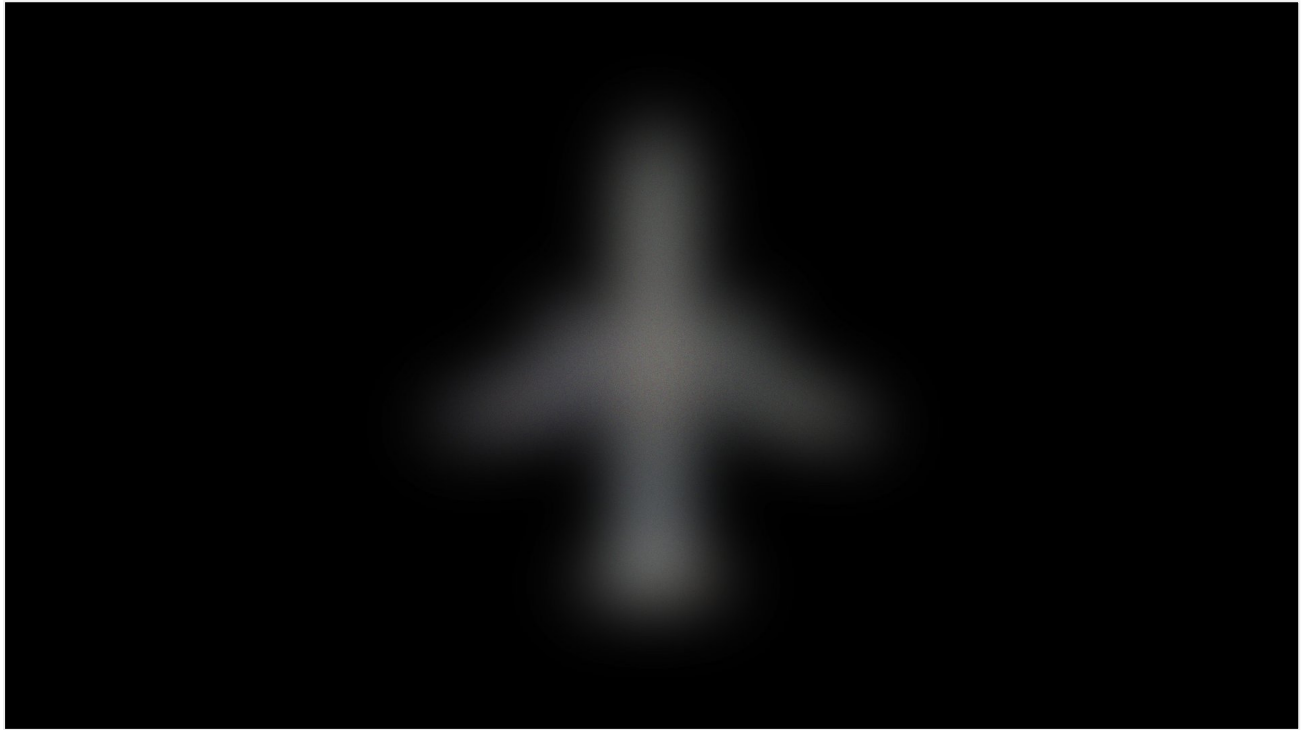


What Really Happened to Malaysia's Missing Airplane

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



Mendelsund & Munday

6. The Captain

THIS LEAVES US with a different sort of event, a hijacking from within where no forced entry is required—by a pilot who runs amok. Reasonable people may resist the idea that a pilot would murder hundreds of innocent passengers as the collateral price of killing himself. The definitive response is that this has happened before. In 1997, a captain working for a Singaporean airline called SilkAir is believed to have disabled the black boxes of a Boeing 737 and to have plunged the airplane at supersonic speeds into a river.* In 1999, EgyptAir Flight 990 was deliberately crashed into the sea by its co-pilot off the coast of Long Island, resulting in the loss of everyone on board. In 2013, just months before MH370 disappeared, the captain of LAM Mozambique Airlines Flight 470 flew his Embraer E190 twin jet from cruising altitude into the ground, killing all 27 passengers and all six crew members. The most recent case is the Germanwings Airbus that was deliberately crashed into the French Alps on March 24, 2015, also causing the loss of everyone on board. Its co-pilot, Andreas Lubitz, had waited for the pilot to use the bathroom and then locked him out. Lubitz had a record of depression and—as investigations later discovered—had made a study of MH370's disappearance, one year earlier.

In the case of MH370, it is difficult to see the co-pilot as the perpetrator. He was young and optimistic, and reportedly planning to get married. He had no history of any sort of trouble, dissent, or doubts. He was not a German signing on to a life in a declining industry of budget airlines, low salaries, and even lower prestige. He was flying a glorious Boeing 777 in a country where the national airline and its pilots are still considered a pretty big deal.

It is the captain, Zaharie, who raises concerns. The first warning is his portrayal in the official reports as someone beyond reproach—a good pilot and placid family man who liked to play with a flight simulator. This is the image promoted by Zaharie’s family, but it is contradicted by multiple indications of trouble that too obviously have been brushed over.

The Malaysian police report held back on divulging what was known about the captain, Zaharie. No one was surprised.

The police discovered aspects of Zaharie’s life that should have caused them to dig more deeply. The formal conclusions they drew were inadequate. The official account, referring to Zaharie as the PIC, or pilot in command, had this to say:

The PIC’s ability to handle stress at work was reported to be good. There was no known history of apathy, anxiety, or irritability. There were no significant changes in his lifestyle, interpersonal conflict, or family stresses ... There were no behavioral signs of social isolation, change of habits or interest ... On studying the PIC’s behavioral pattern on the CCTV [at the airport] on the day of the flight and prior 3 flights, there were no significant behavioral changes observed. On all the CCTV recordings the appearance was similar, i.e. well-groomed and attired. The gait, posture, facial expressions and mannerisms were his normal characteristics.

