

# Findings in crash of Alaska Airlines Flight 261 reveal possible cause

## Radar may reveal piece falling from doomed plane

by J. Lynn Lunsford  
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Radar that tracked Alaska Airlines Flight 261 may show a piece of the aircraft falling from the plane shortly before it crashed, sources say.

National Transportation Safety Board officials were analyzing preliminary radar information late Monday, February 7, but sources said that at least two Southern California radar sites had detected a small "target" that separated from the main image of the McDonnell Douglas MD-83 in the seconds before the crash.

It was impossible to tell the size of the piece. Radar is sensitive enough to pick up objects as small as a briefcase.

The radar tracked the object until it fell into the ocean about four miles from where Flight 261 crashed. Investigators suspect that it came from the tail section of the aircraft just before it flipped and tumbled 17,000 feet into the Pacific Ocean on Jan. 31, killing all 88 people on board.

The airplane was being prepared for an emergency landing in Los Angeles after the crew reported that the horizontal stabilizer was jammed. The airplane had departed from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, and was scheduled to stop in San Francisco and Seattle.

The horizontal stabilizer on an MD-80 series aircraft is a movable 40-foot wing atop the tail that controls the up and down stability of the airplane. By making small adjustments to the stabilizer using switches on the pilot's control wheel, the plane can be trimmed in such a way

that it is easier to fly.

Experts say that if the horizontal stabilizer — or some part of it — failed, the resulting changes in aerodynamic forces could easily cause the airplane to become uncontrollable.

"The eyewitnesses said the airplane was tumbling and spinning, which would indicate a loss of tail effectiveness of some kind," said aviation consultant C.O. Miller, a former senior safety board investigator. "If you have something on radar coming off this airplane, it could go a long way toward solving it."

Flight 261 had been cruising at 31,000 feet when it went into a 90-second dive that took it to 23,700 feet before the crew regained control. After that, a flight attendant told the pilots that she had heard a loud noise in the rear of the aircraft. The pilots said they had heard it too. A second noise, which could have been a piece of the airplane breaking away, occurred just before the airplane plunged out of control.

If a splash site for the piece that fell off the airplane is pinpointed, officials will send U.S. Navy vessels in search of it. Over the last few years, the Navy has been able to find and retrieve key pieces of airplanes that fell into the ocean, including the cargo door that ripped away from a United Airlines Boeing 747, which later landed in Honolulu with a gaping hole in its side.

Several years ago, radar information was used to find the engine from an American Airlines MD-80 that fell from the jetliner over the desert in the western United States. A helicopter flew directly to where the

engine landed based on the radar track.

Even if officials do not find what ever fell from the plane, it could be possible to determine what happened from looking at the main wreckage. Safety board Chairman Jim Hall was scheduled to give an update on the investigation on Tuesday afternoon, Feb. 15.

The crash site is in about 650 feet of water about ten miles off the California coast northwest of Los Angeles. Most of the wreckage is in small pieces that are strewn along the hard sandy bottom in an area the size of a football field.

A source familiar with the investigation said the aircraft "is so broken up that it is impossible to tell whether it is all there or not."

Several pieces of the tail section have been identified on videotapes taken by remote-control submersibles, but few are larger than three feet long. The parts of the tail that have been identified include a five-foot section of the leading edge of the horizontal stabilizer and a three- to four-foot piece of the spar that provides the structural backbone of the stabilizer. Other parts identified include a five- to seven-foot piece of skin from the outside of the vertical stabilizer on which the company's logo, a smiling Eskimo, is painted.

They said a key part of the system that could lead to a catastrophic failure is the jackscrew that adjusts the stabilizer.

A jackscrew is a long, threaded rod on which the stabilizer is mounted. It operates much like a garage door opener: when it turns, the stabilizer moves up or down, depending on the

direction it is turning.

Two electric motors, one more powerful than the other, drive the jackscrew and can be controlled from the cockpit.

