

Missing Flight Syndrome: The Loss of AirAsia Flight 8501

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Region: [Asia](#)

As European flights lay freezing in airports across the capitals, with various de-icing procedures being implemented, the news about missing AirAsia flight QZ8501 began to make its own way through the various channels. That sent a different sort of chill through discussions about air safety. The flight in question, with its 162 passengers, lost contact with air traffic control after take off on Saturday over the Java Sea heading to Singapore from Surabaya.

It has been a tragic year for air travel, and its promoters. The body count relative to other accidents or incidents in travel is always negligible relative to the actual loss of life in the air, but scale tends to be distorted in the context of the macabre and the spectacular. Adding to that the zest of conspiracy, sweetened by cloudy narratives and apologies behind the demise of a flight, and one is already inhabiting a very different world of reasoning.

The conspicuous, heavily reported loss of the AirAsia airliner craft adds to this troubling ledger, which already weighs heavily with the loss of Malaysian Airlines flights MH370 and MH17, the former a continuing vanishing act whose remains have yet to be found, the latter the victim of a missile over the troubled areas of Ukraine.

The loss has all the hallmarks of commentary that is running out of constructive breath, of speculation that is hugging, rather desperately, some reason as to why 162 people would perish without coherent, let alone obvious reason. The search for some rational explanation seems to be a permanently flawed quest, much of it undertaken in the twenty-four hour news cycle of chatter.

The talking heads, centred around aviation specialists and safety analysts, bubble with speculation even as the search continues. A host of theories always tend to make their noisy march in search of the vain truth, masquerading under the title of “known facts” however disputed those facts may be. The AirAsia airline was likely at the “bottom of the sea”, claims the latest confetti line from cable television networks and self-designated official channels.

Then there is that of the troubled pilot, an almost caricature-like beast and product of undergraduate psychology who manifests power at the cockpit and afflicts an act of lethal madness. The account from AirAsia is somewhat milder: the pilot in question had requested a “deviation” in response to bad weather, wishing to take the aircraft to a higher altitude.

Experience and skills are also thrown into the analysis, if one can call it that. Again, it is the pilot who fronts the criticism, and brings a rather pointed accusation of prevalent incompetence in the Southeast Asian aviation industry. This is notwithstanding the remarks

by AirAsia that the pilot was more than experienced, an observation that is casually dismissed by some critics.

Joshua Kurlantzick of *Bloomberg Business* (Dec 29) theorises that the pummelling to the region's aviation industry was occasioned by its approach to the embrace of "low-cost carriers, leading to a proliferation of flights throughout Southeast Asia, stretching air traffic controllers, and possibly allowing some airlines to expand too rapidly."

The conclusion to be drawn by Kurlantzick here is that safety regulations have been weakened even as the demand for pilots and personnel has increased. While he concedes that AirAsia's safety record till now have actually been near faultless, he takes note of specific pilot behaviour, a view that doesn't shy away from a good lashing of innuendo.

Experience was what tickled his interest regarding the AirAsia pilot, who had 6,000 hours of flight experience on the Airbus he was flying. But did he have experience in flying at 34,000 feet or higher? Then there were three pilots from the Indonesian carrier Lion Air – an unconnected matter, you would think – that the author proceeds to link by association. They were arrested for the use of methamphetamine use, something not entirely unusual for those working long shifts.

Not that this suggests a good deal of imperiousness on the part of commentators who see superior, experienced staff in the airline companies of Europe and the Middle East. After all, pilots of other nationalities are not infrequent in the new budget airlines, and the missing AirAsia plane did have a French co-pilot, Rémi-Emmanuel Plesel. What the *Wall Street Journal* (Dec 29) poses is a problem rather than a flaw in the argument. Diversity does not defeat the argument on inexperience and skill, but instead suggests "a big management challenge". Innuendo again takes flight as truth puts its boots on.

Naturally, this necessitates the hunt for the holy grail – the black box, which has become something of a mystical solution. (Little is said about the fact that a black box is only ever as useful as what is said on it, and unlocking its code is not necessarily a solution to anything.)

Then come the head numbing statistics about dramatic changes of course, dizzying fall in altitude, and such other disruptions, including faulty wiring. "Let's break this down for you..." poses the resident CNN weatherman, who merely proceeds to lard a table already heavy with presumptions. This is where plausible officialdom retreats before salaried speculators on the fate of doomed passengers.

Turbulence is usually treated as a red herring, a childhood presumption that a plane will be knocked out of the sky by a bolt from Thor. Weather alone is not deemed sufficient to direct the plane to an imminent doom, though in such cases, the lines between mythological surmising and supposed scientific speculation seem on common ground.

This is evident in Alex Davies' account in *Wired* (Dec 29), which notes that, for all the strengths standard aircraft have against weather challenges, the old terror of the "thunderstorm" is still to be taken seriously. "About 60 people in the US are injured by turbulence annually, according to the FAA, and three people died between 1980 and 2008."

The disappearance of yet another airline has also provided ample, excruciating aviation speak, including that of such boisterous types as Richard Quest of CNN fame, whose

observations act like a prophylactic against cognition.

The accounting types have also found themselves busy this year. Flight companies risk going bankrupt, with a run being made on their stocks. There are plummeting shares and profits. The insurance companies move into less than enthusiastic gear.

What such events seem to reveal is that, even as the state of technology in human life emphasises increased connectedness and identification, spectacular incidents of disappearance can still happen. The contemporary age does nothing to upset the historical trend associated with grand and supposedly mysterious disappearances. We are linked in an unprecedented way, but we are still unable to locate crash sites in open oceans. The missing flight syndrome is bound to continue in the new year.

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