

DOCKET NO. SA-516

APPENDIX P

**NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, DC**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT
NYANG MSGT. DENNIS RICHARDSON
JANUARY 11, 1997
(23 pages)**

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BEFORE THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20594

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IN THE MATTER OF TWA FLIGHT :
800; INTERVIEW OF: :
DENNIS RICHARDSON. :
- - - - - X

TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

The above entitled matter came on for interview pursuant to notice before NORM WIEMEYER, NTSB Official, at the New York Air National Facilities in Westhampton Beach, New York, on January 11, 1997.

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APPEARANCES:

NORM WIEMEYER

NTSB Official

TERRY STACEY

Trans World Airlines Representative

LOU BURNS

Air Line Pilots Association

SCOTT METCALF

Federal Bureau of Investigation

AL CLEMENS

Federal Aviation Administration

I N D E X

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WITNESS:

DENNIS RICHARDSON/Flight Engineer, H-60 helicopter, New York National Guard.

(Tape 2, Side B, first interview.)

(No exhibits were presented or accepted into evidence at or as a result of this interview.)

1 P R O C E E D I N G S

2 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. We're back on the
3 record. We're on Tape 2B.

4 And would you state your full name, for the
5 record, and please spell your last name.

6 MR. RICHARDSON: My Dennis Richardson,
7 R-I-C-H-A-R-D-S-O-N.

8 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. And what -- do you have
9 a local address that you can give us, or the Guard
10 address here -- whichever you prefer.

11 MR. RICHARDSON: I live at 32 Lake Street,
12 Amityville, New York, 11701.

13 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Dennis, what was your
14 involvement in -- what were you doing at the time that
15 the TWA accident took place?

16 MR. RICHARDSON: I'm a flight engineer on the
17 H-60 helicopter. And that night we were doing local
18 training. And we were making our second approach into
19 Kabresky [phonetic sp.] here. Capt. Baur was flying
20 from the left seat, and I was positioned on the left
21 side of the helicopter in the back, to scan outside
22 while he was -- had his head inside the cockpit doing
23 the instrument approach.

24 And as we terminated the approach, Capt. Baur
25 said, "Dennis, is that pyro?" And as I looked up the

1 sky exploded. And the fire went across the sky like
2 napalm. And then it just came down like a curtain.

3 And --

4 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Would you describe that
5 fire in as much detail as you possibly can: color,
6 smoke trails. Anything you can recall about it.

7 MR. RICHARDSON: It was red and black -- red
8 with, like, black smoke in it. And it was, like I
9 said, just like napalm. Like when you see an air -- a
10 fighter drop napalm; it erupted and just went across
11 the sky and then came down at the same time in one big
12 curtain.

13 And the -- the three of us that were in the
14 airplane at the time, Maj. Meyer, Capt. Baur and myself
15 thought -- immediately thought that each local bug-
16 smashers or banner-towers that are up and down the
17 beach all summer had finally collided, you know. And
18 we immediately headed out to the fire -- you know, do
19 that -- start a search.

20 MR. WIEMEYER: Was there any smoke trail
21 following it?

22 MR. RICHARDSON: When we got out there we
23 could actually see a black smoke trail in the sky.
24 And, like, a -- like -- like something with the gilt
25 in. You could still see it in the sky.

1 'Cause when we first got to the fire we flew
2 to the upwind side and we were going to start our
3 search, but there was still stuff falling in the water.
4 And we could see bits and pieces in the sky.

5 So, we had to bank around. Capt. Baur banked
6 it to the right and we made another circle that laid it
7 a few seconds and then came back in -- 'cause there was
8 still stuff falling.

9 But you could still see the black smoke in
10 the sky in, like, a corkscrew effect.

11 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. What did you observe
12 when you got in the area on the surface?

13 MR. RICHARDSON: A lot of fire, heavy black
14 smoke -- and that was being blown east. So, we started
15 our search from the upwind side of that and we just
16 found a lot of debris in the water. And it was further
17 out than we thought a small plane would be -- you know,
18 two small planes colliding. It was about eight --
19 eight miles off the shore.

20 And then we started finding bigger pieces.
21 One window panel we spotted with two squares in it.
22 And then we found our first body -- a young fellow,
23 dark hair, white T-shirt and blue jeans, face down.

24 And then we started finding more stuff and we
25 all realized this is a big plane. This is not two

1 little airplanes. And I guess shortly after that they
2 told us from Kabresky that Kennedy lost a 747.