Officials know that the jetliner's crew was battling problems with the horizontal stabilizer for more than 30 minutes before the airplane crashed. They told air traffic controllers and the company's maintenance experts in Seattle that the stabilizer had "run away" and was jammed in a position that was forcing the airplane's nose downward.

Since the accident, investigators and pilots who flew the aircraft have

## 1997 check found faulty stabilizer part

by J. Lynn Lunsford  
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An inspection in 1997 of the stabilizer trim on the Alaska Airlines jet that crashed two weeks ago showed that it was worn out and needed to be replaced, federal officials said Sunday night.

But for unexplained reasons, the jackscrew assembly was not replaced. Instead, maintenance records show it passed five subsequent inspections the next day, officials said.

The National Transportation Safety Board declined to say what the new information meant, but sources close to the investigation said that investigators will try to determine why maintenance workers changed their opinion after the first inspection.

Investigators think that a worn jackscrew assembly may have led

been puzzled about why stabilizer problems would result in the loss of control of the aircraft. Procedures in the airplane's flight manual spell out what to do for stabilizer problems, including making emergency landings with a jammed stabilizer if the problem cannot be fixed.

Pilots say it is relatively easy to land an MD-83 with a jammed stabilizer, although it could take the strength of both crew members to pull the nose up for landing.

In the week since the crash, three U.S. jetliners have returned to their gates because of stabilizer problems. Two can probably be traced to the

pilots' testing and retesting the equipment, airline officials said.

"It may be that some pilots are being overly cautious and are running through their checks several more times than they typically do with their stabilizer," Jack Evans, an Alaska Airlines spokesman, told *The Associated Press*.

Boeing officials said that running the electric motors that drive the stabilizer on the ground could lead to overheating, which will trip a switch in the cockpit. The motors will remain inoperative until the switches cool down again.

jackscrew assembly was inspected.

During that check, the component failed a check that was done to determine the amount of wear on the jackscrew and the eight-inch gimbal nut though which it traveled.

According to maintenance records, the initial measurement led mechanics to recommend replacing the gimbal nut immediately. However, further entries in the maintenance log show that the action "was re-evaluated and the assembly was re-inspected" the next day, the statement said.

The maintenance record showed that the result of the subsequent inspection fell within federally approved limits, and that the assembly was rechecked five times with the same results before being signed off by an Alaska Airlines maintenance inspector.

# McCain surges, punctures Bush's campaign

by Jodi Enda  
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COLUMBIA, S.C. — The camp of the one-time fighter pilot is festive, celebrating the fact that he is alive at all. The camp of the one-time frat-boy is hunkered down, fighting for its very survival.

As Arizona Sen. John McCain and Texas Gov. George W. Bush gird for a crucial GOP Presidential primary here Saturday, their moods and those of their supporters reflect the unexpected turns of events that have transformed their contest from a lopsided jaunt into a vital and at times bitter race.

A star-struck crowd of at least 1,000 people jammed in line outside the Chapter 11 discount bookstore in Atlanta Sunday, hoping to get McCain

to autograph a copy of his book, *Faith of My Fathers*. Meanwhile Bush was defensive and testy in an hour-long TV grilling about his embattled campaign.

McCain's mighty surge, first in the New Hampshire primary, then in polls both here and nationwide, has undercut a central tenet of Bush's campaign, the argument that he was the Republican most likely to take back the White House from the Democrats.

With that essential claim punctured — one recent national poll shows Bush losing to Vice President Gore but McCain beating the Democratic front-runner — Bush has been forced to fight for the nomination that once appeared inevitably his. After McCain pummeled him in New Hampshire, Bush re-emerged here last week with a new style and strategy that focuses almost entirely on winning South

Carolina.

Now, the easy-going governor describes himself as a fighter, a reformer, a leader.

Someone, in short, like John McCain.

McCain, meanwhile, is so energized by his 19-point New Hampshire victory and his enthusiastic reception here that his bus tour of the state has become something of a rolling celebration. To be sure, the former Navy pilot and Vietnam prisoner of war remains serious about his ultimate goal and his notions of how to get there.

Bush's disposition permeates his crowds, too.

