



Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on July 23, 2014

Tale of Two Passenger Planes: MH 17 and Iran Air 655

With all the condemnatory rhetoric in the Western news media regarding the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine, the press and political commentators have been utterly silent on a now almost-forgotten episode 26 years ago that remains the closest historical parallel to what apparently took place July 17 near Hrabove, Donetsk Oblast.



On July 3, 1988, Iran Air Flight 655, an airbus with 290 souls aboard en route from the southern Iranian city of Bandar Abbas to Dubai, was shot down by a pair of surface-to-air missiles fired by a U.S. Navy warship, the *USS Vincennes*. Aside from the fact that the Iran Air disaster occurred as a result of actions by the U.S. Navy, whereas the downing of MH-17 appears to have been caused by a missile fired by insurgents in eastern Ukraine allied with Russia, the parallels between the two events are striking. Both cases involved catastrophically high casualty counts, with no survivors. Both involved civilian airliners flying over active combat zones. Both involved bitter international recriminations and refusal to accept blame after the fact. And both tragedies (based on what we now know) appear to have been terrible accidents, the result of mistaken identity.

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At 10:17 in the morning of July 3, 1988, Iran Air Flight 655, with a veteran pilot, U.S.-educated Mohsen Rezaian, at the helm, took off from Bandar Abbas on what was to be a brief half-hour flight over the Persian Gulf to Dubai. Because of the brevity of the flight, the flight plan called for a brief maximum cruising altitude of only about 15,000 feet. Minutes after takeoff, the plane settled into its flight path inside a 20-mile-wide air corridor known as “Amber 59” assigned to civilian flights.

Unbeknownst to Captain Rezaian or anyone else aboard the doomed aircraft, events on the waters of the Persian Gulf that morning were creating a dangerously unstable situation that put all aircraft in the area in acute danger. Several U.S. Navy warships, including the Ticonderoga-class cruiser *USS Vincennes*, were in the area to supervise and, where necessary, escort oil tankers and other shipping in the gulf. The Iran-Iraq War had been raging for many years, and many of its most conspicuous



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casualties had been oil tankers, often deliberately sunk by one side or the other as a form of economic warfare. Not long before Iran Air Flight 655 took off, a helicopter from the *USS Vincennes* had come close to several Iranian military speed boats, which had fired warning shots in its direction. Subsequently, the *Vincennes* had entered Iranian territorial waters and engaged the speedboats, sinking two and damaging a third.

About this time, the approaching Iran Air airbus was detected by the *Vincennes*' advanced Aegis Combat System. Contrary to claims made in the immediate aftermath of the incident by U.S. government spokesmen and Navy personnel, the data tapes retrieved from the *Vincennes* showed clearly that the Iran Air plane was ascending, not descending, and was transmitting "squawks" in civilian "Mode III," not military "Mode II." But, evidently owing to human error in tense circumstances, personnel aboard the *USS Vincennes* misidentified the still-ascending Iranian airbus as an Iranian Air Force F-14 descending toward the U.S. warship, and presumably sent in response to the skirmish with Iranian naval vessels. Adding to the apprehension were fresh memories of an incident the previous year in which an Iraqi Air Force pilot had attacked the guided-missile frigate *USS Stark* with two French-made Exocet anti-ship missiles, killing 37 U.S. seamen and nearly sinking the vessel. The attack on the *USS Stark* had apparently been a tragic accident perpetrated in an active combat zone by a country to which — at the time — the U.S. government had been giving military aid. The crew of the *Vincennes* had no desire to become another piece of collateral damage in a seemingly endless and pointless conflict.

The *Vincennes* sent repeated warning broadcasts to the approaching Iranian aircraft, none of which received a response. It is very likely that Captain Rezaian, who was fluent in English, either did not notice the broadcasts, or was unaware they were directed at his aircraft. At 10:24, when the passenger plane was within nine miles of the *Vincennes* and an altitude of about 13,500 feet — well within Iranian airspace but also within range of many anti-ship missiles, such as the Exocet — *USS Vincennes* Captain William C. Rogers decided to take defensive measures. Even though a nearby U.S. naval vessel, the *USS Sides*, had just concluded that the incoming aircraft was still ascending and was civilian, the *Vincennes* proceeded to launch two SM-2ER anti-aircraft missiles at Iran Air 655.

