



Written by [William F. Jasper](#) on October 14, 1996

## What Happened to TWA 800?

### Did a malfunction cause the tragedy? A terrorist missile? “Friendly fire”?

More than two months after the downing of TWA Flight 800, federal investigators still have not determined the cause of the crash which took the lives of all 230 persons on board. The Paris-bound Boeing 747 burst into flames and fell into the Atlantic Ocean off Long Island on July 17 at 8:47 p.m.

Eastern Daylight Time, 11 and one-half minutes after taking off from JFK International Airport. Although the evidence strongly indicates that either a bomb or a missile was responsible for bringing down the jumbo jet, officials have not ruled out “equipment failure.”



Coming as it did, however, on the eve of the Olympics in Atlanta — which scant days later was the target of a bombing — and its close proximity in time to three high-profile terrorist trials in New York City, a recent terrorist summit in Teheran, and the terrorist bombing which took the lives of 19 American servicemen in Saudi Arabia, it is logical to suspect the air tragedy was brought about by a terrorist act. Moreover, the known facts in the case and the venerable air history of the 747 as a reliable workhorse not prone to problems make the catastrophic equipment-failure scenario increasingly unlikely.

### “A Big Ball of Flame”

Numerous eyewitnesses reported seeing the plane explode into a fireball after a smaller initial explosion. Vic Fehner, who was fishing when the incident occurred, said “it started off like a little ball, like a flare. It came down for a few seconds and all of a sudden burst into flames, a big ball of flame.” Jason Fontana, at Westhampton Beach, saw “a big fireball with pieces coming off of it. You heard two big explosions, like two big firecrackers going off.” A colonel with the New York Air National Guard who was flying a C-130 ten miles away said he saw “two large orange fireballs. They looked like comets, coming straight down to the water.”

Michael Barr, director of aviation safety programs at the University of Southern California, is one of the many aviation experts who have noted that the eyewitness testimony, published reports, and official statements on the tragedy are inconsistent with an equipment failure explanation. “Airplanes don’t blow up just like that,” said Barr. “I’ve been following 747s since 1970 and I’ve never seen one blow up like that.” James Donoghue, editor-in-chief of *Air Transport* magazine, said the event bore “the hallmarks of a bombing.” “Of the number of 747s that have descended in flames,” said Donoghue, “the vast majority have been because of bombs.”

Recovery of TWA 800’s voice recorder and flight data recorder has lent further support to bomb and missile theories. The last recorded words on the plane’s voice recorder were those of the captain calmly ordering an increase of altitude after receiving clearance from ground control to go from 13,000 to



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15,000 feet. Those words from the cockpit were followed by a loud noise believed to be an explosion. "About 11 and one-half minutes after takeoff, the recording ended abruptly," Robert Francis, vice chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), told a news conference on July 25. "All four CVR [cockpit voice recorder] channels recorded a brief, fraction-of-a-second sound just prior to the end of the tape."

"We know that there was a catastrophic explosion. It was caused by some kind of bomb, obviously," said James Kallstrom, the FBI's chief investigator in the case. But Kallstrom apparently realized he had stepped beyond the officially ordained line and quickly backpedaled, saying there was still a chance the explosion "had nothing to do with terrorism or criminality" or involved "something in the cargo that would have caused a mechanical problem."

The radar records show that the jet descended for several seconds before erupting into a fireball, breaking up, and plunging into the sea. After the explosion, the aircraft continued to be tracked by radar for an additional 41 seconds, according to the NTSB.

If TWA 800 does indeed prove to have been downed by terrorists, it will stand as the worst terrorist attack ever in the United States, surpassing the death toll of 169 in the April 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building. The 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, was the worst terrorist attack on an American airliner outside of the United States. Two hundred seventy persons were killed in that bombing, which has been linked to Libya.

