

DOCKET NO. SA-516

APPENDIX V

**NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, DC**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT
NYANG TSGT. MICHAEL SPINDLER
JANUARY 11, 1997
(24 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: :
MR. MICHAEL J. SPINDLER. :
- - - - - 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.

1 APPEARANCES:

2

3 NORM WIEMEYER

4 NTSB Official

5

6 TERRY STACEY

7 Trans World Airlines Representative

8

9 LOU BURNS

10 Air Line Pilots Association

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12 SCOTT METCALF

13 Federal Bureau of Investigation

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15 AL CLEMENS

16 Federal Aviation Administration

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I N D E X

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WITNESS:

MICHAEL J. SPINDLER/Flight Engineer, ^{N. J. S. C. C-182.} ~~Coast Guard~~

(Tape 2, Side A; second interview on side.)

(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 are on the record.
3 And would you please state your full name and spell
4 your last name for us, please.

5 MR. SPINDLER: Michael J. Spindler,
6 S-P-I-N-D-L-E-R.

7 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. My name is Norm
8 Wiemeyer. I'm with the National Transportation Safety
9 Board and I'll be starting the questioning.

10 Would you give us an address; either the
11 address here or your home address -- whichever you feel
12 most comfortable with.

13 MR. SPINDLER: Okay. My home address would
14 be 310 -- letter C -- 310-C River Road, in Calverton,
15 New York, 11933.

16 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. And what was your
17 involvement with the events surrounding TWA Flight
18 800's accident?

19 MR. SPINDLER: Okay. I was the flight
20 engineer on the C-130 aircraft, about to perform a
21 training mission.

22 MR. WIEMEYER: What was that training mission
23 going to be?

24 MR. SPINDLER: I believe search patterns and
25 training dropping flares, or search patterns.

1 MR. WIEMEYER: Where were you located in the
2 airplane?

3 MR. SPINDLER: I'm low -- I sit in between
4 the pilot and the co-pilot, facing forward.

5 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Would you describe what
6 you observed. And the events that took place.

7 MR. SPINDLER: Okay. To the best of my
8 knowledge, we were flying out in the -- whatever we
9 call our Jaws [phonetic sp.] training area, which is
10 southeast of Shinnecock -- out in the Atlantic Ocean
11 there.

12 And I looked out the center screen window,
13 which is right in front of me, and saw what looked to
14 be -- like my first impression was that it was some
15 kind of meteor. Or some type of space -- you know,
16 something coming from space; like a star -- or falling
17 star, or something like that.

18 It was just a big fire coming down from the
19 sky.

20 MR. WIEMEYER: Did you see anything entering
21 that area before you saw that?

22 MR. SPINDLER: No, I did not.

23 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Would you go on then,
24 and just describe what took place from that point on?

25 MR. SPINDLER: Okay. Like I said, we saw

1 this -- I -- I saw this fireball coming down from
2 the -- you know, the sky. And I just looked out there
3 and it was so impressive that I -- I says, what the
4 heck is that? You know, what is that out there?

5 You know, 'cause a lot of times you're flying
6 along; you will see, you know, the flash of light. You
7 think it's an airplane, or whatever. But this was just
8 so magnificent -- or so impressive that I was, what is
9 that out there?

10 So, we turned and we looked at it. I -- I
11 remember for a couple seconds we were just, like,
12 looking at it. Everyone's looking at it -- the pilot,
13 co-pilot and myself. The navigator -- not -- really
14 not knowing what this is; this object of fire coming
15 down from the sky.

16 And then we -- I remember our initial thought
17 was that it was very close to us. That was something
18 that amazed me afterwards. We thought it was, like, a
19 mile away. As it turned out it was -- I believe it was
20 11 miles away. It looked -- it was so big that we
21 just -- the way it looked I thought it was a lot
22 closer.

