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Inside the Ring

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CIA on Flight 800

The CIA recently declassified a once-secret report on eyewitnesses to the crash of TWA Flight 800 off Long Island, N.Y., on July 17, 1996. CIA analyst Randolph M. Tauss, who won an intelligence medal for his work on the crash, concluded that numerous eyewitnesses who saw a streak of light heading toward the Boeing 747 jetliner were wrong if they believed it was surface-to-air missile going toward the jet.

Based on sound-travel analysis and a spy satellite sensor, Mr. Tauss stated: "Any eyewitness who thinks he may have seen a missile shoot down Flight 800 needs to have seen something that occurred more than 42 seconds before the aircraft broke into 'two distinct fireballs' and more than 49 seconds before the plane hit the water," he wrote. "CIA analysts are not aware of any eyewitness who did."

Evidence that the streak was burning fuel from the aircraft, which is believed to have exploded shortly after takeoff from a spark inside a center-wing fuel tank, is "extensive and compelling," Mr. Tauss stated.

"Nevertheless, a few people, driven by what they perceive to be an overwhelming number of eyewitnesses who 'saw' a missile attack the plane, persist in thinking otherwise," he said. "Confident that so many eyewitnesses cannot be 'wrong,' they have concluded that the government, for whatever reason, is covering up the true cause of the crash."

Some U.S. officials blame former FBI New York Director James Kallstrom for propagating the terrorist theory. Mr. Kallstrom took control of the crash investigation from the National Transportation Safety Board for months by insisting the crash was a terrorist attack. He gave up the theory after the agency's deputy director for intelligence wrote him a note in March 1997 stating that "the total absence of physical evidence of a missile attack leads CIA analysts to conclude that no such attack occurred."

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