3 MR. WIEMEYER: Well, in -- is there any
4 specific -- of the larger pieces were any specific
5 items that you could visually identify as to what part
6 of the airplane they came from?

7 MR. RICHARDSON: Like I say, the first thing
8 was the window panels -- one window panel. A lot of
9 small debris. And then the -- the C-130 -- we had
10 gotten there around three minutes after -- we -- after
11 it hit the water.

12 And our 130 had been out I think 20 or 30
13 miles doing an out-leg when they saw it and came in.
14 So, they were on-scene maybe a minute or so behind us.
15 But on our way in three-quarters of a mile to our west
16 they dropped a marker beacon -- a marker flare on what
17 they thought was a life raft.

18 So we went over there. And we found a
19 partially inflated of the -- the door chute. And the
20 end of that was folded over, so at the last six to
21 eight feet it looked like a life raft. And when we
22 started our search there we found more bodies -- maybe
23 20 or 30, 40 bodies.

24 And I found -- I saw that piece of duct work
25 you keep seeing on the TV all the time? On the new

1 flashes? It looked like the end of a pod almost, with
2 a square end on it bobbing up and down. We saw that
3 and we saw a couple of the big pieces that have been on
4 the news.

5 Everything else was mostly small. Just
6 unrecognizable garbage and, I don't know, bits and
7 pieces.

8 MR. WIEMEYER: The bodies that you observed
9 in the water, were they relatively intact?

10 MR. RICHARDSON: Most of them were. We went
11 down to about 30, 40 feet and blew them around with the
12 rotor wash, just to see if any response came out of
13 them -- 'cause we didn't have our para-rescue guys on
14 board yet.

15 MR. WIEMEYER: Yeah.

16 MR. RICHARDSON: This was in, like, the first
17 15 minutes of us being on the scene.

18 And nothing -- I saw one woman with a long
19 dress on with no head. And I think what was a torso
20 with one arm -- I'm not sure. Or it could've been a
21 suitcase with something falling out of it.

22 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.

23 MR. RICHARDSON: But we were just trying to,
24 you know, find a -- any kind of survivors.

25 MR. WIEMEYER: Were most of the bodies that

1 you observed -- and I -- I don't mean to be morbid and
2 seem to get off on this. But we -- this is good
3 information here.

4 Were they clothed? Or had their clothes been
5 torn off?

6 MR. RICHARDSON: I believe most of them I saw
7 had their clothes still on.

8 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.

9 MR. RICHARDSON: I was marking them with red
10 chem links -- those light sticks we carry.

11 MR. WIEMEYER: Oh, yeah.

12 MR. RICHARDSON: Because I knew we'd be
13 coming back out with our goggles. We had our goggles
14 with us, and I knew when we picked up our para-rescue
15 guys with their scuba gear we'd be out there again.
16 And it would make it easier on the goggles to find
17 those red lights in the water.

18 So, we -- I threw out maybe 30 or 40 of
19 those; everything I had. And -- well, I threw out a
20 lot of them then. But we came back in and brought the
21 PJs out it was dark. And we were -- we -- it took us
22 about 30 minutes to reacquire the bodies -- the big
23 part of the bodies that were three-quarters of a mile
24 away from us the first time?

25 And they had drifted I think on a heading of

1 340. About four miles from where we originally found
2 them. So, it took us about -- almost a half an hour to
3 pick them up -- pick up those lights again and the main
4 plume of debris and bodies again.

5 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.

6 MR. RICHARDSON: And Capt. Baur had given me
7 the GPS re -- coordinates of the fire as soon as we got
8 there. And a little while when we went over to the
9 main plume of bodies another GPS to the Coast Guard.
10 But they wouldn't talk to us, so we were having a hard
11 time telling them where everything was.

12 And they kept going to the fire later on.
13 Nobody would come over to where we were to recover the
14 bodies.

15 MR. WIEMEYER: Where the bodies were there
16 wasn't any fire, is that correct?

17 MR. RICHARDSON: No.

18 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.

19 MR. RICHARDSON: Not only -- the -- the fire
20 was -- there was only one or two bodies by the fire.
21 And, like, 10 minutes later three-quarters of a mile
22 away where the 130 dropped its flare was most of the
23 bodies -- 30, 40, 50 of them.

24 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.

25 MR. RICHARDSON: And then, like I said, when

1 we came back out they had drifted four miles on a
2 heading of 340 away --

3 MR. WIEMEYER: Did you --

4 MR. RICHARDSON: -- from the --

5 MR. WIEMEYER: -- get any feel for how many
6 of those bodies -- when you came back out I'm talking
7 about -- how many of them had submerged and sunk?

