn't random at all; it was a very consistent pattern of radar hits. Also, there were 17 more radar hits that the NTSB never mentioned. So, I wrote him a note in longhand asking why he had stated "random fashion" and why his analysis did not include discussion of the 17 additional radar hits I'd seen. He wouldn't respond when I tried to talk to him during a break. So I asked a security guard to hand the note to him. He read it, looked at me, looked back at the note again, crumpled it up, and threw it in the trash. That was that!

Q. *Commander Donaldson believes that the NTSB produced a theory and then asked all its personnel to back up that theory. Do you agree?*

A. Not only do I agree, one of their own officials stated as much in a report he produced on April 8, 1997, nine months after the tragedy. James F. Wildey is the group metallurgy specialist for the NTSB. Here is what he wrote in his own one-page "Summary" of his multi-page report:

The Group strove to fit a proposed scenario to all relevant observations in a given area. In some cases, there was more than one identified possibility for a particular feature. In some cases, the Group had to accept that some feature(s) either could not be explained by the proposed scenario or might even be in conflict with the proposed scenario.

He even noted that his own conclusions presented "an apparent conflict" with the evidence and that additional evidence "was not explained."

Q. *Did the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) participate in this investigation?*

A. Yes, and they found nitrates, which is evidence of externally caused explosions, on a piece of wreckage labeled CW504. Once NASA reported what they'd found, the NTSB sent additional pieces of wreckage so that NASA could then report it hadn't found any nitrates on those pieces. CW504 was a



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piece of the center wing tank near the point where we believe the missile hit.

Q. *What is your response to the NTSB's claim that a spark in the center wing tank caused the explosion?*

A. They have demonstrated that the fuel could explode if there's a large enough spark, but they haven't demonstrated how that large spark could have gotten into the center wing tank. I did my own experiment with Jet A fuel and got it to explode violently. But that was with a very large spark. The spark they say could cause this to ignite and the spark they used in their test are two completely different beasts. The spark they used to ignite the vapors is 63,000 times stronger than the energy they spoke of in their hearings.

Q. *Did you say 63,000 times stronger?*

A. Yes. In the original hearings in 1997, they said it would take only a quarter millijoule spark to set off this huge catastrophic explosion. They described this minuscule amount of energy as the equivalent of dropping a dime half an inch off a table. But in their own Jet A explosion tests conducted at Cal Tech, they used an energy of 15,750 millijoules which, as I said, is 63,000 times stronger than a mere quarter millijoule. What they say out of one side of their mouth and what they experimented with are remarkably different.

Q. *Are you aware of the conclusions reached by the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, a party to the investigation just like Boeing, TWA, and the Airline Pilots Association?*

A. I've heard about their report and the fact that it's very good, but I've never read it.

Q. *Let me read a small portion to you and ask for a comment. The report stated: "An explosion did occur within the center fuel tank during TWA Flight 800. We have not been a party to any evidence, wreckage or tests that could conclude that the center tank explosion was and is the primary contributor to this accident.... We find that its explosion was as the result of the aircraft breakup. The initial event caused a structural failure in the area of Flight station 854 to 860, lower left side of the aircraft. A high-pressure event breached the fuselage and the fuselage unzipped due to the event. The explosion was a result of this event." Doesn't this square with your own assessment of this tragedy?*

A. It certainly does, even to pinpointing the lower left side of the aircraft as the site of the "initial event." This conclusion totally discredits the NTSB's theory.

Q. *I've heard that, even though scores of vessels that were in the area when the plane went down have been identified, there was one that has not been identified. What can you tell us about it?*

A. All of the boats in the area appeared on radar, and all but one have been identified by the FBI. The location of this one matches the triangulation point where witnesses say a "flare" went skyward. This vessel kept moving away and didn't stop to participate in any rescue effort after the plane's parts fell into the sea.

Q. *What do you and your fellow investigators plan next?*

A. Our FIRO group sued the NTSB and the FBI in federal court on the fourth anniversary of the crash, July 17, 2000. We intend to disprove the NTSB's theory and show that TWA Flight 800 was victimized by a missile.



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Interview of Cmdr. William Donaldson (Ret.)

Retired Commander William S. Donaldson III accumulated 24 years of experience in virtually all phases of naval aviation. He was not only a U.S. Navy pilot but a safety officer and crash investigator at both the Squadron and Air Wing levels, and a carrier controlled approach officer. As a judge advocate general investigator, he conducted inquiries into a dozen Navy air crashes. He now heads the Associated Retired Aviation Professionals (ARAP) and has spent much of the past four years investigating the TWA 800 crash.