23 But at any rate, I believe the navigator
24 hacked his position where we initially saw it -- or
25 whatever -- hacked his spot. And we started to fly in

1 the general direction, thinking that we're going to be
2 there in 20 seconds -- or whatever -- you know, it was
3 very close.

4 We kept flying and it was -- it took us a
5 while to get to where this thing actually came down.
6 And then it -- it actually hit the water and, you know,
7 black smoke came up, and what not.

8 And we started to enter the area -- now I
9 remember, yes. We started to enter the area and a
10 helicopter had simultaneously started to come out. And
11 I believe it was Fred Meyer who said, you know, stand
12 clear for a bit. There's debris falling from the sky.
13 And we didn't -- we were, like, what is this? Is
14 this -- did -- we had no idea what this might've been.
15 Everybody's speculating at that time.

16 So, we orbited I would guess, maybe a quarter
17 of a mile or half a mile away -- or maybe, plus or
18 minus; I'm not positive how far away -- a distance away
19 to remain clear of the debris falling, for a short
20 period of time. I don't know -- I would guess three
21 minutes, or it could've been more or less -- I don't
22 know -- but for a short period of time.

23 At that time the helicopter, like I said, had
24 mentioned that there was debris falling. And they had,
25 I believe, started to enter the area and they were in

1 the immediate area of where this object, as we knew it
2 at the time, hit the water.

3 Then I believe they had described some type
4 of a life raft, which actually did not turn out to be a
5 life raft. It was -- I believe it was one of the
6 slides -- or -- I believe that. I'm not positive on
7 that. I think they said a life raft and it was a
8 slide, or vice versa.

9 So, then we came in. We were cleared into
10 the area by them, I believe. It was a little -- and
11 there was a lot going on there. There's people
12 talking; we're talking to the helicopter and we're
13 talking to the base, and to here.

14 So, we were cleared in and we circled the
15 area. And at that point somewhat determined, after a
16 few orbits, that this was probably a plane crash -- the
17 plane that had fell into the ocean in one way or
18 another -- whether we don't know how it happened, but
19 determined that it was an airplane.

20 At that point we remained on station and
21 coordinated, you know, the other air -- I think the
22 helicopter came back with a bet -- came back here. And
23 then we stayed out there. And the Coast Guard came
24 out. And then the whole thing just evolved into a
25 recovery -- or attempted rescue of whoever might've

1 been out there.

2 MR. WIEMEYER: Were you listening to the
3 radios also, in addition to the NCS [phonetic sp.]?

4 MR. SPINDLER: Yes.

5 MR. WIEMEYER: Do you recall any
6 conversations taking place with a Navy P-3? Or do you
7 remember calling them?

8 MR. SPINDLER: Yes.

9 MR. WIEMEYER: Or anything like that?

10 MR. SPINDLER: Yes. Yes, there was a -- a
11 P-3. I don't -- I don't remember anything happening
12 before the accident with a P-3. I don't remember that.

13 But I do remember that after a P-3 came up on
14 a frequency. And did say, could they be of
15 assistance -- or something like that. They -- I -- I
16 know -- we -- we kind of -- I kind of blocked them out
17 of my mind 'cause I was worried about -- we had police
18 helicopters coming out. And I -- I know heard a P-3.
19 What they got, they said I -- I can't answer that.

20 MR. WIEMEYER: Well, in the -- this, what
21 turned out to be the fireball, could you give us as
22 detailed a description as you could of the color, the
23 speed of descent, anything come off of it. And expand
24 on that area, if you would, please.

25 MR. SPINDLER: Okay. The way I -- I would

1 describe it was, in my opinion -- and I -- I -- I hear
2 other people that -- what they saw, and I don't know.

3 There's no way that I could say that this was
4 an airplane when it was falling. So, I would not look
5 at this object that I saw and say, "Wow, that's an
6 airplane. There's half a wing hanging out."

7 It was just a ball of fire like you would see
8 in -- in a -- it was like a gigantic softball on fire
9 coming down from the sky. Like -- like something you'd
10 see on a science fiction -- a meteor, or something like
11 that.