## **Missile Attack?**

Although federal officials and various "experts" and unnamed sources quoted in media reports have largely discounted theories involving missiles in the TWA 800 downing, there are a number of facts, eyewitness reports, expert opinions, and documents which indicate that a missile attack should not be ruled out yet. Experts consulted by *The New American* point to a list of troubling elements which leave open the very real possibility that a missile, not a bomb, was the instrument used to send the airliner plunging into the sea. Among them:

- Multiple reports have come from civilian and military eyewitnesses on land, sea, and air that an object or arc of light was seen streaking toward the TWA jumbo jet immediately before it exploded into a fireball.
- There were early reports that air traffic controllers saw, and radar recorded, an unidentified blip on the radar screen arcing up to and merging with TWA 800 immediately before the plane exploded. The blip was later dismissed as an "anomaly."
- A photograph exists which may show a missile streaking toward the airliner.
- Much misinformation has been quoted in the national media about the "impossibility" of missile involvement because the Boeing 747 was beyond the alleged ranges of various missiles cited.
- Documents reveal that TWA 800 was flying through "hot" warning areas which the Navy had reserved for "official use," raising the prospect of a possible downing by "friendly fire."
- There has been official acknowledgment (after earlier denial) that various military aircraft and surface vessels were operating in the warning areas.
- Six weeks after the TWA 800 crash, an American Airlines pilot reported seeing a missile pass by his jetliner while in flight about 220 miles south of the TWA crash sight.



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- A considerable number of precedents exist of previous downings of civilian aircraft. A U.S. State Department report lists 25 incidents in which commercial airliners were shot down by missiles, killing a total of more than 600 people.

According to various news reports, more than 50 eyewitnesses described light streaks or other similar phenomena suggesting a missile may have hit the TWA airliner. On July 21, ABC television's *World News Sunday* broadcast an interview with a witness identified as Lou Desyron who said, "We saw what appeared to be a flare going straight up. As a matter of fact, we thought it was from a boat. It was a bright reddish-orange color. You know, when it came down, once ... it went into flames, I knew that wasn't a flare."

One of those quoted frequently in early reports was New York State Air National Guard helicopter pilot Fred Meyer. "I saw what appeared to be the sort of course and trajectory that you see when a shooting star enters the atmosphere," the *Boston Herald* quoted Major Meyer as telling a press briefing on July 18. "Almost immediately thereafter I saw in rapid succession a small explosion and then a large explosion." Similar quotes with slight variations were attributed to Meyer in other newspapers and broadcasts. However, Major Meyer later stated that he had been misquoted. "There was nothing I observed that gave me any indication that the streak of light I saw was caused by a missile," Meyer is quoted in a July 20 Associated Press article. "I don't know what I saw," said Meyer, who was flying a helicopter at the time of the crash. He said that after he described the sight at a news briefing, "someone picked it up and said it sounds like a missile ... people were describing it as coming up from the ground. I never said that."

The question arises: Was Major Meyer initially misquoted or misrepresented, or did he later change his story due to political pressure or orders from above? The question is worth asking since the Clinton administration sent an early signal that could reasonably be interpreted to mean that all talk of missiles should be curtailed. "There's no American official with half a brain who ought to be speculating on anything of that nature," said White House spokesman Mike McCurry. "There's no concrete information that would lead any of us in the United States government to draw that kind of conclusion." Unidentified Pentagon sources were also being quoted to the effect that "the probability is nil" that a missile had been used against the Boeing 747.

Nevertheless, the FBI's James Kallstrom has admitted, "We do have information that there was something in the sky. A number of people have seen it." "A number of people have described it similarly," he said. "It was ascending." *The New American* is following up on various eyewitness reports to determine the accuracy of earlier accounts and the possibility of pressure or intimidation on witnesses to recant or alter their stories. It should also be noted that Major Meyer's "clarification" does not in any way rule out a missile even in the case of his sighting; it merely states that he is unsure what he saw. But his description of what he saw does fit a missile scenario.

And the reported mysterious radar blip? "Radar detected a blip merging with the jet shortly before the explosion, something that could indicate a missile hit," the Associated Press reported on August 20. "But," the AP story continued, "Pentagon officials said the missile theory is highly unlikely. Also, they said government analysts have studied several radar reports of the area and found the blip to be false." In other reports, an unnamed "federal law enforcement official" was quoted as stating that "there still could be other explanations for the blip; it's not necessarily an object."