Q. *Did you see anything at the [August] NTSB meeting to discount your theory about the downing of TWA Flight 800?*

A. No, it's pretty much a rehash of what they've been saying all along. It's a lot smoother presentation than what we saw at their first public presentation in December 1997. But they're still basing everything on what I call a "nonsense theory," the belief that a mysterious explosion of Jet A fuel (kerosene) in the center wing tank caused the disaster.

Q. *Are you saying that all the work that's been done by the NTSB's personnel has been performed to buttress a "nonsense" conclusion?*

A. That's exactly my impression. In fact, I first encountered this theory back in April 1997 as it was being presented by NTSB chairman James Hall in the *Wall Street Journal*. He said that the accident was caused by a center wing tank explosion. He stuck his neck way out about this even before all the investigators had done their work. It then became the task of all the NTSB personnel to back him up.

Q. *During his presentation, the NTSB's Investigator in Charge, Alfred Dickinson, stated that there was an "unspecified event" preceding the breakup of the plane. Doesn't that square with what you believe? What could he have meant by that?*

A. What happens after a disaster like the TWA crash is that the parties submit their conclusions independently. One of the parties that has the best credentials in investigating crashes is the International Aerospace Workers (IAW). These people build and maintain the airplanes. They know what the parts look like every day because they work with them hands-on. They specifically stated that the cause of the crash was not an event started in the center wing tank but a high-pressure event that started on the left side of the aircraft. They concluded that the subsequent center wing tank explosion, which they agree occurred, was a product of that initial event caused by something that preceded it.

My organization and numerous military analysts who have looked into this "unspecified event" claim that it was an explosion inside the number two fuel tank in the left wing, not in the center wing tank. The number two fuel tank was almost full of fuel, so when the missile head went off in there, you didn't get any of the damage you would get if you had a missile striking the fuselage of the aircraft where there was no fuel. It is obvious to me and to others that the missile went into that number two fuel tank in the left wing.

Q. *One of the slides the NTSB displayed during the hearing carried the statement, "No flammable vapor equals no accident." Doesn't that support your theory?*

A. Yes it does. But what they're not telling you is that there were tests done at Cal Tech out west. They built a sealed container containing a gallon of the same type fuel used aboard TWA 800. They tried to light it and they found they couldn't do so. And there were no vapors until they changed the pressure to the equivalent of pressure at just under 14,000 feet, the altitude of the plane when it was hit. Then, in



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order to light the liquid fuel, they had to use what I'm calling a "super blowtorch," a device attached to the chamber where they blasted 3,000-degree fire into the chamber at 20 times atmospheric pressure. That produced an explosion. But lighting the fire this way still wouldn't be enough to cause the breakup of the plane in the manner that it did. So the whole thing was done and everyone concerned said, "OK, we got the fuel to light." But it proved nothing.

Q. *Dr. Bernard Loeb, the overall director of the investigation of this tragedy, admitted that the investigators did find trace amounts of nitrate residue. This is precisely what would be found if an explosion were caused by a bomb or a missile attacking the plane. But he suggested that its presence in the wreckage resulted from ferrying home troops from Desert Storm, or dog training, or recovery operations, or something other than residue from a missile blast.*

A. What actually happened is the FBI would bring parts in after they were retrieved from the water, lay them on the hangar floor, and run bomb-sniffing dogs over them. When the dogs detected something, they'd take the piece into another room for advanced detection with a chemical sniffer that is the best in the world. They had at least a dozen hits on chemicals known as PETN and RDX on pieces of wreckage, and these are the substances found in a missile warhead. PETN is a booster high explosive, and RDX is the main charge. This is entirely consistent with our view that a missile brought the plane down.

Q. *So you don't believe that returning troops, or dogs, or something else can explain the presence of these substances on the wreckage?*

A. No I don't. It's one thing to say that troops returning via this plane from Desert Storm had it on their clothing many months before. But how did they find this residue on wing parts? Were the troops or some dogs inside a wing tank? These NTSB people have a real tendency to ignore even what they've found. Here we have the strongest airplane in the world failing at its strongest point. The left wing failed right at the wing root which is where a witness said she saw a missile hit the airplane. But the NTSB won't talk about any of this.

