TRUTH ABOUT PLANE THAT LAUNCHED 1,000 CONSPIRACY THEORIES

News / Airlines

Beach cleaner Johnny Begue was on his mid-morning break on the small French island of La Reunion, east of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, when a strange object at the water's edge caught his eye.

Scanning the shoreline, he realised that the 'weird thing' sticking out of the sand was made of metal. It looked suspiciously like part of an aeroplane.

He and his friends dragged it up the beach and sat on it while they discussed their find. The battered piece of debris was at least 6ft long, and the men reasoned that any plane which had lost such a big part of its wing must have crashed. People would have died.

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Missing: The Malaysia Airways Boeing 777 had 239 passengers and crew onboard

Johnny told his friends to stand up. Sitting on the object was disrespectful. They should plant flowers around it, he said, and treat it as a memorial.

One of the men had a different idea: he took out his phone and Googled ‘plane disasters’. What he read prompted them to call their local radio station, which in turn contacted the police.

Within hours, Johnny and his friends were giving interviews to the world’s media.

They had found the first clue to the fate of Flight MH370, one of the greatest aviation mysteries — the disappearance of a Boeing 777 with 239 passengers and crew on board, which vanished without trace en route to China. After 18 months of searching, this was the first tangible proof that the plane had crashed.

If, indeed, this was part of MH370. Because like everything about the story of this aircraft, nothing was as simple as it seemed.

The wreckage was identified as a flaperon — one of the hinged control surfaces along the trailing edge of a wing that sits between the inner flap and the aileron, or little wing.

A serial number was found, 657-BB, which proved it had come from a Boeing 777.

Only four other 777s had ever been written off in accidents, and none of them was lost at sea. The probability seemed high that this flaperon came from MH370.

It was sent to the civil aviation Bureau d’Enquetes et d’Analyses in Toulouse, France, to be examined for evidence that might show whether the plane had crashed into the ocean, broke up in mid-air or was torn apart by a bomb. But the early evidence didn’t need a forensics team.

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Flirtatious: Co-pilot Fariq Abdul Hamid, right, with two girls he invited into the cockpit on a previous flight

There were barnacles nearly an inch across on the metal and their size indicated the debris had been in the sea for more than a year.

MH370 disappeared on March 8, 2014. Johnny Begue found the flaperon on July 29, 2015. The timescale fitted perfectly.

The theory was bolstered this week when more debris apparently from a 777 was found on a sandbar off the coast of Mozambique in East Africa, more than a thousand miles from La Reunion, where the initial find sparked a frantic search for more evidence.

Teams of locals and police combed the black sands, while planes and ships from France, Australia, Malaysia and China joined in the hunt.

The best clues they could find were bottles of Chinese water and Indonesian cleaning fluid. The rest of the 350-ton plane remained missing.

With so little to go on, the grieving families of MH370's passengers could take no comfort. This was far from the first explanation they had heard from officials, media pundits and internet conspiracy peddlers.