All of which may be true, but, as a federal air crash investigator informed *The New American*, the haste with which officials are dismissing the possibility of a missile attack, in the face of so many unresolved



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and troubling discrepancies, smacks of politics, not sound investigation.

### **Photographic Evidence?**

One of the most sensational contributions to the puzzle has been provided by Linda Kabot, a Long Island resident, who happened to be taking photographs of friends at a political fund-raiser and may have captured a crucial part of the tragic event on film. She was standing on the deck of a Long Island restaurant clicking snapshots in the direction of the ill-fated airliner just before it exploded. One of her photos shows what looks like a slender cylinder with one end aglow streaking through the sky.

Many people have discounted the likelihood of a missile hit as the cause of TWA 800's downfall on the basis of reports from reputed authorities. An unidentified analyst with *Jane's Defence Weekly*, a highly-regarded British military publication, was widely quoted in July as dismissing the missile scenario. On September 5 there was another round of "missile theory" debunking as various media sources reported on an as-yet unpublished article from the October issue of *Jane's Intelligence Review* which reputedly claimed a missile hit scenario "is all but impossible."

But is a missile-attack scenario really all that outlandish? Definitely not, say many qualified authorities. Although most critical reports have focused on the technical problems that would be presented to terrorists trying to utilize a shoulder-fired Stinger or a Soviet SA-7, our sources say those difficulties have been exaggerated and that there are a vast number of other missiles which could be launched from air, land, or sea to account for the deadly takedown. According to Craig Roberts, a former Vietnam Marine sniper, police helicopter pilot, and author, the claims in many news reports that the 747 was beyond the reach of Stingers and SA-7s are "simply not true." "According to an unclassified source that I can quote," says Roberts, "the Stinger is capable of engaging and disabling or destroying a target at altitudes in excess of 15,000 feet — far in excess. Even the poor Soviet copy, the SA-7, is capable of engaging up to 14,700 feet. If the Pentagon 'source' [quoted in an article] was relying on a missile fired from land, then the statement [about insufficient range] might be true. But fired from a boat at sea, it is entirely possible to reach the aircraft with a Stinger or SA-7." Part of Roberts' current reserve assignment as a liaison officer to an Air Force fighter squadron entails analyzing surface-to-air threats.

Another informed source who has had experience with the Stinger's capabilities in Afghanistan (who has requested not to be identified) agrees with Roberts' assessment and told *The New American* that the commonly cited range limitations are "garbage." "We know that the Stinger's classified range capabilities exceed what has been commonly reported, and we know they can be boosted to go even higher," claims this source.

But the Stinger and SA-7 are "heat-seeking" missiles, and according to federal investigators all four of TWA 800's jet engines — the likely targets of a heat-seeking missile — have been recovered and were determined not to have been hit by missiles. According to Roberts, this is a highly questionable claim. "I watched the television coverage when they brought up the fourth engine," he told *The New American*, "and half of the engine was gone, as if it had been hit by a missile, even as they were announcing that it was entirely intact." A federal air crash investigator who also observed the engine recovery told *The New American* that the fourth engine did indeed look as if it could have been hit by a missile.

### **Plausible Scenarios**

However, even if such a hit had occurred, it would require an unusual set of circumstances to cause the catastrophic failure that occurred on July 17. Large multi-engine aircraft like the 747 have been known to sustain missile hits and to land safely even with more than one engine destroyed. Nevertheless,



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Roberts offers an explanation which other authorities we have consulted agree is plausible: 1) The missile, armed with a contact fuse, sought out and detonated on contact with the engine, causing catastrophic damage; 2) the engine, badly damaged or destroyed, began to spit hot turbine and compressor blades, self-destructing as it did so, sending pieces of metal in all directions, including into the fuselage and wings; 3) the fuel cells were punctured and spewed volatile jet fuel; 4) the fuel ignited, creating a chain reaction explosion; 5) the explosion would have been enough to destroy the fuselage if hot shards of metal ruptured the center fuel tank, which only contained 50 gallons of jet fuel. Having the tank filled with fumes is like flying with a cargo hold full of explosives if it is ignited under the right circumstances.