This was either irrelevant or at odds with what was knowable about Zaharie. The truth, as I discovered after speaking in Kuala Lumpur with people who knew him or knew about him, is that Zaharie was often lonely and sad. His wife had moved out, and was living in the family's second house. By his own admission to friends, he spent a lot of time pacing empty rooms waiting for the days between flights to go by. He was also a romantic. He is known to have established a wistful relationship with a married woman and her three children, one of whom was disabled, and to have obsessed over two young internet models, whom he encountered on social media, and for whom he left Facebook comments that apparently did not elicit responses. Some were shyly sexual. He mentioned in one comment, for example, that one of the girls, who was wearing a robe in a posted photo, looked like she had just emerged from a shower. Zaharie seems to have become somewhat disconnected from his earlier, well-established life. He was in touch with his children, but they were grown and gone. The detachment and solitude that can accompany the use of social media—and Zaharie used social media a lot—probably did not help. There is a strong suspicion among investigators in the aviation and intelligence communities that he was clinically depressed.

If Malaysia were a country where, in official circles, the truth was welcome, then the police portrait of Zaharie as a healthy and happy man would carry some weight. But Malaysia is not such a country, and the official omission of evidence to the contrary only adds to all the other evidence that Zaharie was a troubled man.

Forensic examinations of Zaharie's simulator by the FBI revealed that [he experimented with a flight profile roughly matching that of MH370](#)—a flight north around Indonesia followed by a long run to the south, ending in fuel exhaustion over the Indian Ocean. Malaysian investigators dismissed this flight profile as merely one of several hundred that the simulator had recorded. That is true, as far as it goes, which is not far enough. Victor Iannello, an engineer and entrepreneur in Roanoke, Virginia, who has become another prominent member of the Independent Group and has done extensive analysis of the simulated flight, underscores what the Malaysian investigators ignored. Of all the profiles extracted

from the simulator, the one that matched MH370's path was the only one that Zaharie did not run as a continuous flight—in other words, taking off on the simulator and letting the flight play out, hour after hour, until it reached the destination airport. Instead he advanced the flight manually in multiple stages, repeatedly jumping the flight forward and subtracting the fuel as necessary until it was gone. Iannello believes that Zaharie was responsible for the diversion. Given that there was nothing technical that Zaharie could have learned by rehearsing the act on a gamelike Microsoft consumer product, Iannello suspects that the purpose of the simulator flight may have been to leave a bread-crumb trail to say goodbye. Referring to the flight profile that MH370 would follow, Iannello said of Zaharie, “It’s as if he was simulating a simulation.” Without a note of explanation, Zaharie’s reasoning is impossible to know. But the simulator flight cannot easily be dismissed as a random coincidence.

In Kuala Lumpur, I met with one of Zaharie’s lifelong friends, a fellow 777 captain whose name I have omitted because of possible repercussions for him. He too believed that Zaharie was guilty, a conclusion he had come to reluctantly. He described the mystery as a pyramid that is broad at the base and one man wide at the top, meaning that the inquiry might have begun with many possible explanations but ended up with a single one. He said, “It doesn’t make sense. It’s hard to reconcile with the man I knew. But it’s the necessary conclusion.” I asked about the need Zaharie would have had to somehow deal with his cockpit companion, First Officer Fariq Hamid. He replied, “That’s easy. Zaharie was an examiner. All he had to say was ‘Go check something in the cabin,’ and the guy would have been gone.” I asked about a motive. He had no idea. He said, “Zaharie’s marriage was bad. In the past he slept with some of the flight attendants. And so what? We all do. You’re flying all over the world with these beautiful girls in the back. But his wife knew.” He agreed that this was hardly a reason to go berserk, but thought Zaharie’s emotional state might have been a factor.

Does the absence of all of this from the official report— Zaharie’s travails; the peculiar nature of the flight profile on the simulator—not to mention the technical inadequacies of the report itself, constitute a cover-up? At this point, we cannot say.

We know some of what the investigators knew but chose not to reveal. There is likely more that they discovered and that we do not yet know.

Which brings us back to the demise of MH370. It is easy to imagine Zaharie toward the end, strapped into an ultra-comfortable seat in the cockpit, inhabiting his cocoon in the glow of familiar instruments, knowing that there could be no return from what he had done, and feeling no need to hurry. He would long since have repressurized the airplane and warmed it to the right degree. There was the hum of the living machine, the beautiful abstractions on the flatscreen displays, the carefully considered backlighting of all the switches and circuit breakers. There was the gentle *whoosh* of the air rushing by. The cockpit is the deepest, most protective, most private sort of home. Around 7 a.m., the sun rose over the eastern horizon, to the airplane's left. A few minutes later it lit the ocean far below. Had Zaharie already died in flight? He could at some point have depressurized the airplane again and brought his life to an end. This is disputed and far from certain. Indeed, there is some suspicion, from fuel-exhaustion simulations that investigators have run, that the airplane, if simply left alone, would not have dived quite as radically as the satellite data suggest that it did—a suspicion, in other words, that someone was at the controls at the end, actively helping to crash the airplane. Either way, somewhere along the seventh arc, after the engines failed from lack of fuel, the airplane entered a vicious spiral dive with descent rates that ultimately may have exceeded 15,000 feet a minute. We know from that descent rate, as well as from Blaine Gibson's shattered debris, that the airplane disintegrated into confetti when it hit the water.