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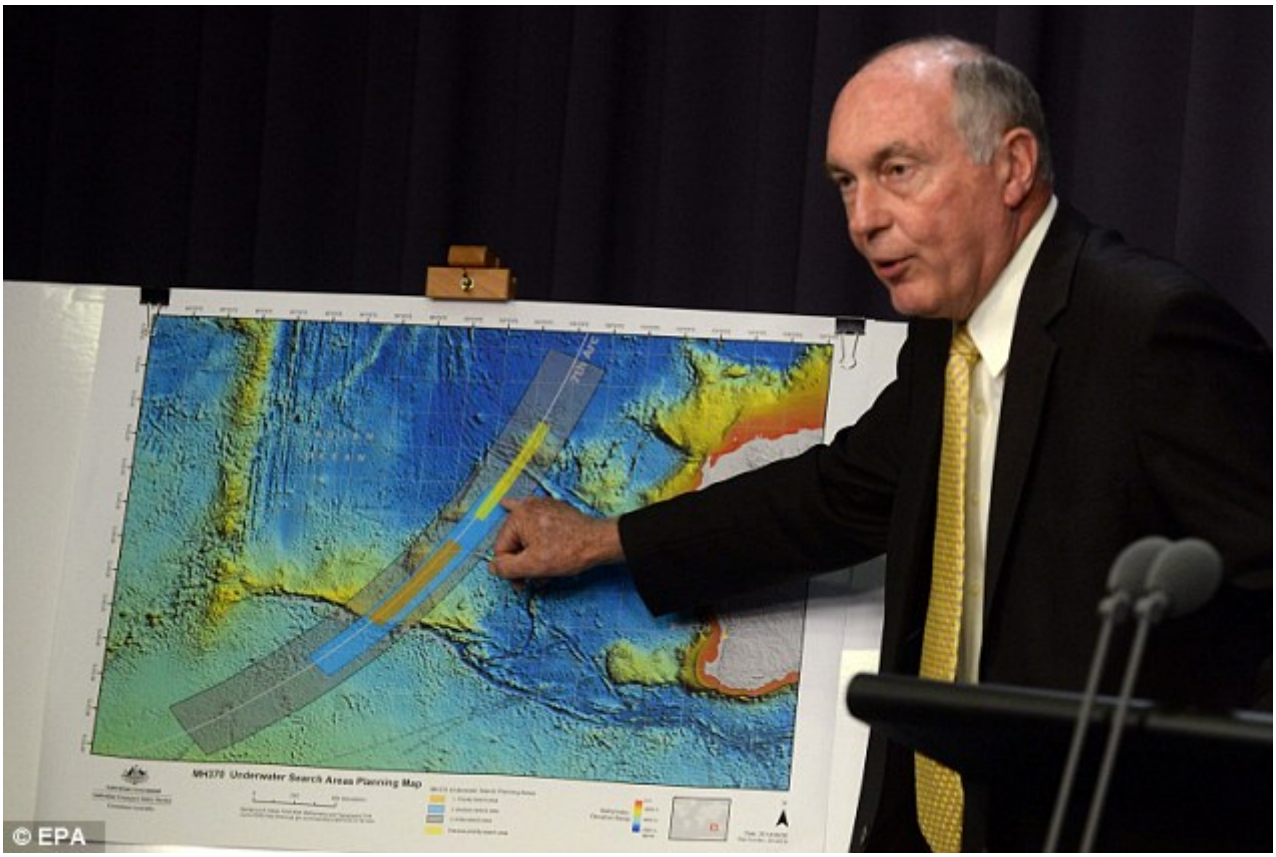

Australian Deputy Prime Minister Warren Truss shows the new search area in the Indian Ocean for missing Malaysia Airlines aircraft MH370

For the 227 passengers that day at Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Malaysia two years ago, everything started ordinarily enough. They were bound for Beijing, 2,700 miles north.

Among them were a Malaysian couple taking a holiday to help them get over the anguish of a miscarriage.

A Chinese father had changed his travel plans at the last minute, heading home a day early to take his child to the dentist.

A section of the passenger list consisted of 24 artists and their families, returning from a calligraphy exhibition, and there was also a group of Buddhist monks.

But some had less innocent reasons to catch flight MH370. Six people had suspect or forged passports. Two of the passports had been reported stolen in Thailand. These men would become the focus of the investigation.

The plane took off shortly before 1am local time and was expected to land just under six hours later.

The automated systems sent a signal, transmitting vital data about the flight, at 1.07am, and 12 minutes later Malaysian air traffic control radioed to say: ‘Please contact Ho Chi Minh City [in Vietnam, the next country that MH370 was supposed to overfly]. Good night.’

