
The Helderberg Disaster

The Helderberg disaster took place on November 27, 1987. South African Airways Flight 295, a Boeing 747, crashed into the Indian Ocean nine hours into a flight between Taipei and Johannesburg. As Malaysia Flight 370 showed again decades later, recovering wreckage miles underwater is a difficult task. They were at least able to find the plane, and recover some of it with custom-built robotic vehicles.

The flight recorder was never found, and the voice recorder took two years to show up. The last radio contact from the pilots had told control that the plane was filling with smoke, and the debris revealed that a fire had burned at more than 600 degrees Celsius (1,112 °Fahrenheit). At the time, a Boeing specialist speculated that rocket fuel may have been carried in the cargo hold.

The theory was plausible. South Africa faced numerous arms embargoes due to the apartheid regime, and it's believed that commercial flights may have been used to smuggle military equipment into the country illegally. The initial inquiry speculated that the lithium batteries may have caught on fire.

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up to investigate crimes from the apartheid era, asked forensic scientist David Klatzow to present evidence. Klatzow had been involved with the original inquiry and maintained a professional interest in the disaster. He noted a number of problems with the first inquiry, including a failure to interview all witnesses.

Klatzow believes that there were two fires onboard the aircraft and that it had been in trouble a lot earlier than official reports suggest. He believes that by the time of the second fire most of the people aboard will have been dead. He'd been asked to refrain from speculation about two fires in the 1980s. More damning, the tape from ground control which recorded communications from the plane during the early part of its flight went missing very early. Klatzow believes the pilot may have refrained from making an emergency landing before reaching South Africa as he was likely carrying illegal cargo.