NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

NEWSDAY, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2001



Newsday Photo / Jiro Ose

Investigators inspect an engine that fell near a home on Beach 126th Street.

No Answers Evident Yet

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Part of the tail was found in Jamaica Bay, a half-mile from where most of the rest of the plane plowed into the ground. The left engine was found largely intact 700 feet from the crash site; the right engine landed 800 feet away.

The pattern of the wreckage of American Flight 587 has stymied investigators, and new evidence from the cockpit voice recorder of airframe rattling noises only deepens the mystery. In addition, NTSB officials virtually ruled out two possible scenarios yesterday, saying it was unlikely that the engines ingested birds or that they exploded and damaged the rest of the plane.

The recovery of the vertical stabilizer, part of the tail, earlier in the flight path of the Airbus A300 jet raises the question of whether or not the tail might somehow have broken off first, creating an aerodynamically unstable plane with forces that sheared off the engines. And experts say it's still too early to rule out some kind of sabotage.

"That tail coming off is very puzzling. There are only a handful of ways it can come off," said one aviation expert who did not want to be identified. He mentioned some sort of structural problem with the tail, something coming off the plane and hitting the tail, or a bomb.

"I don't think we can rule out terrorism," the expert said, even though NTSB officials continued to stress yesterday that the evidence so far points to an accident.

Other experts said the position of the plane's rudder, which turns the jetliner, may hold some clues to what caused the crash. NTSB investigators learned yesterday that the device that moves the rudder was set at 10 degrees to the left. An American Airlines pilot said last night that setting was "really unusual," suggesting either a rudder malfunction, because the movement was more than double what was normally needed to turn, or the plane's pilots were trying to counter a roll to the right.

Paul Czysz, an aviation specialist at Parks College of St. Louis University, believes the latter scenario is more plausible. "What 10 degrees tells you is that something went very wrong with the right engine. That engine was out," he said.

Greg Feith, a former senior investigator at the NTSB, said the flight data recorder recovered from the wreckage will tell investigators whether the sharp turn was intentional or the result of a malfunction.

At a briefing yesterday, NTSB officials said the airframe rattling

See INVESTIGATION on A38

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