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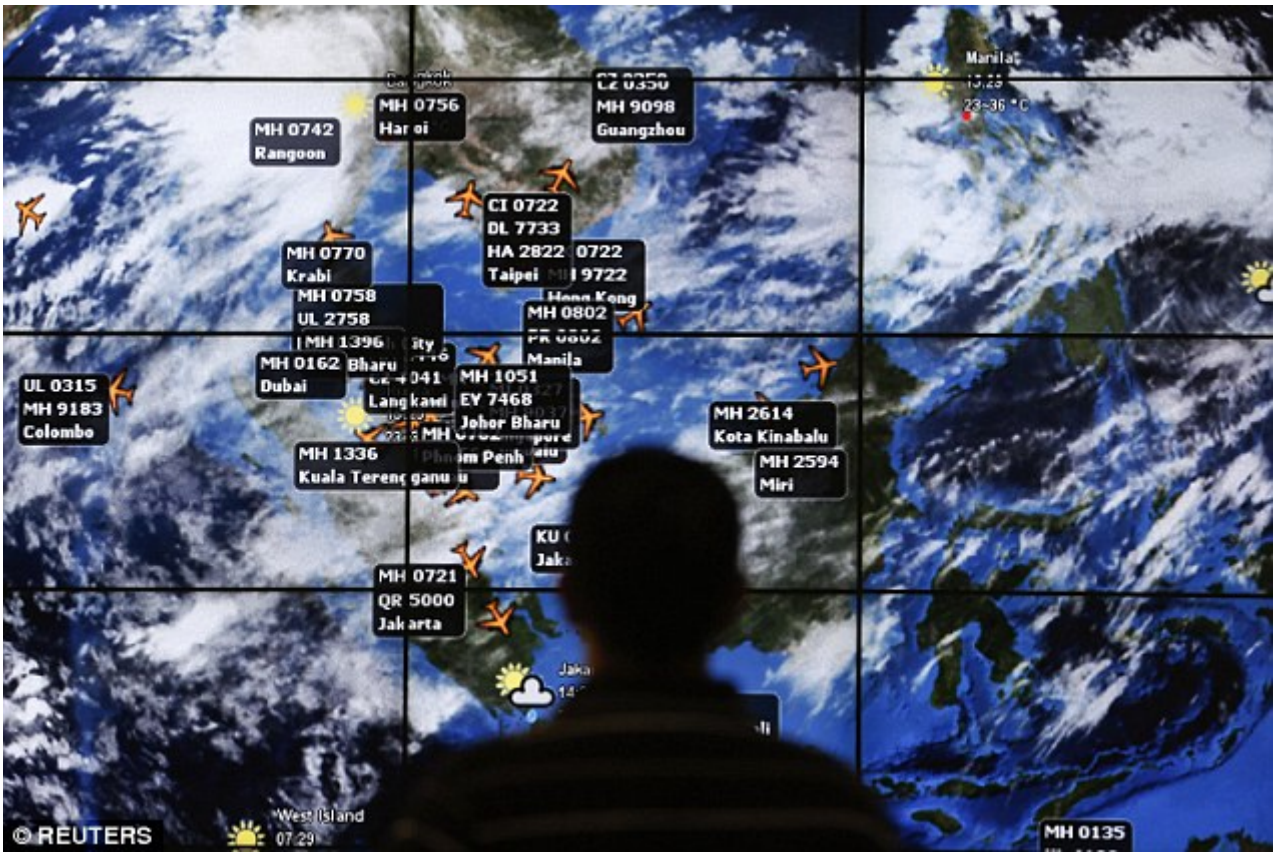
The captain, 53-year-old Zaharie Ahmad Shah, responded with a formal: ‘Good night, Malaysian Three Seven Zero.’ Then, about a minute later, the transponder that identified the plane to air traffic control via ground radar was switched off. The pilot did not contact Ho Chi Minh City.



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Vietnamese flight controllers asked another plane, en route to Tokyo, to radio MH370 via an emergency channel, but the pilot said he could hear nothing more than static and mumbling. He thought the voice belonged to Fariq Abdul Hamid, the co-pilot. After that, nothing more was heard.

When the plane did not arrive in Beijing at 6.30am, officials tried to delay the announcement that they had lost all contact with it. But the news could not be hidden for long and within an hour rumours were swirling on social media. The families were asked to go to a hotel, where they were kept away from reporters.

That evening came the first false explanation: Vietnamese air force jets spotted two large oil slicks and a column of smoke off the southern tip of Vietnam. The government said this was close to the last sighting of the plane and that the twin slicks were consistent with two fuel tanks rupturing in the sea.

The airline began to release details of the passengers who were missing: 152 were from China, 50 from Malaysia, seven from Indonesia, six from Australia, five from India, three from the U.S. and the others from France, New Zealand, Canada, Ukraine, Russia, Taiwan and the Netherlands.

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Bad weather was ruled out as a cause. Another pilot reported that conditions had been perfect. The plane had recently been serviced and the captain, a Malaysia Airlines pilot since 1981, had more than 18,000 hours' flying experience.

The wreckage found on the Indian Ocean island of Reunion belonging to the doomed airliner MH370

But the precise timing of the disappearance provoked immediate suspicion. 'If I was going to steal the aeroplane, that would be the point I would do it,' said former 777 British Airways pilot Stephen Buzdygan. 'There might be a bit of dead space between the air traffic controllers.'

