

Disappearance of Piper Lance for

Victims' familie board to fin

□ Lawyer to pilot's family says case is inconclusive

Herman Grech

A lawyer has told a board of inquiry investigating the disappearance of a Piper Lance four years ago that the case is inconclusive.

However, Dr Malcolm Pace feels there is more reason to think that the flight never took place rather than assuming that the aircraft crashed and ended up in the sea.

Dr Pace is the lawyer to the Piper Lance pilot's family.

The board was set up in January 1996, a month after the Piper Lance disappeared on its way to Malta from Djerba, Tunisia.

The families of the victims yesterday called on the board to finalise and publish their report. The board is made up of Dr Philip Sciberras as chairman, and Captain Franz Sturmeyer and engineer Louis Giordmaina.

Dr Pace said he expected the board to present its report to the government soon.

The plane was piloted by Captain Carmel Bartolo, 47, of Zebbug, and had as passengers Philip Farrugia, 43; Matthew Aquilina, 22; Briton Michael Williams, Irishman Desmond Boomer, and Pole Gorny Tadeuz.

The bodies of the men were never recovered, even though fishermen had found parts of what is thought to be the aircraft's wreckage.

Dr Pace gave several reasons for his conclusions that the case is inconclusive.

Among these were that:

- No eyewitnesses to the incident were produced.
- The original tape of the conversation between the Djerba air traffic control and the pilot was never submitted for scientific analysis, even though the voice of the pilot could not be recognised by members of his own family.
- No floating debris was ever recovered despite numerous days of search and rescue operations, even though numerous items would certainly have floated including the life-raft, lifejackets, and other items on board.
- No trace of human remains was ever found.
- The aircraft did not appear on any radar screen.

He gave 17 reasons as to why the plane could never have taken off.

For example, no eyewitnesses testified on oath that they actually saw the pilot and other people boarding the plane prior to take-off.

Neither the pilot, nor Matthew Aquilina or Philip Farrugia phoned their family in Malta before take-off as was customary.

The Malta control tower never had any

radio contact with the plane despite the fact that it had supposedly reached the boundary between the two airspaces.

In the same report, Dr Pace gave reasons as to why the plane could have actually taken off but was intercepted or hijacked and forced to land elsewhere. Twelve reasons pointed to the possibility that the plane was sabotaged and exploded in mid-air.

For example, a threat had been made to Rosanne Bartolo (the pilot's wife) three weeks before the incident by an identified Egyptian.

The report states that the pilot had 2,200 hours of flying experience, and that it was not in his character to fly in poor weather conditions.

The coins and the keys found in the wallet of the pilot allegedly retrieved by the fishermen with parts of the wreckage did not have much rust and were in "rather pristine condition", considering the period during which they were supposed to have been in the water.

The report makes various criticisms of the post-incident phase.

Rescue operations by both the local and the Tunisian authorities took too long to start. Certain strategic parts of the area could not be searched by Maltese aircraft as Libyan authorities refused permission.

Asked why it had taken so long to submit his report, Dr Pace said it was a mammoth task to collect all the research, exacerbated in more ways than one by the lack of cooperation by the Tunisian authorities.

In the meantime, Joseph Raymond, Cecilia, Gillian and Daniel Aquilina, the immediate family of Matthew who was among the passengers on the aircraft, said they were wondering why the inquiry was taking so long.

"This is not about compensation. This is about the families of the victims deserving to know the truth," Gillian, the victim's sister said.

Mr Aquilina said that back in April, one of the board members said they had finalised the compilation of evidence and that their findings would be published "within a very short time".

"We still have a lot of unanswered questions. All we want to know is the truth. Four years after the incident, we are still where we started. We've been crying for too long, and it's about time somebody seals this story," Gillian said.

She said the local authorities had often blamed the Tunisians for the lack of information. But the Tunisians proved to be "more helpful" than the Maltese in providing some answers.

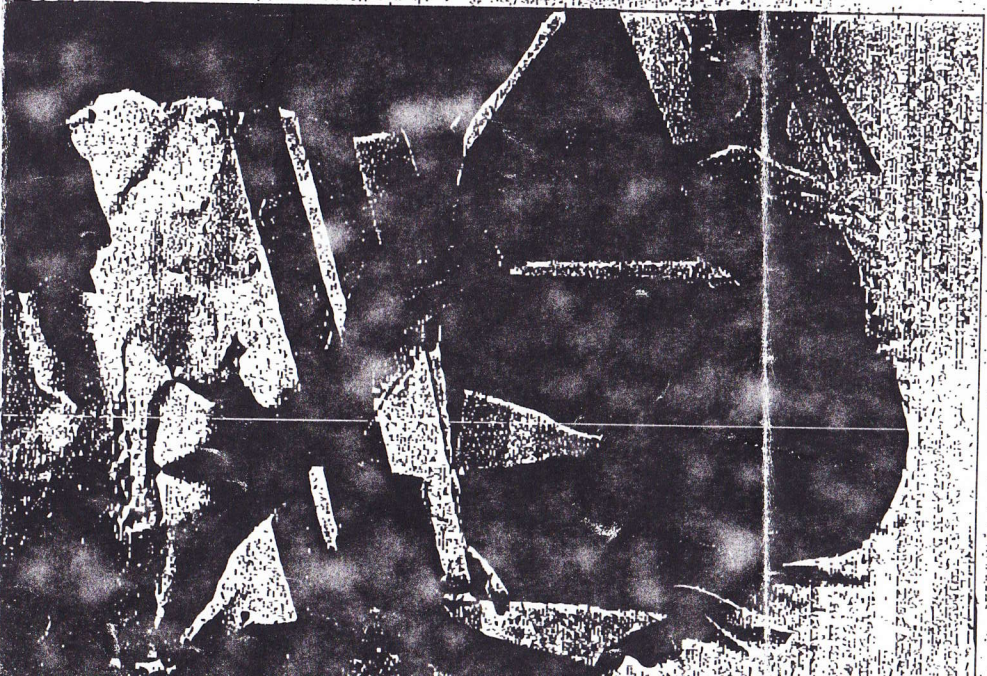
Mr Aquilina, the father of the victim, said the family was still waiting to see whether the

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ilies call on inquiries to finalise report



Three years ago... A Piper Lance expert displaying some of the wreckage believed to be the ill-fated aircraft.

crash could have been triggered by any form of negligence.

"Why was the debris never taken for forensic tests?" he asked.

Mr Aquilina asked why the Emergency Locator Transmitter emergency signal which should have gone off once the aircraft impacted with the sea, never did.

Such unanswered questions have often spurred the families of the victims to believe that the passengers could still be alive.

"My mother sometimes still believes that Matthew will come back," Gillion said.

When contacted, Transport Minister Gules said he could not pressure him into concluding the inquiry.

"When it is an independent body, I cannot interfere in their process," Mr Gules said.

Efforts to contact the members of the mission proved fruitless.



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*Happy New Year,
John Gules
13/1*

With Compliments

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