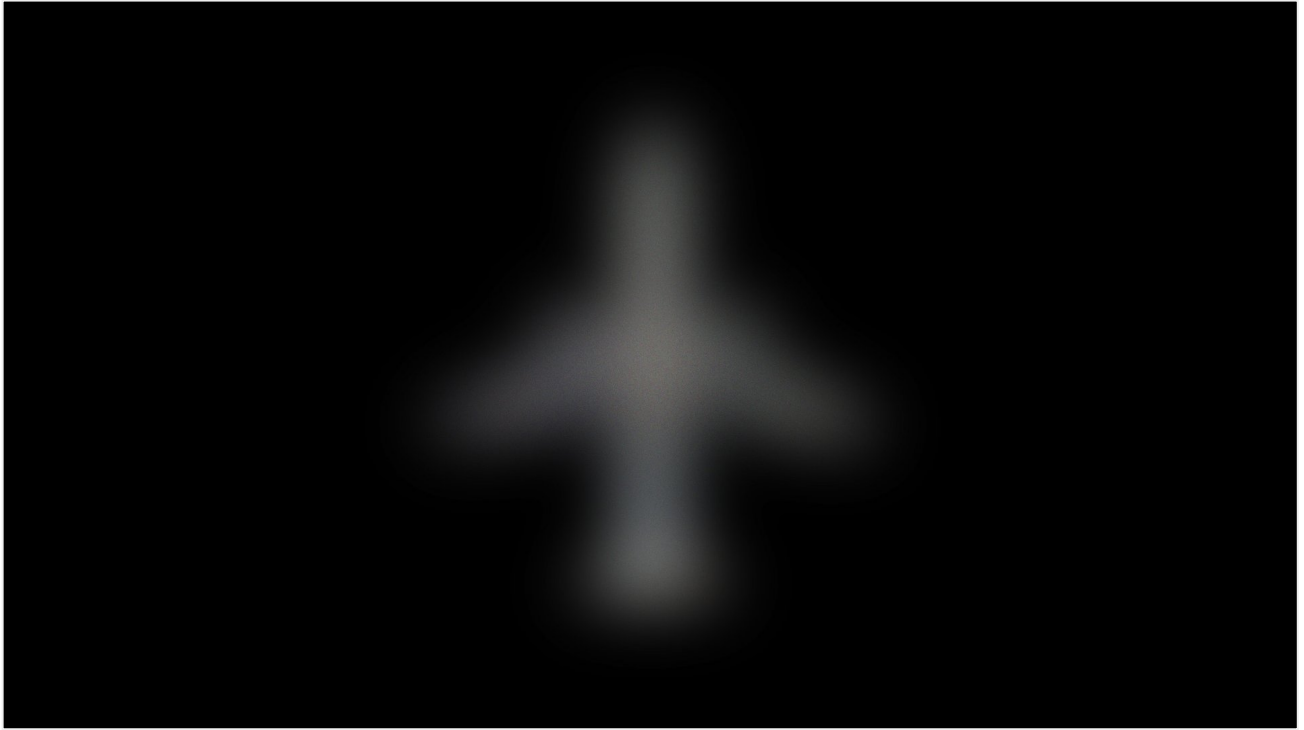


What Really Happened to Malaysia's Missing Airplane

Five years ago, the flight vanished into the Indian Ocean. Officials on land know more about why than they dare to say.



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WILLIAM LANGEWIESCHE

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7. The Truth

FOR NOW THE official investigations have petered out. The Australians have done what they could. The Chinese want to move on and are censoring any news that might inflame the passions of the families. The French are off in France, rehashing the satellite data. The Malaysians just wish the whole subject would go away. I attended an event in the administrative city of Putrajaya last fall, where Grace Nathan and Gibson stood in front of the cameras with the transport minister,

Anthony Loke. The minister formally accepted five new pieces of debris collected over the summer. He was miserable to the point of being angry. He barely spoke, and took no questions from the press. Nathan was seething at the minister's attitude. That night, over dinner, she insisted that the government should not be allowed to walk away so easily. She said, "They didn't follow protocol. They didn't follow procedure. I think it's appalling. More could have been done. As a result of the inaction of the air force—of all of the parties involved in the first hour who didn't follow protocol—we are stuck like this now. Every one of them breached protocol one time, multiple times. Every single person who had some form of responsibility at the time did not do what he was supposed to do. To varying degrees of severity. Maybe in isolation some might not seem so bad, but when you look at it as a whole, every one of them contributed 100 percent to the fact that the airplane has not been found."

And every one of them was a government employee. Nathan had hopes that Ocean Infinity, which had recently found a missing Argentine submarine, would return to the search, again on a no-find, no-fee basis. The company had suggested the possibility of doing so earlier that week. But the government of Malaysia would have to sign the contract. Because of the political culture, Nathan worried that it might not—as so far has proved true.

If the wreckage is ever found, it will lay to rest all the theories that depend on ignoring the satellite data or the fact that the airplane flew an intricate path after its initial turn away from Beijing and then remained aloft for six more hours. No, it did not catch on fire yet stay in the air for all that time. No, it did not become a "ghost flight" able to navigate and switch its systems off and then back on. No, it was not shot down after long consideration by nefarious national powers who lingered on its tail before pulling the trigger. And no, it is not somewhere in the South China Sea, nor is it sitting intact in some camouflaged hangar in Central Asia. The one thing all of these explanations have in common is that they contradict the authentic information investigators do possess.

That aside, finding the wreckage and the two black boxes may accomplish little. The cockpit voice recorder is a self-erasing two-hour loop, and is likely to contain only the sounds of the final alarms going off, unless whoever was at the controls was still alive and in a mood to provide explanations for posterity. The other black box, the flight-data recorder, will provide information about the functioning of the airplane throughout the entire flight, but it will not reveal any relevant system failure, because no such failure can explain what occurred. At best it will answer some relatively unimportant questions, such as when exactly the airplane was depressurized and how long it remained so, or how exactly the satellite box was powered down and then powered back up. The denizens of the internet would be obsessed, but that is hardly an event to look forward to.

The important answers probably don't lie in the ocean but on land, in Malaysia. That should be the focus moving forward. Unless they are as incompetent as the air force and air traffic control, the Malaysian police know more than they have dared to say. The riddle may not be deep. That is the frustration here. The answers may well lie close at hand, but they are more difficult to retrieve than any black box. If Blaine Gibson wants a real adventure, he might spend a year poking around Kuala Lumpur.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WILLIAM LANGEWIESCHE, a former national correspondent for *The Atlantic* and a professional pilot, has written about subjects including aviation, national security, and North Africa.