The discovery that so many passengers had been travelling on false or stolen passports quickly attracted attention.

Days earlier, Muslim separatists had slaughtered 33 people and wounded 130 in a mass stabbing in south-west China. Islamic extremism seemed a probable explanation for MH370's disappearance.

Other theories proliferated. That the pilots had made no distress call suggested the plane might have been destroyed instantaneously by a bomb on board.

The final scraps of data gathered before radar contact was lost, though, suggested the jet plunged 650ft and changed direction before vanishing, perhaps an indication that a hijacker wrested control from the pilots.

Mechanical breakdown seemed less likely: the 777 had enough height to glide without fuel for 40 minutes. Even if engine failure was coupled with a complete electrical failure, the idea that Captain Shah was unable to make any sort of distress call seemed highly improbable.

A multinational fleet of 40 ships and 34 aircraft converged on the spot where the Vietnamese pilots had reported seeing wreckage. Nothing was found.

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Malaysian officials began putting out the story that the plane must have ‘disintegrated at around 35,000ft’. This was unlikely, however, as radio beacons in the black box data recorder would have been activated.

The CIA was concentrating on the two men travelling under false IDs. There was a brisk trade in stolen passports in South-East Asia, and Interpol had 40 million lost or stolen passports in its database. Some 270,000 British passports alone are lost or stolen every year.

On MH370, the impostors with stolen passports were posing as Luigi Maraldi, an Italian, and Austrian Christian Kozel. Their real names were uncovered: Poura Mehrdad, 19, and Delavar Mahammadreze, 29. Both were thought to be asylum seekers who planned to fly on from Beijing to Germany.

Poura’s mother was waiting for him in Frankfurt. Neither man had known terrorist connections.

‘The more information we get, the more we are inclined to conclude it is not a terrorist incident,’ said an Interpol spokesman.

Rescuers in the South China Sea reported that the oil slick off Vietnam had come from a ship.

Investigators were clutching at straws, almost literally — air-sea crews were scrambled to pick up survivors when a Singaporean search plane spotted a yellow object resembling a life-raft south-west of Tho Chu island. It turned out to be floating moss.

According to internet conspiracy sites, the search mission was part of a government cover-up. Wild claims abounded that Vietnamese fighter jets had forced the aircraft to land at a remote

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military airfield, where the passengers were being held in a counter-terrorism operation.

Another theory held that a fighter on a training mission had crashed into the 777 or that it had been shot down by a ground-to-air missile in error. In both cases, the story went, the Vietnamese had hidden all the evidence for fear that China would take their mistake as an act of war.

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One of the most far-fetched theories, suggested by aviation expert Jeff Wise, was that MH370 had been hijacked by the two Ukrainians and one Russian on board, who flew it to Kazakhstan's Baikonur Cosmodrome.

One man had slipped through a hatch into the fuselage to disable the electronics, while the other two over-powered the crew.

This theory, while technically possible, has no evidence to back it up, other than the faintly dubious background of the alleged hijackers — one an extreme sports enthusiast, the others shady businessmen.

This week, a UFO hunter even claimed to have found the missing plane in an eight-month-old Google satellite image. Scott Waring believes an underwater shadow off the coast of South Africa is the outline of a Boeing 777.

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Back in late March 2014, though, more credible evidence concerning the plane's movements emerged from the UK and a satellite system, Inmarsat, which tracks technical systems of Boeing planes to monitor any faults.

The Rolls-Royce ground station in Derby had made an electronic 'handshake' with MH370 at 2.11am, 45 minutes after Captain Shah's final signal.

Four minutes later, Malaysian military radar spotted the plane over the heavily populated island of Penang, far to the west of its scheduled course.

They lost sight of it 25 minutes later, south of Phuket island in the Malacca Strait. It would be days before they realised what the plane was and recognised the significance of what they had picked up.

U.S. aviation chief Billie Vincent, who had been a forensic witness at the Lockerbie trial, favoured the bomb theory: a small device in the hold

The radar system was primitive, of World War II vintage, showing just a blip on a screen. But it fitted with everything the satellite data suggested, that MH370 had taken an unscheduled detour of several hundred miles, heading west. This seemed to imply that the plane could have crashed into the Indian Ocean, which covers 28 million square miles and is more than four miles deep in places.

