

Docket No. SA-520

Exhibit No. 4-A

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

Washington, D.C .

Witness Group Chairman's Factual Report

(5 Pages)

**NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
Office of Aviation Safety
Washington, D.C. 20594**

March 1, 2000

WITNESS GROUP CHAIRMAN'S FACTUAL REPORT

DCA-00-MA-023

A. ACCIDENT

Location: Pacific Ocean, Approximately 3 miles north of Anacapa Island,
California
Date: January 31, 2000
Time: About 1621 hours, Pacific Standard Time
Aircraft: McDonnell-Douglas MD-83, N963AS

B. WITNESS GROUP

The following group members participated in the investigation:

Chairman: Wayne Pollack
National Transportation Safety Board
Southwest Regional Office, Gardena, CA

Member: Lloyd Crumrine
Federal Aviation Administration
Van Nuys, CA

Member: Tom Stichman
Airline Pilots Association
Seattle, WA

Member: John Steinnes
Alaska Airlines
Los Angeles, CA

Member: Sharon Macaulay
Association of Flight Attendants
Seattle, Washington

Member: Dave Nesbitt and Linda Esparza
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Oxnard, CA

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C. SUMMARY

On January 31, 2000, at about 1621 Pst, Alaska Airlines flight 261, a Boeing MD-83, N963AS, crashed into the Pacific Ocean approximately 2.69 miles north of Anacapa Island, California. The flight, from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico to Seattle, Washington, with an intermediate stop in San Francisco, California, was operating under 14 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 121. All 83 passengers and 5 crewmembers were fatally injured and the aircraft was destroyed. Visual meteorological conditions prevailed at the time of the accident.

The Witness Group convened between February 1 and 4, 2000, at the Safety Board's command post which was established at the Port Hueneme Naval Construction Battalion Center, Port Hueneme, California. Interviews were principally conducted during the weeklong period which followed the accident.

The interviews were limited to ground-based witnesses who reported observing and/or hearing what they believed was likely the accident aircraft. (See the Safety Board's Operations Group Chairman's Factual Report for information regarding airborne witness statements.)

The Witness Group identified a total of four persons who either observed and/or heard the accident aircraft. Of these, two persons were classified as both auditory and visual witnesses. One of these witnesses reported observing the aircraft impact the ocean. The third and fourth persons were each classified as being either a visual or an auditory witness.

In addition, limited interviews were conducted with seven persons who indicated that they may have seen the accident aircraft. However, upon questioning they were found to have no relevant information. Also, limited interviews were conducted with two fishermen who were identified as having been about 1 mile from the crash site. These persons reported hearing the impact sound, and they were the first to arrive at the crash site.

One person was interviewed who reported having (unknowingly) photographed the accident airplane in the vicinity of the accident site. The person's location was documented along with pertinent details of the photograph, which was subsequently provided to the Safety Board's Investigator-in-Charge.

D. DETAILS OF INVESTIGATION

1. VISUAL AND AUDITORY WITNESSES, STATEMENT SUMMARIES

One combined visual and auditory witness (referred to as witness A), reported initially observing the aircraft flying overhead. The witness reported hearing a popping sound, that was followed by a series of popping sounds. Thereafter, the airplane flew for nearly 1 minute until entering an erratically performed right (approximate) 270 degree turn. Then the airplane, while twisting and gyrating erratically, descended in a near vertical (estimated 80 degree) nose down attitude until impacting the water. The witness reported observing both engines attached to the airframe. No other aircraft or objects were observed near the accident aircraft. No flame, fire, or smoke was observed. No aircraft parts were observed separating from the aircraft.

The second combined visual and auditory witness (referred to as witness B) reported hearing a series of rapidly accelerating and decelerating engine sounds. The witness indicated that upon first seeing the airplane his impression was that it was a "radio controlled" airplane because of the manner in which it was maneuvering. The airplane appeared to quickly descend in a nose low attitude while rotating.

2. VISUAL ONLY WITNESS, STATEMENT SUMMARY

The visual only witness (referred to as witness C) reported the airplane looked like a toy airplane. It appeared to fall in a near vertical nose down attitude. Its wings rolled back and forth several times while it descended. No other aircraft were observed in the area. No smoke, fire or flash was noted.

3. AUDITORY ONLY WITNESS, STATEMENT SUMMARY

The auditory only witness (referred to as witness D) reported hearing the sound of a sharp crack, followed by a tapering echo wave. The sound occurred first in two repeated instances separated by approximately one to two seconds, followed by a third, louder instance about eight to ten seconds later.

4. FISHERMEN, STATEMENT SUMMARY

Two fishermen in a boat, about 1 mile from the crash site, reported hearing a thundering, intense, splash sound. They turned around and observed an "incredible" spray of water between 100 and 200 feet into the air. They proceeded to the site and arrived between five and seven minutes thereafter. They smelled fuel, and they observed baggage and airplane wreckage.

5. PHOTOGRAPHER STATEMENT

A person was interviewed who took a photograph in the direction where the accident aircraft may have been descending. The photographer indicated that she was

not aware she had photographed the accident airplane until after her film was printed.

6. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Seven additional persons also reported observing an airplane flying near the accident vicinity or over Ventura County. These "witnesses" were also interviewed. The interviews were terminated when either of the following 2 events occurred: (1) the witnesses provided information which indicated that their physical location was so distant from the accident site that the size of the airplane which they observed would not have been consistent with the size of an MD-83; or (2) the time of their observation was inconsistent with the time of the accident.

The Witness Group team also made inquiries whether persons who may have been located on the "Gale" offshore channel island oil platform observed the accident airplane. No one was identified.

Finally, the Witness Group contacted the NAS Point Mugu Air Traffic Facility regarding the existence of other "transport" size jet aircraft flying in the area near the time of the accident. No pertinent aircraft were identified.

7. PROXIMITY OF WITNESSES TO ACCIDENT SITE

The accident aircraft's last recorded position on radar was approximately 34 degrees, 04 minutes, 35 seconds north latitude, by 119 degrees, 20 minutes, 35.40 seconds west longitude.

Witness A indicated that he had been located during his observations about N34 degrees 01.0 minutes, by W119 degrees 21.5 minutes.

Witness B's location was ascertained by reference to a road map. The witness's location corresponded to a position about N34 degrees 09.1 minutes, by W119 degrees 13.0 minutes.

Witness C's location was determined by the Witness Group traveling to the place where she reportedly was located during her observations. The global positioning satellite (GPS) coordinates for this location were determined to be approximately N34 degrees 18.04 minutes, by W119 degrees 12.66 minutes.


Witness D reported his location using a GPS receiver, approximately N34 degrees 27.7 minutes, by W119 degrees 42.3 minutes.

On 2/2/2000, the Witness Group accompanied the photographer to the approximate location that she indicated she was standing when she photographed what likely was the accident aircraft. The photographer indicated that the photograph was taken while looking in a southwesterly direction toward the Pacific Ocean. Her GPS location was

determined to be approximately N34 degrees 08.81 minutes, by W119 degrees 12.98 minutes.

The bearings and distances from the above listed persons to the aircraft's last recorded radar position are as follows:

<u>REPORTING PERSON</u>	<u>MAGNETIC BEARING</u>	<u>NAUTICAL MILES</u>	<u>WITNESS TYPE</u> <u>AUDITORY / VISUAL</u>	
A	000	3.10	A	V
B	217	8.09	A	V
C	191	15.49		V
D	129	29.72	A	
Photographer	219 degrees	7.92	Not Applicable	



Wayne Pollack
Air Safety Investigator
Chairman, Witness Group