12 That's what I saw. Just a big orange glow
13 flying down from the sky. At which -- at which part --
14 I don't -- I don't even think I followed her all the
15 way to the ground. I think it got lost in the haze
16 there a little bit as we came down level with the
17 horizon; then all of sudden we saw the smoke.

18 As I said, it -- it was -- it was big. So
19 big that I thought we were very close to it. And then
20 when the navigator hacked his -- hacked his -- I don't
21 know if he was using GPS, or whatever he was using. I
22 think he had a GPS on.

23 He said, 11 miles -- or some -- a lot greater
24 mileage than I thought it was. I thought the thing was
25 right -- right near us. So, it must -- it was -- it

1 must've been very big, you know, coming down.

2 And then hit the water, and then black smoke.

3 That was -- that was what I saw. I mean, there was

4 no --

5 MR. WIEMEYER: What was the color of the
6 fireball?

7 MR. SPINDLER: Orange. It was an orange --

8 MR. WIEMEYER: And was it -- was it trailing
9 any smoke as it descended?

10 MR. SPINDLER: Yeah, it did have, like, a --
11 a stream of --

12 MR. WIEMEYER: What color --

13 MR. SPINDLER: -- something --

14 MR. WIEMEYER: -- was that smoke? Do you
15 recall?

16 MR. SPINDLER: I would just be guessing.
17 I -- I think it was a gray, or something.

18 MR. WIEMEYER: Was there -- was it a single
19 fireball? Or was there more than one?

20 MR. SPINDLER: What I saw was a single one.
21 There may have been others off to the side. But I was
22 so fixated on this one. So, what I saw was one.

23 MR. WIEMEYER: In orbiting the wreckage scene
24 -- or the accident scene, other than these rafts or
25 slides -- whatever they really were -- did you see any

1 other debris that you could recognize and describe?

2 MR. SPINDLER: Hmm. Yeah. I think we -- you
3 know, we saw -- it was very minimal wreckage. It
4 wasn't large pieces. Very small pieces or medium-size
5 pieces -- maybe the size of a sheet of plywood. 4 x 8,
6 or somewhere around there.

7 Light pieces of fuselage. Just bits. Just
8 scattered, like -- I don't want to infer anything --
9 but that -- that it was, like, blown up. But I'm -- I
10 don't mean that as it was blown up. I'm just saying
11 that it was pieces.

12 MR. WIEMEYER: Do you recall -- early on
13 after you started orbiting the area any boats arriving
14 on the scene? And could you give me a description of
15 those, if you saw any.

16 MR. SPINDLER: Hmm. Yes, there were -- there
17 were boats that came. And I would have to -- to the
18 best of my recollection they were like the normal
19 fishing trawlers that we might see out there -- I
20 think. I mean, there were boats that came.

21 Did they come immediately? I don't -- I
22 don't know think so. I -- I don't know. I don't know.
23 I know there were boats out there. As the time evolved
24 boats came. Whether -- whether the object came down,
25 five minutes later boats were there, I can't answer

1 that. And with the time frame involved.

2 But there were boats that did appear.
3 Fishing boats and then sport fishing boat -- you know,
4 commercial fishing boats. And then, maybe some smaller
5 sport fishing boats.

6 MR. WIEMEYER: You don't have a feel of from
7 the time frame after you arrived when the other boats
8 started to arrive?

9 MR. SPINDLER: No. I'd have to say -- I
10 couldn't honestly answer that.

11 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.

12 MR. SPINDLER: I'd say --

13 MR. WIEMEYER: Let --

14 MR. SPINDLER: I'd like to say a number, but
15 it would just be a guess. Or -- or --

16 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. That's all the
17 questions I have for now.