8 MR. RICHARDSON: No, sir.

9 MR. WIEMEYER: Or had they --

10 MR. RICHARDSON: It was dark by then, and
11 under the goggles it's a little different. You can
12 still see, but everything's that green color.

13 MR. WIEMEYER: Yeah.

14 MR. RICHARDSON: And it's -- you know, you
15 can -- it'd be -- you can distinguish what they are.
16 But, like, you couldn't tell -- you know, checkered
17 shirts, or whatever.

18 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Do you recall seeing
19 any boats in the area? Initially. Especially early
20 on?

21 MR. RICHARDSON: When we were trying to raise
22 the Coast Guard there was a big fishing boat with the
23 outriggers and everything. And he eventually went
24 right to the mass of bodies and stopped and started
25 pulling them in.

1 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.

2 MR. RICHARDSON: It was a commercial boat.

3 MR. WIEMEYER: Were -- you weren't able to
4 talk to him on --

5 MR. RICHARDSON: No, sir.

6 MR. WIEMEYER: Oh.

7 MR. RICHARDSON: We have no marine radios on
8 the air -- on the aircraft. But we tried to -- we
9 called Moriches Coast Guard station and told them to --
10 to get the Coast Guard cutter Adack [phonetic sp.] to
11 come up to our frequency -- which the big boat has the
12 air -- you know, the --

13 MR. WIEMEYER: Yeah.

14 MR. RICHARDSON: -- aircraft radios. They
15 could've talked to us.

16 And we came them the coordinates of
17 everything. But all night long we saw the boats
18 heading for the fire. Everything that came out of the
19 inlets went right to fire. Nobody was coming out to
20 where we were.

21 And then they wanted us out of the area
22 'cause we didn't have any lights on. And we were no
23 where near their helicopters. By the time they got
24 there it was, like, 40 minutes later.

25 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. And so they -- the

1 Coast Guard brought some helicopters out?

2 MR. RICHARDSON: Finally, yeah. But --

3 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.

4 MR. RICHARDSON: -- I'd say it was a half an
5 hour to 40 minutes later.

6 You know, we're like trying to coordinate
7 this where, hey, everything is here and there. And we
8 did a search -- a box search with the goggles, which is
9 like standing on a football field. You could see the
10 whole football field with the goggles on -- one guy --
11 and tell you that there's nothing in it.

12 These three helicopters were up and down with
13 their spotlights -- they didn't bring goggles with
14 them. So, they were re-searching everything we already
15 searched and none of them would come out to where we
16 were.

17 And then, Baur went out further. By that
18 time Maj. Noyes was flying -- as pilot from the right
19 seat, but he -- he let Baur continue doing what he was
20 doing. And we went out about six or eight more miles
21 and started a search back in to establish the distance
22 they had drifted, and to see if there's anything
23 further out.

24 MR. WIEMEYER: Right.

25 MR. RICHARDSON: Then we gave them the

1 coordinates again. But, you know, nobody was paying
2 any attention to us.

3 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. I don't have any
4 further questions.

5 Lou?

6 MR. BURNS: Yeah. Hi, I'm Lou Burns, with
7 the Air Line Pilots Association.

8 When Capt. Baur said, "Dennis, is that pyro?"
9 and you looked up, did you see --

10 MR. RICHARDSON: No.

11 MR. BURNS: -- anything? Just --

12 MR. RICHARDSON: No.

13 MR. BURNS: -- looked up just in time to see
14 the explosion, is that --

15 MR. RICHARDSON: That's about it.

16 MR. BURNS: Okay.

17 MR. RICHARDSON: I'm not sure if I saw a red
18 line or not. And I'm just -- you know, I -- I just saw
19 it blow up. I didn't see any streaks, or nothing like
20 that.

21 'Cause when he said pyro I was -- you know,
22 we -- we weren't briefed that the 130 was dropping any
23 flares. You know, 'cause everything is briefed before
24 hand here, you know. And you just can't throw flares.
25 You have to tell the Coast Guard and everybody else

1 that you're going to do it.

2 I said, what the hell? And then when it
3 went -- I was expecting it to be a flare coming down on
4 a parachute, you know, like we normally seen it. It
5 was just, boom. It was a big -- all kinds of fire.

