It was a hot evening in New York City on Tuesday, July 17, 1996. Most of the heads of Law Enforcement were at the Friars Club for a dinner to honor Ray Kelly, who was leaving the NYPD to become the head of U.S. Customs Service. As the Assistant Director of the NYO and long-time veteran of the office, I had known Ray well and respected him. He was a festive occasion among good friends. As coffee was being served and the speeches were about to begin, my pager screeched its familiar sound. It was the phone number of the NYO duty supervisor with the added suffix "911." Suddenly, other pagers started chattering. The two telephones in the lobby were in use so I called from my Bureau car parked outside. What I learned was chilling! The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) had notified us that their radar contact with a 747 jetliner en route from JFK airport to Paris, France had disappeared just minutes after take-off. Other aircraft over the Atlantic Ocean near Long Island’s Moriches Inlet reported seeing a large fireball in the sky.

It was TWA Flight 800. Hours later, we learned that the passengers included grandparents, the Executive Producer of ABC Sports, a noted American musical composer, 16 members of a high school French club from Pennsylvania, newlyweds, children from 6 months to 16 and a senior flight attendant. In a terrible twist of fate, she had his beloved wife, Janet, aboard the plane, serving as the "passenger in command" at the time of the crash. I was frantic. My heart sank when I learned that another way. The NTSB is a truly professional government agency request pointless. The FBI rightly prides itself on its history of pursuing the truth wherever it leads. Our job is, and always has been, to work with every lead wherever it takes us in a professional and "dispassionate" manner. Yet, more than 20 years after the TWA 800 disaster, I still vividly recall how the FBI/"dispassionate" manner. Yet, more than 20 years after the TWA 800 disaster, I still vividly recall how the FBI/NY0 family struggled mightily with "dispassion" in this case. It began with a call from my wife, Susan, as I pulled into the underground parking garage. My dear friend and fellow Agent, Charlie Christopher, had just telephoned our home. He was frantic. My heart sank when I learned that his beloved wife, Janet, was aboard the plane, serving the food. In a terrible twist of fate, she had switched shifts with a colleague so that she could attend her son’s Eagle Scout induction ceremony the following weekend. Charlie was one of my first calls. For the NY0, this was now personal.

But what could I tell them? At that point, I knew very little. The plane had arrived at JFK Airport from Athens, Greece that day at 4 pm. After a gate delay of more than an hour, it took off at 8:19 pm bound for Paris, France. At 8:23 pm, the Boston Air Traffic Control Center took over the routine tracking from the JFK Center. Six minutes later, the blip on the radar screen that was TWA 800 disappeared at an altitude of 13,700 feet about 50 miles east of New York City. At 8:38 pm, Boston Center called Boston Coast Guard Command Center confirming aircraft sightings of a "fireball" in the sky. At 8:49 pm, when my pager popped to life at the Coast Guard and dive teams from the FBI, NYPD, New York State Police, as well as Nassau and Suffolk county police depart-

The awkwardness of our partnership soon displayed itself in another way. The TWA is a truly professional government agency made up of highly talented and dedicated experts. Their mission is to determine the cause or causes of a crash and make recommendations for future correctives. It was not the FBI/abit of proof, demanded in federal criminal investigations, do not apply. Furthermore, the NTSB, through long standing agreements, includes representatives of the aircraft manufacturer (Boeing), the airline company (TWA), the engine manufacturers (Pratt and Whitney), the pilots’ union and the flight attendants’ union in their investigative team. This set-up would later cause me all sorts of personal headaches. Within hours of the crash the Coast Guard had begun the dangerous task of moving about the flaming wreckage recover floating bodies for removal to a temporary morgue at their Moriches station. By the following morning, the outlines of our investigative structure were in place. Tom Pickard, the SAC for counterintelligence and counterterrorism, took overall charge of the investigation. Operating from the command center in New York City, Tom oversaw all aspects of the case while continuously updating me on the work produced by Agents assigned to the FBI’s Moriches command center. Based on oversight developments, it was clear that an immediate neighborhood-type investigation would be needed along a 15–20 mile southern coastline section of Long Island. There were 75 potential eyewitnesses, who had called in to the Command Post by 4 AM, who had to be located and interviewed. All marinas, as well as any and all vessels, large or small on the ocean near Moriches (within twenty four hours before and after the disaster) had to be identi-