But while the often-genial governor capably knocks off occasional jokes, he is more apt of late to strike a serious tone, one that is intended to convince voters of the gravity of his quest

and the depth of his desire.

Having tossed aside his stump speech, Bush now appears less sure-footed than McCain. He often stumbles through his lines and slaughters the grammar while striving to engage more directly with his audiences.

While Bush's crowds are less boisterous than McCain's, they seem to be no less committed to their man — in fact, as the backbone of the Republican Party, they may be more likely to show up on primary day.

Bush describes himself as a "cold-eyed realist" who can make things happen in Washington. And despite polls that show him in a tight race here, his supporters hold firm to the view that he is their party's best shot in November. Knight-Ridder correspondent Ben Stocking contributed to this article.

## FORBES DROPS GOP BID



WASHINGTON - Publisher Steve Forbes, left, and his wife Sabina wave to supporters in Washington, D.C., Thursday, Feb. 10, shortly after his dropping out of the race for the GOP Presidential nomination. Forbes abandoned his second presidential campaign Wednesday after spending more than \$66 million of his estimated \$440 million personal fortune in a six-year bid for the White House.

# Britain suspends Northern Ireland government

by Ray Moseley  
Chicago Tribune  
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LONDON — Britain suspended on Friday the ten-week-old Northern Ireland government in which Catholics and Protestants shared power, holding that there had been insufficient progress in efforts to get the Irish Republican Army to give up its arms.

But hours later an independent commission with responsibility for the arms question issued a fresh report saying the IRA had indicated earlier in the day it "will initiate a comprehensive process to put arms beyond use, in a manner as to ensure maximum public confidence."

The commission headed by Canadian Gen. John de Chastelain said the IRA statement "holds out the real prospect of an agreement" which will enable the commission to fulfill its mandate. The commission's mandate expires on May 22, when disarmament by the IRA and all other paramilitary groups, Catholic and Protestant, is supposed to be completed.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's office welcomed the report as "a development of real significance." But Britain's Northern Ireland secretary, Peter Mandelson, said it remained unclear whether the IRA had now given a commitment to disarm.

He said if the IRA gives a commitment, and a time frame for completing disarmament, that would "open the way" for him to lift the suspension of the Northern Ireland government.

"The statement implies many things, but they [the IRA] don't state unequivocally what they mean," Mandelson said.

In a day of swift-moving developments, Mandelson announced in Belfast early Friday evening he had decided with regret to suspend the new government. He said "real progress" had been made in resolving the crisis in the last week, but not enough to justify his withholding the suspension.

With his decision, power over Northern Ireland affairs reverted to the British government. The Northern Ireland executive, legislative assembly, and cross-border bodies with the Irish Republic went into the deep freeze.

Only minutes before Mandelson spoke, the leader of the IRA's political wing — Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams — said his party had submitted a "breakthrough proposition" to the British and Irish governments on resolving the impasse.

Mandelson then appeared to brush aside Adams' statement by saying the arms issue could not be overcome by a "last-minute rush on a Friday afternoon."

Later he said he only received a copy of Adams' statement 20 minutes after he had announced the suspension, and had not yet read it. He also said he had not seen the new de Chastelain report when he announced suspension, but said its content would not have altered his decision.

A Sinn Fein official, Alex Maskey, said Mandelson's statements were untrue. He said Mandelson was fully aware of the Sinn Fein proposal before he announced suspension, and knew of the new report as well.

After suspension was announced, Sinn Fein Chairman Mitchel McLaughlin, in New York, said: "We will castigate the British government, we will punish the British govern-

ment, we will take them to court if necessary." Sinn Fein had earlier threatened legal action to challenge the suspension.

The suspension forestalled the threatened resignation of Northern Ireland First Minister David Trimble, which would have brought about the collapse of the power-sharing government in which Sinn Fein holds two Cabinet posts alongside Protestants and representatives of the Catholic

*"there can be no further place in the politics of Northern Ireland for private armies and their guns."*

-David Trimble,  
First Minister of  
Northern Ireland

Social Democratic and Labor Party.