Q. *The FBI quit this investigation after less than two years. Do you know why?*

A. The Navy air weapons center at China Lake, California, produced a 19-page report recommending a replication of what we think occurred by firing missiles at these in-board tanks on test aircraft. James Kallstrom, the lead FBI investigator, ignored the recommendations in October 1997, and a few weeks later shut down the criminal investigation. The recommended testing was never done. Yet, at the NTSB meeting he said that the FBI did everything they possibly could to determine the cause of this crash. That's not true.

Q. *What about the claim that aging wiring supplied the spark that led to the explosion?*

A. That's another non-problem. Because of the allegations made by the NTSB, the Air Transport Association and Boeing Corporation inspected thousands of these aircraft for that specific possible problem. They expended hundreds of thousands of man-hours, and Boeing alone spent \$34 million inspecting over 900 aircraft. They opened up parts of these planes not normally opened up, climbed in there, and looked at everything. In their report, they state that they couldn't find a single tank that wasn't safe, not even in the older planes. Think about this: They couldn't find a single tank in the world's fleet that wasn't perfectly safe, meaning that they couldn't find anything that would cause a spark to set off a flame in the center wing tank.

Q. *For 25 years, no center wing tank aboard this type aircraft had ever experienced the type of*



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explosion the NTSB claims happened. Four more years have elapsed since the incident and there are still no such explosions.

A. And there never will be such an explosion unless there's another missile that hits an aircraft in the manner that TWA Flight 800 was hit.

Q. *Have the remnants of the center wing tank been examined sufficiently to help in determining what happened?*

A. There's an inward bulge on the bottom of the center wing tank that the NTSB won't talk about. It's never been explained. If there's an explosion inside a tank, there's not going to be any inward bulge; it will be outward.

Q. *Boeing has already paid out claims to some of the families of the victims. Why would Boeing open the door to settlements when, if a missile brought down the plane, there would be no culpability on their part and no claims could be made against them?*

A. I'll speculate. Right after Flight 800 went down, McDonnell-Douglas was absorbed by Boeing. That can only happen, particularly during the Clinton administration, with the blessing of the government. So I don't know, but if you've got a multi-billion dollar deal on the one hand, and you have to pay some millions of dollars with the other hand in order to get that deal, what would you do?

Q. *Is it true that radar showed a missile going through the plane?*

A. Yes, this is what the radar shows. The Air Force missile guidance people at Wright-Patterson AFB in Ohio told the FBI to look at the first sweep on the radar after the aircraft began to have a problem. And to look especially for displaced metal, meaning metal going out away from the track of the aircraft rapidly. Once you find that, then keep going on that line because that's where the missile body is going to descend. Their computers showed that if a stinger-type missile hit that aircraft in the wing, it would have gone through the wing, and would have traveled between one to three kilometers (0.6 to 1.8 miles) out away from the aircraft.

The radar clearly shows that two big pieces of metal went ripping out 3,200 feet (one kilometer) in seven seconds. That could only be from a missile or an anti-aircraft shell. It went half a nautical mile in seven seconds and then, as you watch the next couple of radar sweeps, you see those parts falling into the water into a distinct debris field all their own. I predicted in 1997 in a *Wall Street Journal* article that any missile debris field would not be close to the main body of debris. But once you find such a debris field, you'll know the aircraft was hit. It's there on the radar and was predicted by Air Force missile experts as well.

Q. *You have stated in the past that there were three missiles, two from the water and one from the land. Do you still hold this opinion?*

A. We know that one missile hit the plane. One of the two fired from the water did the job; this is what witnesses testified they saw. The missile fired from the beach was probably out of range.

Q. *Dr. Loeb said almost all of the 258 streak-of-light witnesses gave testimony that's consistent with the theory that what they saw was burning fuel or pieces of the plane. Is this possible?*

A. What he said is completely ridiculous. Very few of the witnesses I've talked to described anything like what he claimed or what was shown in the CIA's animated explanation of the event. This "CIA cartoon," as it has become known, has been withdrawn because it presents a completely ludicrous



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explanation of what happened.

The plane was already over two miles high before any of this starts. If a witness is five to seven miles away and he or she describes a streak of light coming from the horizon and speeding up in four-to-five seconds and then suddenly sees a white flash or an explosion, he or she isn't talking about burning fuel or pieces of the plane.



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