Stories from the Historical Committee

O ur History

Fireball (TWA Flight 800)


28 September/October 2016

the Grapevine 29

Bob Francis, VC, NTSB, Kallstrom, Two Unknmwn, Joe Cantamessa

News media satellite truck

Friars Club, nine Coast Guard cutters and patrol boats along with two helicopters and a C130 airplane were already scouring the Atlantic in search of survivors. Despite the tremendous improvements in air travel safety in recent decades, commercial and private aircraft still crash. The causes span the spectrum — mechanical problems, human error, negligence, weather and even the occasional bird strike. Normally, the NTSB investigates aircraft accidents in the United States. But this case was different. Because jet liners don’t just explode at 13,000 feet, a suspicion of terrorism quickly engulfed everyone’s mind. Fueling these fears was a steady stream of ominous calls coming in from residents along Long Island’s South Shore. They described lights trailing in an upward direction as if someone had fired a ground to air missile. Perhaps a bomb had been carried into the passenger compartment or was concealed in check-in luggage. Every person and thing that had access to the plane at JFK or in the air in the minutes afterward had to be scrutinized. That would include all airport personnel, all passengers on Flight 800 to Paris, as well as the inbound flight from Athens. Every item of freight placed on the aircraft and the investigation of every freight company employee associated with packing and delivering items to the plane would have to be scrutinized. These suspicions led to an FBI break with normal protocols by launching a criminal investigation under Title 18 USC, “Crime Aboard American Flag Aircraft” or “Destruction of American Flag Aircraft!” The NTSB commenced a parallel inquiry with both agencies working together as partners under their own jurisdic-

tions. From the start, we agreed that if the NTSB found clear and conclusive proof of a mechanical/electrical/structural failure, then the FBI would cease investigation. But if we found the “Eureka” piece that proved to our standards — terrorism — then NTSB would close its investigation. I also agreed to Hall’s request for the presence of one of his investigators at any FBI interview. NTSB sent only five people (later doubling to ten) to Moriches. By week’s end, the Bureau had close to 700 Agents on site rendering Hall’s request pointless.

Additional details of the crash scene’s one-of-a-kind setup can be found in the book Crash on the Beach by the late Robert Driscoll. It is a chilling account of what it was like to work on this case and perhaps the most important book ever published in the field of aviation investigation.

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Another nagging question focused on whether any U.S. military assets in the area, carrying ordinances, were capable of bringing the flight down. After a long night, SAC Joseph Cantamessa left for Moriches the next morning. Joe coordinated the Coast Guard and dive teams from the FBI, NYPD, New York State Police, as well as Nassau and Suffolk county police depart-