At least one of the missiles hit and destroyed Iran Air 655, killing all aboard in what remains one of the worst air disasters in history. Within hours, news reports were broadcasting pitiful images of bloated corpses floating in the Persian Gulf. The crew of the *Vincennes* soon learned that they had mistakenly taken the lives of nearly 300 people, and the storm of accusations and counter accusations between the United States and Iran began.

President Ronald Reagan expressed deep regret for what had happened and offered condolences to the families of the dead of the Iran Air flight. Other members of his administration did the same, although no official apology was ever given. A month after the accident, Vice President George Bush stated emphatically to *Newsweek* magazine, "I will never apologize for the United States of America, ever. I don't care what the facts are." Some in the United States, relying on claims that were later proven inaccurate, to the effect that the Iran Air flight was emitting "squawks" on a military frequency, accused the Iranian government of cynically and purposely sending the aircraft into harm's way in hopes of provoking an incident that could be used to discredit the United States. Iran, for its part, accused the U.S. military of acting deliberately and of covering up evidence to that effect.

With the passage of time, the truth of the matter has become clear. For one thing, the *USS Vincennes* was in Iranian territorial waters at the time of the incident, a fact that was emphatically denied by the



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U.S. government — including President Reagan — in the disaster’s aftermath, and not officially admitted until three years later, by U.S. Admiral William Crowe on *Nightline*. Furthermore, Iran Air Flight 655 was well within the “Amber 59” air corridor approved for civilian flights, despite U.S. claims that it was off course.

The U.S. government never officially apologized for the incident or accepted responsibility, although in 1996 more than \$61 million in compensation was paid to the families of the 248 Iranian citizens who died in the crash. As Reagan administration spokesman Marlin Fitzwater put it regarding the eventual monetary settlement, “[The] offer of ex gratia compensation ... is a humanitarian effort to ease the hardship of the families. It is offered on a voluntary basis, not on the basis of any legal liability or obligation.”

So what happened? A chain of unfortunate errors led to the shooting down of a civilian passenger liner by the U.S. Navy. Fearing political retribution, Navy personnel and U.S. government officials distorted some of the facts, while many others, with memories of the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979 still fresh, accused the Iranian government of dastardly complicity in encouraging the incident. But in the end, Iran Air 655 was an accident. The *Vincennes* did not realize it was firing at a passenger airliner, and the souls who perished were victims of very unfortunate circumstances typical of combat zones, and not of any deliberate targeting of civilians on either side.

This, based on the evidence now available, is in all likelihood the explanation for what happened to MH-17. If, as now appears likely, the plane was shot down by Ukrainian insurgents, it is highly improbable that those who perpetrated the act knew they were firing on a civilian aircraft. From the evidence of intercepted broadcasts, the plane was mistaken for a Ukrainian military transport. Of course, the perpetrators should acknowledge that they shot down MH-17, just as the U.S. government should have been totally honest regarding the Iran Air shoot-down. But assuming the MH-17 shoot-down was an accident, the perpetrators’ responsibility for this terrible tragedy is akin to the U.S. government’s responsibility for the Iran Air tragedy. Not only that, but blaming and vilifying Vladimir Putin for what happened — regardless of one’s assessment of him — makes about as much sense as blaming Ronald Reagan for the Iran Air incident.

Inasmuch as truth is the first casualty of war, it well behooves Americans not to allow themselves to be swayed by the heady rhetoric of fearmongers and manufactories of public opinion, but to examine both the evidence and the relevant history.

Photos at top show vigil in Philadelphia for victims of MH 17 (left) and mass funeral in Tehran for victims of Iran Air 655: AP Images



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