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FINAL SECONDS

Tape bares odd noise just before jet's crash

By ADAM MILLER, KIRSTEN DANIS and TRACY CONNOR

The cockpit voice recorder from American Airlines Flight 587 has yielded crucial clues about the doomed jet's final moments — including a mysterious rattling sound soon after takeoff and the pilots' scramble to stop the plane from plunging to earth seconds later.

"This investigation is really coming to a head," National Transportation Safety Board chief Marion Blakey said last night as the feds detailed their chilling findings from a second examination of the Airbus A300's so-called "black box."

The first hint of possible trouble on the 30-minute recording comes 1 minute and 47 seconds after the Dominican Republic-bound aircraft revved its engines and took off from Kennedy Airport on Monday morning.

That's when an unidentified "airframe rattling noise" is heard on the tape, NTSB board member George Black Jr. said.

At the 1-minute, 54-second mark, pilot Edward States made a comment about "wake encounter," or turbulence from another plane — a phenomenon that's been blamed for structural damage in the past.



ILL-FATED FLIER: Co-pilot Sten Molin, in a cockpit in 1993, was at the controls of the American Airlines jet when it crashed Monday. AP

A larger Japan Airlines Boeing 747 was in front of the American jet, but it's unknown if it played a role or if the pilots misinterpreted the shaking for wake turbulence.

A second "airframe rattling" was heard at 2 minutes, 1 second. Four seconds *after that, co-pilot* Sten Molin — who was at the controls — called for "maximum power."

The last words heard on the tape come at 2 minutes, 7 seconds, when the pilots made "several comments suggesting loss of control," Black said.

The recording ends 2 minutes and 24 seconds after takeoff, apparently at 9:17 a.m. — the moment the plane plunged into a Queens neighborhood, killing all 260 on board and leaving five people on the ground presumed dead.

NTSB officials stressed they haven't reached any conclusions from the recording about what caused the plane's tail fin and rudder to separate and one engine tear off before it went into a steep death spiral — although they said there was no sign of "internal" engine failure.

They did dismiss reports that a bird was sucked into one engine, causing some kind of mid-air explosion.

Officials will conduct a more thorough listening session on the recording *today, along with an analysis* of the flight-data recorder — which was found yesterday.

The developments came as two neighborhoods at opposite ends of the city picked up the pieces, emotional and physical, left by the catastrophe.

In Washington Heights, nearly everyone in the close-knit Dominican community seemed to know someone touched by the tragedy.

In the Rockaways, residents awoke to the smoldering ruins of 11 houses damaged or destroyed by *falling debris and fire.*

Officials said 262 bodies and 180 body parts were recovered.

Hoping to speed DNA identification, relatives of the dead brought bags of personal effects to the family-assistance center at the Javits Center.

The family of Fernando Perez, a 38-year-old *health-care worker from* Brooklyn, brought in the towel he used the morning of the flight.

"I'm not leaving until I get all the information I need so that we can bury Fernando," said his sister-*in-law, Rafaela.*

Mayor Giuliani said the city would hold a joint memorial service soon for those lost from both neighborhoods.

With additional reporting by Brad Hunter, Maria Alvarez, Douglas Wight and Frankie Edozien

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