18 MR. BURNS: Hi, Mike. Lou Burns, I'm a TWA
19 747 captain, representing the Air Line Pilots
20 Association.

21 On the C-130 are you operating with headsets
22 and boom mikes? Is that --

23 MR. SPINDLER: Yes, sir.

24 MR. BURNS: -- normally -- and -- so, your
25 communications would normally be through the

1 interphone, with other members of the crew?

2 MR. SPINDLER: Yes, sir.

3 MR. BURNS: And then you're also monitoring,
4 as the flight engineer, the outside radio's aircraft?

5 MR. SPINDLER: --

6 MR. BURNS: Do you select which radios you
7 monitor? Or is this automatically coming into your
8 headset?

9 MR. SPINDLER: I select them.

10 MR. BURNS: Now, would you, like, normally
11 have air traffic control on one of them for, say, base
12 ops and --

13 MR. SPINDLER: Exactly.

14 MR. BURNS: -- tactical radio, and stuff?

15 MR. SPINDLER: Yes.

16 MR. BURNS: And when -- and you had these all
17 going at that time? Or what --

18 MR. SPINDLER: More than likely. I hate to
19 answer things that I don't know absolutely.

20 MR. BURNS: Yeah.

21 MR. SPINDLER: But, more than likely, I had
22 the UHF up for here and the Victor [phonetic sp.] up
23 for air traffic.

24 MR. BURNS: Thanks. That's all I had.

25 MR. CLEMENS: Al Clemens, from the FAA. Just

1 a couple of questions.

2 You mentioned that you were sitting between
3 the pilot and the co-pilot --

4 MR. SPINDLER: Yes, sir.

5 MR. CLEMENS: -- looking out.

6 At that particular time were you busy with
7 other duties, were you busy with other duties? Or were
8 you looking for traffic and looking outside?

9 MR. SPINDLER: I run the checklists on the
10 aircraft for any search -- or any -- any operation that
11 we have I run the checklists for any procedure that
12 we'll do.

13 I believe I was just into that, or a --
14 involved in that. Getting ready to do it or -- or
15 doing it.

16 MR. CLEMENS: So, your field of vision was
17 outside the aircraft? Or --

18 MR. SPINDLER: No, I probably looked up. Or
19 act -- my -- I -- probably my head was -- was down.
20 That I -- I can remember that.

21 I remember that -- that -- I can remember
22 myself seeing it. I can remember that pretty
23 distinctly; that initial sight of the object.

24 And I remember I -- I was -- was doing
25 something else. And the pilots are doing something

1 else also, 'cause we're getting ready to do a
2 maneuver -- a procedure.

3 MR. CLEMENS: Am I correct in interpreting,
4 then, that you were drawn to the object, but didn't
5 look in that area before the object had illuminated?
6 Or was -- it wasn't something where you were looking up
7 there and would've been seeing several events that were
8 occurring out there? That you, more or less, were
9 directed at it -- your attention at it after it had
10 happened?

11 MR. SPINDLER: Yes. I -- I would say that's
12 accurate.

13 MR. CLEMENS: Okay. And what altitude would
14 you say it was when you were looking toward it?

15 MR. SPINDLER: When I looked toward it? Hmm.
16 I don't know what the ceilings were. But it was --
17 it's very hard to tell. Like I -- like I say, my
18 estimation probably would not be accurate because I
19 assumed that it was a mile away and it was 11 miles
20 away.

21 MR. CLEMENS: Right.

22 MR. SPINDLER: I could say it's at 2,000 feet
23 and it was at 20,000 feet.

24 MR. CLEMENS: Right.

25 MR. SPINDLER: You know, just one of those

1 large objects that just -- it takes you -- it's -- it's
2 not -- it doesn't -- if they told me it was that big,
3 then I would be able to -- you know, it's -- you get
4 disorientated with something that big.

5 I -- I don't know. It -- I don't know.
6 8,000 feet? I don't -- I have no -- I don't know. I
7 mean, it wasn't at 500 feet and it wasn't at 2,000
8 feet.