Tom Pickard, Director Freeh, Jim Kallstrom and Joe Cantamessa

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boxes were quickly found and flown to NTSB headquarters in hundreds of feet underwater in an effort to recover bodies and evidence. Seventy-five courageous hard-hat workers who were supposedly part of a so-called trusted network. Digging deeper, we found few, if any, personnel security procedures in place. What had been an empty cavernous building, steadily morphed with thousands of miles of wires and cables strung out in long rows or bundled like plates of spaghetti began filling the entire floor space. It was a jigsaw puzzle of staggering dimension which included the TW A 800 fuselage. Along the wall behind the cockpit were mementos of the crash. Some believed it was a missile. For the next year, while the FBI faced a similar dilemma during this case. With only 70% of wreckage recovered, Jim Hall recommended an end to the investigation with a public announcement. The NTSB's theory was that while the plane sat for hours at the JFK gate, its air conditioning equipment, situated directly under the center fuel tank, gradually vaporized forty gallons of fuel. Shortly after take-off, an electrical spark jumping from the high voltage wires to low voltage wires that powered the fuel pumps, ignited the vaporized fuel in the center fuel tank. The wires were the one thing that were never replaced, as the older planes were recertified by the FAA for continued service. This particular 747 airframe was 25 years old with 16,000 flights to its record. Over time, the sheathing on the wire bundles wore thin, and in some places wore completely off. The NTSB's theory was that this deadly confluence of events caused the horrific explosion. Thus far, no evidence of a bomb had been found. But as 30% of the airplane was still missing, I insisted that the FBI investigation continue until as much of the aircraft as possible had been recovered and tested. Our thinking was influenced, in part, by our extensive knowledge of the principal conspirator behind the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, Ramzi Yousef. We knew he had constructed a small shape charge bomb from components, which he individually smuggled through airport security and onto a plane in the Philippines. After reassembling the device in the bathroom, Yousef placed it next to a bulkhead seat on the bulkhead with the timer set to go off on the coast or in a boat on the water — the sound of that explosion reached ground level between 40-63 seconds after it occurred. During this window of time, the plane's four engines, powered by the continued flow of fuel, drove the craft another thousand feet higher before the second and final explosion blew it apart. In fact, what witnesses actually observed was the final seconds of the hulk continuing its upward trajectory amidst burning fuel and debris already blown off the airframe followed by the final explosion. They could not have, under any circumstance, seen a missile hitting the airplane. In his 2014 political memoir, Worthy Fights, Leon Panetta described a conference he had with FBI Director Mueller about Al Qaeda, while serving as President Obama's CIA Director. No AQ cells had been found in the U.S., Mueller explained, but knowledge of the principal conspirator behind the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, Ramzi Yousef. We knew he had constructed a small shape charge bomb from components, which he individually smuggled through airport security and onto a plane in the Philippines. After reassembling the device in the bathroom, Yousef placed it next to a bulkhead seat on the bulkhead with the timer set to go off on the next leg of the journey after he departed the plane. This effort, as we were well aware, was part of a larger plan to bomb 12 aircrafts simultaneously.
Facing down the head of NTSB meant insisting on a meeting with White House officials. On two occasions, Hall and I met with Leon Panetta, then serving as President Clinton’s chief of staff. Hall explained his electrical spark theory as the most likely cause of the explosion, even with only 70% of the aircraft recovered. And as one of the costliest accident investigations ever undertaken by the NTSB, he insisted on ending it, rather than face a further drain on his agency’s already depleted budget. When Panetta turned to me, I urged him to reject Hall’s plan. Publicly announcing an end to the investigation with only 70% of the plane recovered would not only cause worldwide outrage, but would further enflame the suspicions of the French victims’ families that the Clinton Administration was trying to cover something up. Compounding this up turn, I said, was the fact that the FBI would continue its investigation making no final judgments until as much of the plane as could be located was recovered and examined. Panetta saw the political handwriting on the wall. Ignoring Hall and his budget concerns, he simply looked at me and said “Jim, continue doing what you’re doing. “ Over the next five months, scallop trawling was stopped because of budget concerns, he simply looked at me and said “Jim, continue doing what you’re doing. “

The TWA 800 investigation experienced everything from bi- zarre conspiracy theories and baseless claims to outright criminal behavior. Pierre Salinger came up with the most outrageous story. Pierre’s “ready, fire, aim” approach to journalism had gotten him into trouble before. In 1988, he claimed that a bochted DEA operation caused the explosion of Pan Am 103. Now, here he was once again, only this time he had proof of the form of a confidential document purported to be from French intelligence sources. Waving the document before a worldwide audience, Salinger announced that a missile fired from the USSR Normandy, a US Navy frigate, brought down the jumbo jet. As it turned out, the “document” was a hoax that had been making the rounds on the internet for weeks. (A key aspect of our investigation was to familiarize bomb sniffing dogs with the scent of certain chemicals. Working with ex-police officer turned investigative journalist James Sanders, and his wife, Elizabeth, a TWA flight attendent, Stacey stoe samples of seat fabric and investigative documents which Sanders incorporated into his book, The Down- ing of TWA Flight 800. Sanders theory — TWA 800 was destroyed by a Navy missile which the government covered-up, in order to prevent a public panic.