One of the world's leading missile and military explosives experts, Brigadier General Benton K. Partin (USAF, ret.), agrees that a missile-attack scenario is entirely in keeping with the publicly available information on the jet disaster, but does not believe a Stinger-type missile would have been used. "According to what has been released, there was not the kind of damage in the [jet's] cabin that would coincide with a bomb inside the aircraft," Partin explained to *The New American*. "To obtain the kind of massive structural damage we see here, a bomb would have to produce much greater internal explosive destruction than has been reported. And you could hit a big 747 with several Redeyes or Stingers and still not bring it down." General Partin, who has commanded the U.S. Air Force Armaments Laboratory and has designed and tested many warheads, said that "when you design a missile warhead to destroy a bomber, you always want to get what we call a 'K-kill,' meaning a massive, instantaneous, structural failure which 'kills' — brings down — the aircraft." "The only kind of missile I know of for that kind of structural kill — to cut the nose off the front of the plane as happened with TWA 800 — is a proximity-fused, continuous-rod missile warhead."

As General Partin explained it, the missile would be launched — from land, sea, or air — to intersect with the trajectory of the jet. The missile itself would not necessarily hit the aircraft. The proximity fuse would detonate when the missile approaches the aircraft, causing a long, accordion-like steel rod to unfold at high velocity, slicing the target in two. "I doubt that any of the investigators on the crash have ever seen that kind of damage to a plane before and so would probably not know how to assess the damage even if they were looking at it," said General Partin.

### **Friendly Fire Shootdown?**

If, indeed, that is what happened to TWA 800, then we are looking at much more than your garden variety terrorist operation. The technological sophistication, expense, and bulk of the type of missile General Partin suggests takes us into the realm of either state terrorism — or "friendly fire."

The possibility of an accidental, or "friendly fire," shootdown should not be summarily discounted. Weeks after the TWA 800 explosion, an American Airlines pilot reported seeing a missile pass by his Boeing 757 while on a flight from San Juan, Puerto Rico, to Boston. The pilot, whose name has not been released, said that the incident occurred while he was flying over Wallops Island, Virginia, on August 29. The island, which is about 220 miles south of the TWA crash site, is home to the NASA Wallops Flight Facility, which has a program for unmanned research rockets. The National Transportation Safety Board, which is investigating the event, has not said how close the "missile" came to the airliner, but on September 11 NTSB spokesman Peter Goelz stated that the rocket posed "no danger" to the American Airlines jet.

In 1988, the missile cruiser USS Vincennes mistakenly shot down Iran Air Flight 655 over the Persian Gulf. All 290 persons on board were killed when the Airbus A300 was hit by two radar-guided missiles.



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More recently, 14 American service personnel were killed in April 1994 when their helicopter was shot down over Iraq by U.S. jets, in one of the most notorious “friendly fire” cases.

According to the August 28 issue of *Aerospace Daily*, “TWA Flight 800 was vectored about 15 miles northwest of a so-called ‘hot area’ off Long Island activated by the military as an exclusion zone, FAA sources and the Navy acknowledged yesterday. The zone is designed to keep aircraft departing New York safely north of any military activity, but it was unclear yesterday whether the zone was in use at the time of the crash. Spokesmen for the Navy and Coast Guard wouldn’t specify for what activities the zone was activated, although the Navy said it wasn’t using the area.” The publication further stated:

Flight 800 was on what is called the “Betty track,” FAA sources said, one of two tracks used when areas set aside for military exercises off the Long Island coastline are “hot.” A spokesman for the Navy, which activates the restricted areas, said yesterday that the area known as Whiskey 105, or W-105, was activated at the time of the TWA accident but for “no specific purpose.” It was simply available for use, and the spokesman went on to say that “a ship never checked in to use it.” He allowed, however, that it was unclear if ships operated by others, such as the Coast Guard or other federal agencies, would have checked in....

