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Malaysia Flight 17 'black box' will not answer why



Bart Jansen, USA TODAY

Recorders from Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 carry detailed information about the moments before it was shot down over Ukraine, but experts say the information is unlikely to explain why it went down.

A plane's cockpit-voice recorder and flight-data recorder are crucial to any investigation because they offer the pilots' unique perspective before a crash. Thousands of streams of information describe how the Boeing 777-200 was operating before it lost power and fell apart in the sky.

But the recorders, nicknamed "black boxes," would have stopped working soon as the Malaysia flight lost power from a missile strike. The plane's hull and other parts could offer better clues about what sort of missile damaged the plane and where.

Even so, the recorders could document key points about how and where the plane was flying Thursday, along with whether the pilots received any warnings.

Malaysia negotiated with pro-Russia militants in eastern Ukraine to obtain the recorders, which they got Monday.

Ukraine asked the Netherlands, home to 193 of the 298 people killed on the plane, to lead the investigation into the crash.

"The Dutch investigators do a very thorough job, and I think they have a lot of integrity," said Steve Marks, an aviation lawyer at Podhurst Orseck in Miami who worked with them on an EI Al cargo crash near Amsterdam in 1992 and a Surinam Airways crash on a flight from Amsterdam in Suriname in 1989.

The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board announced Tuesday that a senior investigator familiar with recorders will help download the voice and flight data.

During a recent briefing, NTSB investigators said they would spend several days transcribing key portions of the flight from the voice recorder. Data will be compared and could serve as the foundation for animation of the end of the flight.



Al Diehl, a former NTSB investigator, said the data recorder will provide the definitive evidence about how high the plane was flying and whether it was heading along an approved path.

Ukrainian authorities ordered commercial planes to fly at least 32,000 feet high, after an AN-26 military transport was shot down at 21,000 feet just three days before the Malaysia flight. The Malaysia plane was reportedly flying at 33,000 feet.

"The one real issue that the recorders could reveal is whether the aircraft was below 32,000 feet," Diehl said. "If so, the Russian separatists are going to contend it was in the war zone."

Justin Green, an aviation lawyer at Kreindler & Kreindler, said the recorders won't be as important as finding who authorized the missile shot and who pulled the trigger. But he said the voice recorder could prove whether the pilots were warned before being shot down.

The recorder "will answer the question whether the rebels shot without even asking any questions of the Malaysia air Flight 17 crew," Green said.

Marks was pessimistic about a radio warning.

"I believe our government would have picked up any of these types of communications," Marks said. "That type of information would have already been released, if there were that type of warning."

The lack of warning became an issue when the U.S. Navy cruiser Vincennes mistakenly shot down an Iran Air flight with 290 people aboard in 1988. The Navy issued radio warnings to the Airbus A300, which was mistaken for an F-14 fighter, but on a channel the Iranian plane didn't receive.

"At least in that case, they were trying to warn that plane," Diehl said.