Another Lost Flight

By Dr. Richard Kelley

As I write this article, the world remains focused on the whereabouts of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, which disappeared while en route from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to Beijing, China, almost two weeks ago. As we went to press late this week, there were reports that debris from the plane might have been spotted in a remote area of the Indian Ocean, some 1,400 miles (2,300 kilometers) southwest of Australia. Even if the large object sighted is confirmed to be from the missing airplane, it will be a long time, if ever, before the cause of the plane’s loss is understood. This sad incident brings back memories of the disappearance of another aircraft, this one flying between San Francisco and Honolulu, Hawaii, on November 9, 1957. In that case, bodies and wreckage were found five days later nearly 1,000 (1,600 kilometers) miles northeast of Honolulu, but to this day, the reason for the crash remains a mystery.

In the 1950s, Pan American World Airways, a pioneer in opening international air routes since its founding in 1927, flew many, many routes around the world. At the beginning, Pan Am could not wait for airports to be built. It turned instead to “flying boats” – specialized seaplanes made by Sikorsky and Martin with a hull-shaped fuselage that enabled them to land and take off on water. My mother, sisters and I flew in one in February 1942 when we were evacuated to California in anticipation of a possible invasion of Hawaii after Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941.

After World War II, Boeing developed the B-377 Stratocruiser, which is remembered for its figure-8-shaped double hull with upper and lower passenger cabins, sleeper berths, lounge and bar. Each Pan Am Stratocruiser, which the airline dubbed “Clippers,” had an individual name such as Clipper Sovereign of the Skies. I flew in them several times on my way to and from college and medical school and can assure you there was a huge difference between the spacious Stratocruiser and today’s cramped aircraft with economy seats generally measuring no more than 17 inches in width. Unfortunately, the B-377 lumbered along at only 325 mph, about 200 mph slower than today’s jetliners. The trip between Honolulu and...
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California thus took around nine hours, compared to today's five- or six-hour flights.

On the evening of October 6, 1956, Clipper Sovereign of the Skies, designated Pan Am Flight 6, departed from Honolulu on the last leg of an around-the-world journey and, after flying about five hours and near the midway point to San Francisco, two of its four engines froze up and the pilot had to ditch the plane in the Pacific Ocean.

Fortunately, in those days the U.S. Coast Guard had several ships stationed between Hawai'i and California to monitor weather conditions and be prepared to assist ships and aircraft as needed. On that night, the Coast Guard cutter nearest Pan Am's troubled Flight 6 was the Pontchartrain.

Pan Am Captain Richard N. Ogg, a pilot with over 13,000 hours of flying time, 738 of which were in Boeing 377s, flew to the USCGC Pontchartrain's location, leveled off at 2,000 feet, and circled until daylight on its two functioning engines. Then he did a near-perfect landing on the water. The nearby Pontchartrain picked up all 31 people on board, and there were remarkably few injuries. Forty-four cases of live canaries in the hold were not so lucky and sank with the aircraft.

On November 8, 1957, a little more than a year later, Clipper Romance of the Skies, Pan Am Flight 7, took off from San Francisco just before noon, with 44 souls reported on board, headed for Honolulu. Captain Gordon Brown, a 15-year veteran of the airline, was in the left seat, assisted by First Officer Bill Wygant, who had over a dozen years' experience. Seated behind them was Bill Fortenberry, the navigator.

The details of what happened or might have happened during the following hours can be found in a fascinating article titled The Mystery of the Lost Clipper, by Gregg Herken with Ken Fortenberry, the son of Flight 7's navigator, published in the September 2004 issue of Air & Space Magazine.¹

At 4:04 p.m. local time, Captain Brown radioed a routine position report to the Pontchartrain saying all was well as they approached the halfway point to Honolulu. The skies were clear, the seas were calm and the sun was sinking low in the western sky. They were at an altitude of 10,000 feet, on course about 10 miles east of Pontchartrain and on schedule.

Twenty-two minutes later, Flight 7 apparently hit the water hard, judging from three wristwatches stopped at 4:26 p.m. later found on bodies recovered floating with aircraft debris about 90 miles north of the course typically flown.

Analysis of the debris suggested the aircraft hit with the nose slightly down and the right wing lowered. Nineteen bodies were recovered. Fourteen were wearing life vests but no shoes, suggesting that there had been some time to prepare for ditching. Autopsies showed “impact trauma” on some bodies, but most revealed death by drowning. Four bodies, including that of Captain Brown, carried carbon monoxide. Debris from above the waterline areas showed burn marks, evidence of a fire that could have followed the crash.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) both began investigating but, after a dispute over which agency was in charge, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover pulled his agency off the case. The cause of the crash remains a mystery.

Could the crash have been the result of something triggered by a passenger or crewmember?

- Purser Eugene Crosthwaite had been in trouble with Pan Am for previous erratic and bizarre behavior. His personal life was in shambles following the death of his wife and disputes with his 16-year-old stepdaughter. He had amended his will the morning of the flight and left a copy of the document in the glove compartment of his car, parked at the airport.
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- Passenger William Harrison Payne had financial difficulties due to an investment in real estate and had bought a $10,000 double indemnity life insurance two weeks before the crash. In 1958, that real estate mysteriously burned to the ground and, according to the local postmistress, his newly remarried “widow” began to receive letters and packages from overseas without return addresses. Was Payne really on Flight 7 when it crashed?

Could there have been a catastrophic mechanical failure on the Stratocruiser? Authors Herken and Fortenberry found that the B-377s had a history of serious problems with their propellers. Movement of their neoprene cores sometimes made them unbalanced, which would cause them to shake and, in at least a few instances, result in the blades, or pieces of them, flying off.

Other B-377s had experienced runaway or “over-speeding” propellers and, with a sudden change in pitch, the propellers would emit a blood-curdling “whine” that gave the pilot only seconds to react. That was probably what happened to Pan Am’s Flight 6 just a year before.

Herken and Fortenberry also were in contact with an expert on aircraft engines and propellers who believed that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) knew there was a problem with a tube that fed oil to the engines on the B-377s and had issued an emergency “AD” (Airworthiness Directive) in early 1957 ordering the oil-supply tubes inspected on every engine and “either replaced or repaired not later than May 31, 1957.” We will probably never know if that was done on the B-377 used for Flight 7 on November 9, 1957.

So, like Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, there are a number of people or things that might have diverted the aircraft from its scheduled route.

Like Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, no distress signals were heard from Flight 7. Obviously, the communications and contact technology available in 1957 was very limited compared to that routinely employed in 2014.

In January 1959, a Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) report stated that it had found “no probable cause” for the crash of Flight 7.

On January 20, 2014, Gregg Herken and Ken Fortenberry issued a press release saying they had just rejoined forces and, using newly uncovered evidence and a grant from the Pan Am Historical Foundation, would continue their quest to discover the cause of the unsolved 1957 crash. They said their investigation “will not end until the answers have been found.”

You can follow their quest on Facebook or their dedicated website. 

Sources:
1 www.AirSpaceMag.com
2 http://tinyurl.com/kjd8lbx
3 http://www.romanceoftheskies.com