The mysterious crash of Antonov-AN 32. (1995, September 17). *The Island.*

THE MYSTERIOUS CRASH OF ANTONOV-AN 32

By Our Defence Correspondent

Airlanka flight UL-101, from Colombo to Male, took off from Katunayake at 7.48 a.m. on Wednesday, and headed west across the sea, climbing as it went.

The flight, a routine one to the Maldives, had been scheduled to leave at 7.30 a.m., but had been delayed for 20 minutes by bad weather west of the airport.

Suddenly, when the plane was 23 miles west of Negombo, its instruments picked up a radio signal from the Emergency Location Transmitter of another plane.

It is not something that other pilots enjoy discovering ELT, as it is known in aviation circles, is a device fitted in the tail of all planes, which automatically activates itself when the plane crashes.

It is meant to tell other aircraft in the area that a plane has crashed, and to guide searchers to the site. With its own set of indestructible batteries, it will go on transmitting its distress signal for several days until the power runs out.

The signal from the ELT was very weak, which indicated to the Airlanka crew that it was coming from beneath the surface of the sea.

Only minutes earlier, as UL-101 was taking off, radar controllers at Katunayake had warned its pilots that an air force Antonov AN-32 transport plane was missing with 75 people on board. Its last known location was west of Negombo, and the Airlanka crew had been asked to be alert for any sign of the missing plane.

Weak though the ELT signal was, UL-101's pilots had no doubts about its origin, and knew exactly what it meant. If the signal was coming from within the sea, the Antonov would be lying at the bottom, thousands of feet below the surface, and the chance of survivors would be slim.

They quickly radioed back to Katunayake that they had picked up the signal, and gave its exact location. The Katunayake radar controller immediately passed on the information to two Bell-212 helicopters which had already left Ratmalana to search for the missing plane. UL-101 then continued on its way to Male.

The helicopters also picked up the ELT, and several of the navy's inshore patrol craft which were already on their way from Colombo harbour were told of the exact area to search in.

Later, Y-12 planes also joined the search, and at 11.15 a.m. a small oil slick was spotted on the surface of the water, giving a clear indication of where the plane was.

Although the plane had crashed only 23 miles from the coast, the chances of recovering the wreckage are virtually nil. The water is believed to be about 3,000 feet deep at that point, and few divers can go down more than 200 feet.

Although navy divers also searched they found little except small items from the plane, which had probably escaped through a small hole and floated to the top.

The plane is so deep down that it cannot even be seen from the surface, or by divers, and the wreck itself has not been found.

But at 5.20 p.m. with less than an hour of daylight left before the search had to be called off, the searchers made a gruesome discovery.

A large peace of human flesh was found, which included more than half of a face.

This was immediately identified by navy Lieutenant Commander Cedric Martenstyne as that of his son, Flying Officer John Martenstyne, the navigator of the ill-fated plane.

A specialist in diving, Lt. Cdr. Martenstyne had flown to Colombo from Trincomalee as soon as he had heard of the crash, and had been directing the navy divers. He had made several dives into the water himself in search of his son's plane.

The sequence of events recorded by the Katunayake radar room offers little explanation for the crash. Flight A7465 left Ratmalana at 7.08 a.m., and headed north along the coast. It was due to Palaly at 7.43 a.m.

The pilot was Squadran Leader Ravi Pakyanathan, one of the most experienced transport pilots in the air force, with 7,325 flying hours, mostly in Avros and Y-8s.

The co-pilot was Flight Lieutenant K. A. J. P. Kahadawala, who had 3,800 flying hours, also mostly in transport planes.

At 7.19 a.m., Pakyanathan radioed Katunayake and reported a "line squall" on his left.

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This is an advancing line of low rain clouds, sometimes with high winds and lightning.

The radar controller then asked "465, please confirm (that) on your present heading, you will be clear of (the) weather".

Pakyanathan replied: "Negative sir. We have a small problem with the instruments."

The pilot did not say what the problem with his instruments was. But he does not seem to have regarded it as serious. In any case, malfunctioning of one instrument cannot cripple a plane, since it is equipped with several backup systems.

Radar: "On this heading you will be heading to the weather patch according to the radar".

Pakyanathan: "Roger, copied. (received message). Confirm (that) left is clear."

Radar: "The patch is extending upto 35 miles according to the radar".

Pakyanathan: "Roger, copied sir. We would like to descend and get back to Ratmalana."

The pilot gave no reason for wanting to turn back. But since Ratmalana was only 15 minutes away, it is not unusual for a plane with a small problem to turn back.

Radar: "For this, turn right heading 145 (degrees).

Pakyanathan: "Right 145."

This is where the mystery began. Instead of turning right, away from the bad weather, Pakyanathan turned left. He gave no reason, and the radar controller immediately queried his action. But the weather was not bad enough to alarm the controller, who then gave directions for the left turn, which the plane was already doing.