We wasted no time with Stacey. After his arrest, he quickly pled guilty to a misdemeanor theft charge. On December 5, 1997, federal prosecutors also charged the Sanders couple with theft of government property. Their defense attorney, Bruce Maffeo, described the prosecution as “extremely vindictive,” insisting that the couple had a First Amendment right to expose a cover-up. Both were convicted in the spring of 1999 and sentenced to probation.

The TWA 800 investigation exposed everything from bizarre conspiracy theories and baseless claims to outright criminal behavior. Pierre Salinger came up with the most outrageous story.

Facilitating the bombing of TWA 800 during an exercise, while White House officials watched on closed-circuit television. We never found the leader, but someone slipped erroneous information to the press. Don was a friend, I gave it to him straight, acknowledging that we had, in fact, found minute traces of the chemicals but insufficient to cause any explosion. Furthermore, an analysis of that section of the plane produced no evidence of a bomb. I then warned him that publishing such bogus charges would only end in embarrassment for him and the paper. The story, nevertheless, broke the next day, causing further anguish for the victims’ families and major headaches with Congress and the White House. It would take months for the FBI team to study the ship from a public relations standpoint. The RDX and PETN riddle was resolved when a St. Louis, MO airport police officer came forward with the answer. Years earlier, as part of a training exercise on that plane, designed to familiarize bomb sniffing dogs with the scent of certain chemicals, he had placed detonation cord in the overhead compartment directly above Rows 22/23. What he then told us closed the matter. The detonation cord was defective. It had cracks which caused the RDX and PETN to leak out of the storage bin and onto the floor of the plane. Over the ensuing years, the tiles had been replaced. But the two sided tape holding them down remained in place. I gave 157 press conferences over the 15-month life of this case. In every instance, the FBI advised the families of any significant developments before press releases were issued. My public briefing, held in New York City on November 18, 1997, formally ended the pending status of the TWA 800 investigation. Given the magnitude of the tragedy and the fears it provoked, we wanted the victims’ families and the world to know with substantial detail that the FBI team left no stone unturned and in most cases — unturned twice. All 230 victims were recovered and turned over to their families and loved ones for burial along with 39,000 personal items. Ninety-seven percent of the plane was recovered over a 45-square-mile ocean area. (Some pieces were found as far south as Cape May, NJ and as far north as Nantucket Island, MA.) Ninety-six percent was reassembled. More than one million pieces of the aircraft were doubly inspected. We conducted more than 7,000 interviews here and abroad, covering over 3,000 leads and chemically swabbed 3,000 pieces of cargo looking for traces of explosive substances. FBI agents interviewed every worker who touched the aircraft or was on board; there was even a box containing human organs for a scheduled transplant in Paris, which was delivered to the pilot a minute before the plane pushed off. Everything was fully documented. In the end, both the FBI and NTSB, were totally satisfied that everything humanly and scientifically possible had been done. The cause of the TWA 800 disaster was an electrical malfunction — not a bomb or missile. As I close, I want to single out for special appreciation the drivers from the NYPD, Nassau and Suffolk county police departments, the New York State Police and the FBI who then, as always, selflessly risked their lives in the service of others. I end with my heartfelt thanks for the professionalism and tremendous work ethic of all those FBI men and women who assisted in this noble effort. I hope you are as proud of our humanitarianism as I am.

A wise man once said, “Your attitude determines your altitude.” You were ALL flying high!