Usually at the time of the evening when there are a lot of departures from New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport, W-105 and nearby Whiskey 106 are “cold,” meaning there are no live exercises underway, according to an FAA source. But the warning areas can be activated at will by the military through a telephone land-line to air traffic control called the “Foxtrot” line. The evening of the air disaster, Whiskey 105 was “active” to an altitude of 6,000 feet, the FAA sources said. Controllers would have had little concern about the flight’s safety since Whiskey 105 is about 15 miles southeast of Whiskey 106, where the TWA 747 eventually went down. The aircraft would have entered Whiskey 106 well above the 6,000-foot altitude warning area of Whiskey 105.

In fact, controllers would have figured that both the Betty track, and another track called the “Haple” track, were safe since both would have topped the 6,000-foot altitude warning area. The TWA aircraft reached about 13,700 feet before something went wrong.

Unclassified internal Navy and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) documents obtained by *The New American*, including the FAA’s “Warning and Restricted Areas Information Log,” indicate that the Navy had reserved air space from surface to flight level 10,000 feet covering a large area extending southward from warning area W-105. The reservation began on July 18 at “0100Z” — or 0100 Zulu (Greenwich Mean Time or Universal Time) — which translates to 8:00 p.m. in New York on July 17, about the time TWA 800 was taxiing toward the runway. The reservation continued until “0700Z,” or 2:00 a.m., July 18, Eastern Daylight Time. The FAA log also shows nearby W-107 reserved during the same time period.

Were military exercises underway in those areas that night — exercises that may have involved an errant missile? The Pentagon, after initially stonewalling, began dribbling out information confirming the presence of some assets in the areas in question. A September 4 fax response to *The New American* from the Navy’s COMNAVAIRLANT Public Affairs office stated that “a P-3 Orion submarine patrol craft was operating at flight level 10,000 (approximately 3,700 feet below TWA Flight 800) and some distance away when the incident occurred. The P-3’s crew heard radio traffic discussing the incident and offered assistance.” The fax also stated that “the guided missile cruiser USS NORMANDY was conducting routine operations about 180 miles from the crash site. It was not engaged in any weapons firing evolution at the time.”



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The Coast Guard reported that its 110-foot cutter Adak was on “routine patrol” in the area the night of the crash, and that the Adak was the first Coast Guard vessel on the scene immediately after the 747 plunged into the coastal waters. An Air National Guard C-130 and two National Guard helicopters are also known to have been operating in the area. According to some reports, the C-130 was seen dropping white phosphorous parachute flares before TWA 800 went down. If this is true, were the flares being dropped as part of a target exercise for heat-seeking missiles? Or had the National Guard C-130 been alerted to a possible missile threat and dropped flares to divert missiles from targeting it and other aircraft in the area?

### **Russian Rumor**

Or is there, perhaps, something to the unconfirmed report *The New American* received from a reliable source that a fishing boat ran into a submarine in the immediate area and that the Navy’s P-3 and the National Guard aircraft may have been responding to the boat’s radio alert? Establishment “experts,” no doubt, would reject that possibility out of hand. “Tom Clancy fiction,” they have been conditioned to chime on cue. However, terrorism experts and special operations veterans we consulted say that in the realm of state terrorism the use of submarines is a factor which must always be considered. A missile could be fired directly from a small submarine, they point out, or the submarine could be used to pick up an individual or small team which may have fired a missile from a surface vessel. The vessel could then be scuttled as the shooter(s) escape underwater. Far from being outlandish fantasy, they say, this is exactly the kind of operation that elite special forces teams from Russia and other nations regularly train for.