Worse, evidence of more electronic 'pings' or automatic signals sent to Rolls-Royce indicated the plane was airborne for several hours after crossing the Malacca Straits. This meant the search area stretched, in theory, from India to Australia.

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It seemed possible that a sudden decompression, perhaps caused by a crack in the fuselage, had caused everyone on board to black out, and the plane had flown under automatic pilot until the tanks ran dry and it crashed.

U.S. aviation chief Billie Vincent, who had been a forensic witness at the Lockerbie trial, favoured the bomb theory: a small device in the hold, he said, ignited hazardous materials that spread toxic fumes throughout the plane, while burning through the wiring of the communications system.

If one of the pilots had been able to pull on an oxygen mask, he might have been trying to turn the plane back towards Kuala Lumpur before he passed out. If he was blinded by the smoke, this would explain the sudden loss of height and violent change of direction.

Reports of sightings kept coming. The most credible came from villagers on the remote Maldives island of Kudahuvadhoo, nearly 2,000 miles from the southern tip of India. Ibrahim Sarih, manager of the Blue Leaf Guesthouse, said: ‘I’ve never seen a jet that size flying so low. I could even make out the doors on it quite clearly.’

He described blue-and-red markings, consistent with the Malaysia Airlines livery. If MH370 was being flown low to avoid radar and slowly to conserve fuel, the timing — 9.15am on March 8 — seems right.

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In this case, it seems likely the plane had been hijacked and was heading towards Africa, perhaps Somalia, though it probably wouldn’t have had enough fuel.

Eight days after the disappearance, another possibility opened up. ‘It might well be the world’s first cyber hijack,’ said British anti-terror expert Dr Sally Leivesley.

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A former Home Office scientific adviser, she believed hackers on board the plane took control by triggering malicious software codes from a smartphone, over-riding security devices.

‘It is possible for hackers to get into the main computer network of the plane through the in-flight onboard entertainment system,’ she said.

But this didn’t explain why the pilot and co-pilot had not made any effort to signal for help, and attention turned back to them. Disturbing stories began to surface about co-pilot Fariq Abdul Hamid.

Two years earlier, he had picked out two blonde teenage backpackers from the check-in queue and invited them into the cockpit, where they remained for the flight. He then asked them for a date.

Still more worrying facts emerged when police searched Captain Shah’s home, a full week after the plane had disappeared.

They found a flight simulator he had built himself: it seemed that even when he wasn’t working, he was obsessed with flying. This had taken a toll on his family and the day before MH370 went missing, his wife moved out with their children.

Friends of Shah were sceptical. It was impossible to imagine him incapacitating all comms before soaring to 43,000 ft, the height at which passengers would pass out from oxygen deprivation. And why would he simply keep flying until the plane ran out of fuel?

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cockpit, where they remained for the flight

But circumstantial evidence was against him. Shortly before take-off, he had taken a two-minute phone call from an unknown woman using a pay-as-you-go SIM card. British pilot Simon Hardy, a senior Boeing 777 pilot who flew the Asian air routes for 17 years, studied the radar evidence and saw that the plane had flown along the Malaysian border with Thailand, dipping in and out of each country at least eight times.

‘This was probably very accurate flying,’ he said. ‘It’s a good way to cause confusion between air traffic controllers, who would each assume the aircraft was in the other country’s jurisdiction.’

Hardy then realised the plane had performed a three-sided turn over Penang in Malaysia. It was a manoeuvre he had often done himself over Ayers Rock in Australia — the best way to get a clear look from the cockpit.

Penang was Captain Shah’s home. ‘Someone did a nice long turn and took a last, emotional look at Penang,’ Hardy said.

Plotting the satellite ‘handshakes’, he calculated that the plane would have ploughed into the sea off the Andaman islands. If it sank close to a trench in the seabed, no debris would ever surface — except, perhaps, components that floated, such as the flaperon, which emerged 3,700 miles away at La Reunion.

The Australian Transport Safety Bureau has described this theory as ‘credible’.

Reluctantly, even Captain Shah’s friends are beginning to accept that this solution, while improbable, may well be the closest we can ever get to the truth.

Nik Huzlan, a retired Malaysian Airlines pilot who knew Shah for 30 years, says: ‘Your best friend can harbour the darkest secrets.’

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