Radar: "Confirm you are turning left, (and) then continue left turn heading 145".

Pakyanthan: "Left 145 confirm".

Radar: "Observed (on radar screen that) you are turning, left. Continue left turn heading 145 to be clear of weather."

The controller then realised that according to his screen, the plane had not completed its turn.

Radar: "Alpha 7465, continue your left turn heading 145".

The pilot did not reply, but the navigator's voice was heard.

Martenstyne: "Pilot? Speed increasing 700 (kilometres per hour on) left turn".

This was the last radio contact with the plane.

The time was 7:21 a.m., when the controller realised that something was wrong. The plane, which was supposed to be at an altitude of 8,000 feet had vanished from his radar screen, which would show any plane more than 500 feet above the ground.

Radar: "7465, say again your heading now!".

Radar: "Standby" (The controller was rechecking his radar screens to see if there was a problem with his equipment).

Radar: "7465 (to) radar".

The controller, having confirmed that the plane was not on his screen, and that there was nothing wrong with his equipment, had become alarmed and was trying desperately to contact the pilot.

Radar: "Alpha 7465. I lost you on radar, 25 miles bearing 244. Do you read me?

Within a few minutes, the controller urgently informed the Ratmalana control tower that flight Alpha 7465 was missing, and scrambled the Bell-212's to do a search. He also warned all other aircraft in the area, including Air Lanka flight UL-101.

Many questions remain unanswered. What was wrong with the plane's instruments? Why did Pakyanathan turn left when he was told to turn right? Was his plane disabled in some way, that he couldn't turn right? If so, why didn't he inform the controller? And why didn't he know that the plane was descending from 8,000 feet? If he knew the plane was descending, why didn't he tell the controller, whose instruments cannot say at what height an aircraft is, and was still assuming that he was at 8,000 feet.

An aircraft diving from 8,000 feet takes about half a minute to hit the ground. But the AN-32 vanished from the radar screen in less than five seconds, which clearly means that the plane was flying much lower.

Whatever happened, happened very quickly, and didn't give the crew enough time to warn the controller that they were in an emergency situation. Even had Pakyanathan been occupied in fighting to keep his plane in the air, his co-point or navigator could have radioed Katunayake.

Although the air force is desperate to find out what went wrong with flight "Alpha 7465," there is little chance that the truth will ever be known.

Only submarines can go down so deep, and there a few in the Indian Ocean. Russia, India and the United States have military submarines in the areas, but these are of little use, since they have no proper equipment for an underwater salvage mission.

Only Australia has such submarines in the Indian Ocean, and the government on Thursday requested that country, for assistance. The Australians are trying to see if one of their submarines could be taken off from routine work and sent to Sri Lanka.

The most serious aspect of the loss of the plane, apart from the deaths of 68 soldiers, two policemen, and five air force personnel, is that it has definitely set back the government's planned major offensive against the LTTE in the Jaffna peninsula.

The operation had already been delayed and postponed several times due to insufficient stockpiles of artillery ammunition at Palali but with the loss of one Antonov, and the grounding of the other two for an indefinite period of time, it is likely that no offensive can be launched for several months, by which time the northeast monsoon will force a further postponement until next year.

Although the air force has two Chinese-built Y-8 planes, five British Avro's and six Russian MI-17 helicopters for transport purposes, none of these has the middle detection equipment and anti-missile flare systems that the Antonovs have.

As the LTTE demonstrated last week by shelling Palali airfield, there is little security for aircraft taking off and landing at Palali from missiles as well.

While the air force has publicly tried to blame the weather for the crash, this would be an unusual cause. In all its years, the Sri Lanka Air Force has never lost an aircraft due to bad weather, and the AN-32, which is widely used by many air forces around the world including India's has an excellent track record.

The three Antonovs were purchased for Rs. 225 million each from the Ukraine, only in July, arriving just in time to take part in Operation Leap Forward.

The crash could not have come at a worse time. The navy, which has lost five vessels to the LTTE since April 19, this week took delivery of three gunboats from China, to replace those which was destroyed in Trincomalee in April.

Transferred directly from the Chinese navy, the gunboats will be able to go into action within a few weeks and would certainly turn the tide against the LTTE in escorting convoys of ships loaded with supplies for the thousands of troops in the Jaffna peninsula.

Their extremely heavy armament, and large number of guns are capable of cutting any Sea Tiger craft to ribbons within seconds. Such is the importance of this type of heavy gunboat that they were the LTTE's first target when the war resumed.

But sea convoys take time to reach the peninsula. When troops are wounded and need to be brought back to Colombo, only planes can do so. Reinforcements for any battle would also need to be rushed in planes.

Until the Antonovs start flying again, the threat to the LTTE has been greatly reduced.