

## The Enduring Mystery of MH370

A plane can disappear for a day. A week, maybe, if it plunges into remote terrain. But nine years?

That's the enduring mystery of MH370, which vanished like a fairy in the wee hours of March 8, 2014. A Netflix documentary this month, one of its top 10 most popular, leans way into the whodunit aspects. It gives free rein to journalists such as Jeff Wise, who for years touted a theory that Russian agents hijacked the Malaysian Airlines plane over the South China Sea and flew it to Kazakhstan to divert the world's attention from Russia's invasion of Crimea, which had just begun then. Wise thought it was no coincidence another Malaysian airliner was shot down by pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine four months later. Even for a master Machiavellian like Vladimir Putin, that's one helluva smokescreen.

When this story broke, I was a news editor for Reuters at its Asia headquarters in Singapore. To say it consumed global attention is like saying Godzilla consumed much of Tokyo on an empty stomach. CNN went wild with talking head plane-splainers, like Wise. CNN aviation correspondent Richard Quest was hyper-venting on air so robustly I thought he would spawn his own mini-me.

Here are the facts as we know them today:

The plane disappeared from radar screens and all communications ceased about an hour after it took off from Kuala Lumpur International Airport on a six-hour flight north to Beijing. There was no mayday signal, no last messages

from the passengers. According to military radar, the plane then made a sharp turn to the west across the Malaysian peninsula.

The British satellite telecommunications company Inmarsat announced days later it had picked up signals from the plane indicating it had flown for 7 1/2 hours on a course that could have taken it into remote Indian Ocean waters between Australia and Africa or possibly north on another trajectory into central Asia (which fueled Wise's theory). The Malaysian prime minister said at the time it appeared to be a "deliberate" course maneuver, prompting a theory the pilot depressurized the cabin, rendering everyone unconscious, and donning an oxygen mask himself, flew the plane for hours before plunging into the southern Indian Ocean. But in 2015, Malaysian Airlines, seeming to contradict the prime minister, called it an "accident," paving the way to pay compensation to the families of the passengers. A \$150 million search over a 120,000-square mile area of the southern Indian Ocean never did find the plane or its black box.

In July 2015, a piece of wing called the flaperon washed up on Reunion, a small island in the Indian Ocean, administered by France. French authorities said it came from MH370. Other debris washed ashore in Africa was thought to be from the passengers on the flight.

Australian Transport Safety Bureau investigators in 2018 dismissed the pilot murder-suicide theory after its own extensive investigation, saying all 289 people on the plane, including the captain, co-pilot, flight attendants, and passengers were unconscious as the uncontrolled craft ran out of fuel and crashed into the ocean. It could offer no reason, however, why that happened.

If it was an accident, what catastrophic system failure would have prevented the pilots from putting on their oxygen masks long enough to send out a distress signal?

If it was deliberate, why would the pilot keep the plane flying for over seven hours? Why not down it as soon as possible before something intervened to foil the plan?

Families of those aboard MH 370 this month called on the Malaysian government to allow U.S. seabed exploration firm Ocean Infinity to mount a new search for the missing plane, which could happen this summer, Reuters reported.

One thing is for sure, this whodunit is going to get a lot of air mileage in media coverage for a long time to come.