6 MR. BURNS: Thanks.

7 MR. RICHARDSON: And you couldn't see
8 anything in it. You couldn't see tail, wings --
9 nothing like that.

10 MR. BURNS: Yeah.

11 MR. RICHARDSON: It was just -- you know.

12 MR. BURNS: Thank you. That's all. That's
13 all I have.

14 MR. CLEMENS: Al Clemens, with the FAA. I
15 have no questions. Thank you.

16 MR. METCALF: Hi, my name's Scott Metcalf.
17 I'm an agent with the FBI.

18 When you guys got to the scene was there any
19 additional debris falling?

20 MR. RICHARDSON: Yes, there was still stuff
21 falling out of the sky.

22 MR. METCALF: Can you describe some of it to
23 us? Like, what kind of debris did you see?

24 MR. RICHARDSON: I think they're just
25 drifting down; like, it would be lightweight stuff.

1 Paper, maybe or plastics and stuff like that. Embers
2 that was burning -- embers still falling.

3 There was a couple of splashes in the water
4 from heavy stuff. Chris thought he saw some big
5 splashes.

6 But I was busy in the back trying to get
7 the -- the hoist ready to -- to start making the
8 pickups thinking we had a -- a small plane where there
9 would be -- be survivors. And -- I did see the stuff
10 in the sky initially. The --

11 MR. METCALF: Right.

12 MR. RICHARDSON: -- embers and what not.

13 MR. METCALF: Right. Anyone else in the
14 cockpit -- in the aircraft with you call out they saw
15 anything other thing fall from the sky, other than what
16 you saw?

17 MR. RICHARDSON: No, sir. I don't believe
18 so. It was just the three of us at first.

19 MR. METCALF: Okay.

20 MR. RICHARDSON: But -- no, I didn't see any
21 arcs, no smoke trails or -- no big pieces falling down
22 or nothing.

23 MR. METCALF: Okay. Now, I'm talking when
24 you -- you're on-site.

25 MR. RICHARDSON: Yeah. No, just the --

1 MR. METCALF: The debris coming down.

2 MR. RICHARDSON: Just lightweight stuff and a
3 lot of embers and -- and the smoke trail. A big black
4 smoke trail going over the sky.

5 MR. METCALF: Okay. Thank you very much. No
6 more questions.

7 MR. STACEY: Dennis, Terry Stacey, with TWA.
8 What runway were you shooting the ILS approach to, do
9 you remember?

10 MR. RICHARDSON: No, just the one out here
11 which is -- is it E-4?

12 MR. STACEY: And you were -- were you, in
13 fact, heading?

14 MR. RICHARDSON: We were heading this way.
15 If you looked out the left you'd see it. The left side
16 of the aircraft.

17 I don't maybe on 2-4 this way and -- I think
18 that's the runway that runs parallel to the building
19 here.

20 MR. STACEY: Okay.

21 MR. RICHARDSON: It was -- go to.

22 MR. STACEY: How -- did y'all immediately
23 pursue -- start proceeding toward the fireball?

24 MR. RICHARDSON: Yes, sir. Immediate left
25 turn and clear it with the tower. They cleared us

1 right out 'cause they saw it -- boom.

2 We just headed it right out there to start --
3 you know, you were in rescue and you just -- we went
4 right into the mode without thinking. We just did it.

5 MR. STACEY: Well, what's the speed of
6 helicopters?

7 MR. RICHARDSON: They say 190. But we're
8 low -- we're so loaded down she'll do, probably, 160.
9 And I think that's what we're doing 'cause we got there
10 within a few minutes, and it had to be about five miles
11 from where we were on the base -- five to -- to eight
12 miles out there on the --

13 MR. STACEY: And as you were going out there
14 you're continuing to watch this fireball descend and --

15 MR. RICHARDSON: Yeah, just -- by that time I
16 guess it was in the water. I was -- like I say, I was
17 busy --

18 MR. STACEY: Okay.

19 MR. RICHARDSON: -- getting the hoist ready
20 to penetrate it.

21 And when we got there within -- it was all in
22 the water by that time. I know it was a pretty good
23 sized fire. And it hadn't started drifting all the way
24 out yet.

25 MR. STACEY: Okay. What kind of radar

1 equipment do you have on the helicopter?

2 MR. RICHARDSON: Well, we have an all-weather
3 radar. And -- and the Doppler. We have EPS.

4 MR. STACEY: Do you have any kind of system
5 that would alert you to an attack if you were
6 under the --

7 MR. RICHARDSON: We have a threat-receiver,
8 yes, sir.

9 MR. STACEY: A threat-receiver?

10 MR. RICHARDSON: Yeah.

11 MR. STACEY: What does that pick up?

12 MR. RICHARDSON: It would pick up a launch.
13 You know, if a rocket comes at us. And get -- and
14 would -- it displays a code as to what type it might
15 be.

