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# MH370:

## suicidal pilot, parajacker or, perhaps, stowaway?

by Philip Baum

On 30th July, Dr Kok Soo Chon, the investigator in charge of the Malaysian flight MH370 safety investigation, stood before the world's media and declared that "there was no record of malfunction or defect in the aircraft that could have contributed to the disappearance."

The statement, made on behalf of the Malaysian government in the aftermath of the cessation of all search activities, was part of the presentation of the latest report into the incident, which is regarded as one of the aviation industry's greatest mysteries of all time.

The whereabouts of the wreckage are unknown, as are the reasons why MH370 never reached Beijing as planned on 8 March 2014. There has been much speculation over the intervening years, some of which has been wild in nature; many remain convinced that, despite fragments showing up on east African shores, the aircraft is hidden away by either the Russians in Kazakhstan or the Americans in Diego Garcia and that all the passengers and crew are going to emerge unscathed!

The aircraft's initial movements indicate, as the report states, the likelihood is that "such manoeuvres are due to the systems being manipulated", or, in other words, as a result of a criminal act.

There remain a multitude of different options in that space: hijacking of the aircraft by a passenger or crewmember, a cyber attack whereby some external, ground-based individual or entity managed to manipulate the controls, or, as is still the most likely scenario as far as I am concerned, pilot suicide.

Whilst the report indicates that there is no evidence that Captain Zaharia Ahmed Shah did indeed hijack his own aircraft and concluded that he had "no conflict issues with friends or family and had shown no signs of social isolation, self-neglect, no abuse of alcohol or drugs, no change of habit or interest, no stress or anxiety was detected in his audio recordings and no signs of significant behavioural changes as observed in the CCTV footage", there is little doubt that the nature of his activities on his home-based flight simulator, and his YouTube presentations on DIY air-conditioning system repair, were unusual. And, furthermore, the report states that "the turn was made indeed under a manual, not autopilot", so somebody must have been at the controls. As Geoff Askew writes in his article (on airline alliances) in this issue, there can be "no more tragic example of a possible 'insider threat' than the possible hijacking of Malaysian flight MH370 by its own captain".

However, this still begs the question why, if he were suicidal, Captain Shah didn't simply crash the aircraft. Why would he have gone to the extent of ensuring that the wreckage would not be discovered for a lengthy period of time, if ever? To ensure that his family are beneficiaries of his life insurance policies and that he be considered as much a victim as all other souls on board? Perhaps.

Or perhaps he was the hijacker, yet not suicidal? Could he have faked his own demise by piloting the aircraft to a remote region of the Indian Ocean and then, DB Cooper style,

parachuted from the aircraft leaving it to continue its flight until it ran out of fuel? It is possible that Captain Shah, or indeed another member of the crew, could still be alive enjoying a new life under an assumed identity having been picked up from the ocean by an accomplice. Yes, it's far-fetched, and a B-777 is not as easy to bail out of as a B-727 (à la Cooper), and he would certainly have had to descend to a low altitude to avoid freezing to death during his fall. Still, a possibility all the same.

Yet the 'insider threat' need not be restricted to the crew on board. The report states that, "we cannot exclude the possibility of unlawful interference by a third party." What if that entity were to have been on board, yet not on the manifest? We know that there has been a detailed analysis into the background of all passengers and crew, but we don't know for certain whether there were others on board.

As Alexandra James wrote in this journal (in her article on stowaways in April), "123 stowaway attempts have been reported internationally on 107 different flights." And those are only the reported incidents; who knows how many others have reached their destinations undetected or have fallen from aircraft without anybody ever having known they were there? Most of these stowaways have, after all, hidden in wheel wells of aircraft. Stowaways could, however, also be airport-based employees, or other persons who have gained access to restricted areas of the airport, who have concealed themselves on board. In the case of the B-777 – and I do not think this is in any way far-fetched – in the avionics bay perhaps?

This scenario is one I mooted as a possibility a few days after the loss of MH370. Aircraft mechanics access the bay, yet it is an area of the aircraft that is rarely the subject of a pre-flight search (and, as this is a possible scenario highlighting a weakness in the system, something which should be addressed). From that bay, one has complete access to all the aircraft controls, including the communication systems. From that bay, one could depressurise the aircraft and kill all souls on board before taking control of the aircraft and either piloting it to its demise in the depths of the Indian Ocean or, as aforementioned, parachuting from it at low altitude. Then again, why do so?

An airport or airline employee with mental health issues simply showing it could be done? Or a terrorist group? In the case of the latter, it is of course also a possibility that a person or persons could have concealed themselves in the electronics and engineering bay, cut all aircraft communications and then, perhaps armed, attempted to hijack the aircraft. Perhaps, rather than being the villain of the piece, Captain Shah's final act was a heroic one trying to save the aircraft?

Until the wreckage is located and a forensic examination of the bodies of those on board is performed, I'm afraid it all continues to be speculation... ■