Trimble had planned to put his resignation into effect on Saturday at a meeting of his Ulster Unionist Party's 860-member council in Belfast. But sources in Belfast said Trimble, dissatisfied with what he had heard from Sinn Fein officials on Friday, threatened to resign immediately unless Mandelson announced suspension of the government.

Referring to that, Adams said it was "quite bizarre" that Mandelson had acted in response "to a Unionist

threat."

After long refusal by the Unionists to set up the power-sharing government because of the arms issue, they changed their minds last November — but with the proviso they would not continue with the administration unless the IRA started disposing of arms by Jan. 31. The new government was established on Dec. 2.

The de Chastelain commission reported at the end of January that IRA disarmament had not begun and it had been unable to learn from the IRA when it would. De Chastelain's report was only released by the British government on Friday, and in it the commission suggested its own dissolution if there were no significant progress on the arms issue.

There is no road map showing where Northern Ireland goes from here. Mandelson indicated Britain will try to "put flesh on the bones" of the IRA statement in coming days.

But much may depend on Ulster Unionist reaction to the statement. Jeffrey Donaldson, a prominent Ulster Unionist who opposes the Good Friday agreement, said Friday night the statement was "ambiguous" and "doesn't give us much more than we had before."

The last previous power-sharing government in Northern Ireland was set up in 1974. It collapsed within weeks amid violence from both sides, and it took another 24 years to produce the Good Friday peace agreement.

President Clinton, Blair, and the prime ministers of the Irish Republic, Bertie Ahern, were involved on Friday in a late round of telephone conversations about the crisis before

Mandelson finally acted.

All emphasized that they did not expect the suspension to become permanent but looked to political parties in Northern Ireland to continue the search for a solution.

"It is a suspension. It is not an annulment," said a spokesman for Blair. "The prime minister still believes it should be possible to implement the Good Friday agreement in full."

Ahern said Thursday, February 10, however, that his government had "concerns about suspension" and believed it was not in line with terms of the Good Friday agreement.

The Irish have said they fear that suspension will make it impossible to achieve progress on disarmament. But they have suggested they will not allow the disagreement to upset their relations with Britain.

In the past week Irish officials have met frequently with Sinn Fein representatives, and have floated various suggestions for overcoming the current crisis. One involved a proposal for reducing the 15,000-member British military presence in Northern Ireland as an inducement to the IRA to disarm.

Another was reported to call for a symbolic disposal of some weapons by all paramilitary groups, Protestant and Catholic, on a "day of reconciliation."

But Mandelson said he received no commitment of IRA disarmament before he acted on Friday.

Speaking before the new de Chastelain report was announced, he said the past week's discussions between Sinn Fein and the Irish government had left "very unclear what the position of the IRA is, what informa-

tion they will provide to de Chastelain, and what they are prepared to agree with de Chastelain as to what he could report."

In announcing the suspension, Mandelson said: "We've got to clear up this issue of decommissioning [disarmament] once and for all. It has dogged the process throughout. It has sapped confidence in the institutions."

He said real progress had been made but it was not sufficient. "I hope with goodwill, and in a calm and measured way, people will be able to build on this progress" and resolve the crisis, he said.

Trimble told reporters he met with Sinn Fein's chief negotiator Martin McGuinness on Friday, then had a phone talk with Adams. "They had nothing to put before me," he said. "Consequently, suspension became inevitable."

He said he regretted suspension, but "there can be no further place in the politics of Northern Ireland for private armies and their guns."

Shortly before Mandelson's announcement, President Clinton said he hoped a way could be found to keep the peace process going. He said his administration had been "heavily involved" in trying to break the deadlock, and he hoped there would be no "backslide" during the suspension.

During past crises, Clinton has sent former Sen. George Mitchell to Northern Ireland, and Mitchell succeeded in steering the parties to agreements. But Mandelson said Mitchell had advised he did not want to return to Northern Ireland.

That left open the question of who will head a review of the peace process that will now be undertaken.