16 MR. STACEY: Does it pick it up from radar?
17 Or infrared?

18 MR. RICHARDSON: I'm -- I'm not sure.

19 MR. STACEY: You don't know?

20 MR. RICHARDSON: We don't use it --

21 MR. STACEY: Say again?

22 MR. RICHARDSON: I haven't been over the dead
23 with -- with the group, so I haven't seen it in action.
24 Like in the old Vietnam days where you're, like, the
25 seat of your pants and an M-16 machine gun on the

1 helicopter and that was it. You know.

2 MR. STACEY: Was this threat device
3 activated?

4 MR. RICHARDSON: I don't know.

5 MR. STACEY: Still don't -- I'll ask is.

6 How long would you say from the time you
7 immediately headed for the fireball was it before you
8 felt you could -- you'd be able to distinguish
9 relatively large objects?

10 MR. RICHARDSON: Well, like I say, I couldn't
11 distinguish a large -- I just -- I just thought that
12 two -- two of the idiots that tow banners and fly too
13 low in places where they're not supposed to be had
14 finally collided out here.

15 As long as I've been flying here we've been
16 at our assigned altitudes and some fool'll come blowing
17 right through our formation and then -- or land here
18 thinking it's the other airport. You know, so we've
19 got a lot of them out there. And part of our briefing
20 is, watch out for the little airplanes.

21 The -- I didn't think that this -- it was a
22 747 or -- or any large airplane that blew up. Or -- we
23 just naturally thought it was a head-on between two
24 small ones.

25 And I didn't see any objects -- you know,

1 it -- itself. All I saw was that fire.

2 MR. STACEY: Okay. And you work with -- you
3 and the crew you were with, Meyer and Baur -- y'all
4 work together frequently?

5 MR. RICHARDSON: Quite a bit, yes, sir.

6 MR. STACEY: But you're normally assigned to
7 each other?

8 MR. RICHARDSON: No. There's no hard crews
9 here.

10 MR. STACEY: Okay. Then.

11 MR. RICHARDSON: You know, it's just like you
12 -- you're flying with the people for years. So, you
13 fly with everybody just pretty -- you fly here.

14 Oh, I did think of one other question --
15 Terry Stacey, again.

16 When y'all finally terminated the mission,
17 did you write down a debrief?

18 MR. RICHARDSON: Yes, sir. Maj. Stevey
19 [phonetic sp.] is with the FAA. And he immediately
20 took a statement down. And the GPS coordinates for
21 both sites that we saw are on that.

22 And I believe the FBI talked to us, too.
23 Which was -- Bob Aldrich [phonetic sp.].

24 MR. STACEY: He talked to you -- Bob --

25 MR. RICHARDSON: That night --

1 MR. STACEY: -- Aldrich talked --

2 MR. RICHARDSON: -- he was here --

3 MR. STACEY: -- to you that night?

4 MR. RICHARDSON: Yes.

5 MR. STACEY: And subsequent to that did
6 anyone interview you?

7 MR. RICHARDSON: No. I saw Mr. Hall
8 [phonetic sp.] out here a couple of days later. I was
9 outside having a smoke and your air -- your aircraft
10 was here with some of the other fellas.

11 And I was talking to one of them outside and
12 telling him what -- where I was when it happened. And
13 we had a good conversation.

14 And he didn't know we were the first ones on
15 the scene. And when Mr. Hall came out he handed me his
16 business card and said, if nobody calls you in two days
17 you call me. Which I did. And one of the local fellas
18 here called me and -- and told me that there wouldn't
19 be an interview until the FBI okayed it, or something
20 like that. But that later on the -- the NTSB would be
21 talking to me.

22 And that's the last we talk -- talked to the
23 NTSB.

24 MR. STACEY: What kind of questions did the
25 FBI ask you?

1 MR. RICHARDSON: Basically the same thing you
2 guys did: what we saw; you know, did we see anything
3 else; any other boats; any other aircraft. Things like
4 that.

5 MR. STACEY: Okay. Thanks.

6 MR. WIEMEYER: Dennis, I don't have any
7 further questions and if anybody else doesn't, we'll
8 let you go back to work.

9 MR. RICHARDSON: Okay. Thank you.

10 MR. WIEMEYER: Thank you very much for your
11 help.

12 (Chorus of thank yous.)

13 MR. RICHARDSON: No problem.

14 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded [no
15 time noted].)

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