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Closer Look At Tail of Jet

NTSB to send parts to outside lab

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Experts examining the tail of the Airbus A300 that was American Flight 587 have not yet found any evidence that the structure had been weakened before last week's crash, and the National Transportation Safety Board plans to send parts of the tail to outside laboratories to find out why it snapped off in flight, sending the plane into an uncontrollable dive, federal investigators said yesterday.

The NTSB planned to leave the site today and meet in Washington early this week to decide where to send the tail for further analysis. While the safety board's laboratories in Washington have a scanning electron microscope to look for signs of weakness in aluminum and other metal parts, the lab isn't set up to examine the carbon composite material in the tail of the Airbus A300.

"This whole composite business is a bit new to us," one investigator said. "We have the ranking experts in the world here, but they're not ready to come up with anything yet."

The tail is the focus of the investigation into the crash in Belle Harbor, which killed 265 people, because investigators believe it was the first part on the aircraft to come off as the cockpit crew was recovering from an encounter with wake turbulence from a Boeing 747 it was following in flight. Flight 587 also lost both its engines, but investigators do not believe engine problems are to blame.

The composite material, used for decades in military aircraft and race cars, is extremely strong and light. Airbus officials say the 27-foot tail (a vertical stabilizer and rudder) was designed to withstand 50 times more stress than it would be expected to bear in its lifetime and should have been able to withstand even the forces of pilots turning the rudder hard.

In Washington, NTSB staffers will continue to work on synchronizing the cockpit voice recorder and the flight data recorder, the plane's two black boxes, so they will know exactly what was happening with the plane's systems when the airframe shaking noises that were heard on the tape occurred. Spectral sound analysis of those shaking sounds and other sounds on the cockpit voice recorder will also continue. Investigators will input the flight data recorder information to an Airbus flight simulator in Toulouse, France, where the plane was manufactured, to learn more.

The failure of the tail of the 13-year-old plane was of enough concern that the Federal Aviation Administration on Friday ordered airlines to inspect the tails of all 91 Airbus A300-A600 models in the U.S. fleet, as well as the tails of all 46 Airbus A310s, a slightly smaller but similar plane. The visual inspections must be done in 15 days.

The NTSB also plans to move the wreckage from a hangar at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn to a warehouse in New Jersey, investigators said.

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