9 MR. CLEMENS: Okay. Do you have a --

10 MR. SPINDLER: But it might've been at 5 and
11 it might've been at 10. It might've been at 12. I
12 don't know, it was up from the horizon --

13 MR. CLEMENS: Okay.

14 MR. SPINDLER: -- coming down.

15 MR. CLEMENS: And it came straight down?

16 MR. SPINDLER: At -- it did not come
17 vertically down, as in "straight down". It seemed like
18 it came down on somewhat of an angle, from our
19 position.

20 MR. CLEMENS: I have no further questions.
21 Thanks.

22 MR. SPINDLER: Okay.

23 MR. CLEMENS: Mike, I am Scott Metcalf. I'm
24 an agent with the FBI in New York.

25 When you guys arrived on the scene, any other

1 aircraft in the area other than your helicopter?

2 MR. SPINDLER: Not that we were aware of, and
3 that I was aware of.

4 MR. METCALF: Did you talk to any other
5 aircraft out there?

6 MR. SPINDLER: No. Not that I'm aware of.

7 MR. METCALF: Okay. That's all the questions
8 I have. Thank you.

9 MR. STACEY: Mike, Terry Stacey, with TWA.
10 When -- were you circling the debris field?
11 Or just orbiting at -- on one corner of it? Or upwind,
12 or something? Or were you, in fact, orbiting the
13 entire --

14 MR. SPINDLER: We --

15 MR. STACEY: -- region?

16 MR. SPINDLER: On our first arrival at the --
17 the vicinity of where it came down, we did -- I believe
18 we were making a full 360 as I -- I believe -- if I
19 remember right -- trying to determine what this was. I
20 mean, at -- you have to understand, we didn't know what
21 this was.

22 So, you know, we -- and the helicopter
23 saying, stay out of the area, that's it's a -- falling
24 debris.

25 So, you know, I believe we were doing 360s

1 around it.

2 MR. STACEY: That's all I have. Thanks.

3 MR. WIEMEYER: This is Norm Wiemeyer. I have
4 a couple of follow-up questions.

5 You say that the object was descending at an
6 angle. Could you give us a description of the angle
7 that it was travelling, relative to you?

8 MR. SPINDLER: What the angle was?

9 MR. WIEMEYER: No. Where it was from you,
10 and where the -- was it coming towards you? Away --

11 MR. SPINDLER: Oh, no. Okay.

12 MR. WIEMEYER: -- from you?

13 MR. SPINDLER: It was --

14 MR. WIEMEYER: 90 degrees?

15 MR. SPINDLER: We were facing in a southerly
16 direction -- a somewhat southerly. And it was coming
17 down, I guess, on a angle to the northwest, I would
18 say.

19 Coming down this -- you know, I'm facing
20 south right now. It was coming down from my left to my
21 right on an angle.

22 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. What direction would
23 it -- would that have been travelling at?

24 MR. SPINDLER: It would've been travelling
25 northwest.

1 MR. WIEMEYER: Travelling northwest.

2 MR. SPINDLER: I mean, that's the -- why I
3 looked at -- actually, we were maybe a little -- a
4 little bit more west of south. A little southwest.
5 Maybe we were looking right -- 'cause we had to turn
6 and go towards it.

7 Turn and go towards it, right. So, it would
8 be coming down southwest -- if I remember right.

9 MR. WIEMEYER: Was this object's angle of
10 descent fairly constant? Or did it steepen? Shallow
11 out?

12 MR. SPINDLER: No, it -- it came down on the
13 angle on a string, I would say.

14 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.

15 MR. SPINDLER: Somewhat.

16 MR. WIEMEYER: Did you see any impact with
17 the water?

18 MR. SPINDLER: No. I mean, I followed it to
19 the water. But did I see it impact the water, and
20 water splashing, and -- and something like that? No.
21 It was -- it was a -- it was a little -- maybe a bit
22 hazy off.