Which is all the more reason to give serious consideration to the charge made in the Autumn 1996 issue of *International Currency Review* that the TWA disaster was a Soviet operation. The *Review* is a British quarterly journal published by Christopher Story, editor of the authoritative, London-based *Soviet Analyst*. According to *International Currency Review*:

A KGB defector [not Anatoliy Golitsyn] has informed us that the TWA plane was sabotaged by Russian intelligence. This operation had to be implemented directly, rather than via controlled forces apparently separated from Yevgeniy Primakov’s global terror apparatus because it was tightly timed to precede the Group of Seven/Eight’s meeting on security and terrorism — at which, inter alia, it was agreed that the G-7 countries and Russia would now have access to the FBI’s data base, and that a comprehensive exchange of intelligence and cooperation would ensue. Further atrocities will be staged in due course to ratchet up this process in fulfillment of a secret Soviet sub-strategy to exploit terror and organized crime — which the “successor” Leninist criminal state is exporting globally — to establish “global structures” and, ultimately, a “world justice system” which would supplant national security arrangements and legal systems, further contributing to the intended redundancy of the nation state. This line was revealed by the former Russian Interior Minister, Viktor Yerin, in the Spring, 1995 issue of *International Affairs*, the journal of the Russian Foreign Ministry, in which he called for “common parameters for national legislation in order to harmonise as far as possible the approach of countries to fight against organized crime and [to] ensure on this basis the inevitable punishment of persons involved in this activity irrespective of the place and country where they may have committed their crimes.”

Whether or not the TWA 800 incident was a Soviet operation as claimed by the *Review*’s defector, there is little point in denying that the event has helped further the convergence of U.S. and Russian police and intelligence services. As the August 20 *Washington Post* reported, the Clinton administration has



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issued a plan “to increase from 23 to 46 the number of foreign cities where the FBI has a permanent presence, including such far-flung locales as Almaty, Kazakstan, and Lima, Peru.” Other cities where Clinton’s new, global FBI will be opening offices include Beijing, Kiev, Tashkent, Warsaw, Tblisi, and Bucharest. President Clinton and FBI Director Louis Freeh have cited the specters of international terrorism, organized crime, and drug trafficking as justification for this dramatic expansion of the FBI’s operational authority.

### **The Middle East Factor**

There are, of course, a number of other prime suspects in the international rogues’ gallery of possible perpetrators of the TWA disaster. Perhaps chief among these are associates of Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, who, when TWA 800 went down, was beginning the sixth week of his trial in New York for allegedly plotting a bombing attack on U.S. airliners in the Pacific. On September 8, Yousef and codefendants Abdul Hakim Murad and Wahli Khan Amin Shah, were convicted of plotting a 48-hour “reign of terror” in the sky that could have killed 4,000 people and blown up 12 U.S. jets over the Pacific Ocean. Yousef is also charged with masterminding the 1993 World Trade Center bombing that killed six and injured thousands, of attempting to assassinate Pope John Paul II, and of bombing a Philippine jumbo jet.

According to U.S. prosecutors, Yousef made a test run of his grand terror scheme by blowing up a Philippine Airlines jet on December 11, 1994. Yousef is believed to have boarded the Filipino jetliner in Manila with the unassembled bomb components in his carry-on luggage. During the first leg of the plane’s flight, he assembled the bomb in the plane’s lavatory, then returned to his seat and tucked the bomb under the seat cushion. Yousef deplaned at Cebu City, and the bomb detonated two hours later while the plane was en route to Tokyo. One Japanese man was killed and the jet was forced to make an emergency landing on Okinawa.

Might the “Yousef method” have been used on TWA 800? The Boeing 747 had begun July 17 as Flight 880 from JFK in New York to Athens, Greece. It spent two hours on the ground in Athens, then turned around as Flight 881 on a return to JFK. Three and one-half hours later it was outbound from JFK again as Flight 800, headed for Paris. Did a terrorist get on board in Athens with a bomb? The coincidence of the disaster with Yousef’s high-profile trial, together with the notorious record Athens’ Hellenikon Airport has for terrorist acts and the irresistibly perverse symbolism of a deadly Trojan horse coming from Greece on the eve of the Olympics through the open gates of Troy — all of these facts argue for seriously considering the Yousef network as prime suspects in this terrorist act.





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