23 And we couldn't see it, you know, smash into
24 the water. It wasn't like that.

25 MR. WIEMEYER: At the time of impact how far

1 away do you feel that you were at that time?

2 MR. SPINDLER: I thought we were about -- I
3 thought we were about two miles, or three miles away.
4 Just -- you know, as it was coming down.

5 At the time of impact -- and then we realized
6 -- as we were flying towards it it was, wow, that thing
7 was -- that thing's far away. We -- you know, keep on
8 moving towards it.

9 And -- and then, you know, it hit, and then
10 that smoke came up. And it was black smoke -- blackish
11 gray smoke. And then --

12 MR. WIEMEYER: In looking up at the object
13 when you first noticed it, do you recall seeing any
14 other objects, of any kind, that were in that field of
15 vision?

16 (Pause)

17 MR. SPINDLER: No. I mean, I -- I can't say
18 that I did. I mean, I was just so fixated on that
19 flame.

20 Like I say, there very well could've been
21 something off to the side, but I did not see that. I
22 was just very fixated on that nucleus; that object --
23 that one object.

24 MR. WIEMEYER: I'll be a little bit more
25 specific.

1 If -- was the visibility good enough if had
2 there been -- are you familiar with the DC-9 aircraft?

3 MR. SPINDLER: Yes.

4 MR. WIEMEYER: Had there been a DC-9 in the
5 area that that fireball took place -- possibly above it
6 -- do you think you would've been able to see it?

7 MR. SPINDLER: Yeah. I would say.

8 MR. WIEMEYER: Do you think that your
9 attention may have been distracted by the fireball to
10 the point where you wouldn't have noticed it?

11 MR. SPINDLER: Absolutely.

12 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.

13 MR. SPINDLER: Without a doubt. Like I say,
14 I was fixated on that. It was something I'd never seen
15 before; something quite traumatic. Unbelievable.

16 MR. WIEMEYER: When did you come to the
17 realization that it was a -- you personally, now, come
18 to the realization that it was a large aircraft?

19 MR. SPINDLER: Well, I didn't know how -- how
20 large it was; whether it was a 737 or a 47. But I --
21 it was a aircraft when I saw the slide. I -- I saw the
22 raft and the -- and it looked like a slide to me. Or
23 whatever -- that's -- when I saw those floatations --
24 whatever they were -- they were big. Pretty big. And
25 that's a big airplane.

1 And I think that we saw -- I think I remember
2 seeing so much debris. It was very splattered debris.
3 It wasn't like -- it wasn't like there was a seat
4 floating.

5 You know, there might've been a -- a
6 headset -- a headrest to a seat floating, or -- do you
7 get what I'm saying?

8 And then, when we saw some of that stuff then
9 we -- then I -- then I knew. I went, wow, it's an
10 airplane. That stuff -- 'cause I remember one of the
11 helicopter guys coming over the radio saying, yeah,
12 that -- I heard a -- he said that he heard a twin, or
13 something. I think I remember.

14 What's his name? Oh --

15 MR. WIEMEYER: Baur?

16 MR. SPINDLER: Chris Baur?

17 MR. WIEMEYER: Baur? Yeah.

18 MR. SPINDLER: I think he said something
19 about a twin. I don't know. He -- something -- he
20 said something about a twin aircraft. And I'm thinking
21 in my mind, that's no twin aircraft. I mean, there's
22 no way.

23 MR. WIEMEYER: Well, I don't have any other
24 questions.

25 Does anybody else have any follow-ups at all?

1 (No response.)

2 MR. WIEMEYER: Thanks. Sure appreciate it.
3 You -- you've shed some light on some things. I
4 appreciate it very much. It's been helpful.

5 MR. SPINDLER: Thank you.

6 MR. WIEMEYER: Thanks a lot.

7 (Chorus of thank yous.)

8 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded at
9 [no time noted].)

10 [End of Tape 2, Side A. Rest of Side A is
11 blank. Interviews resume on Side B.]

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