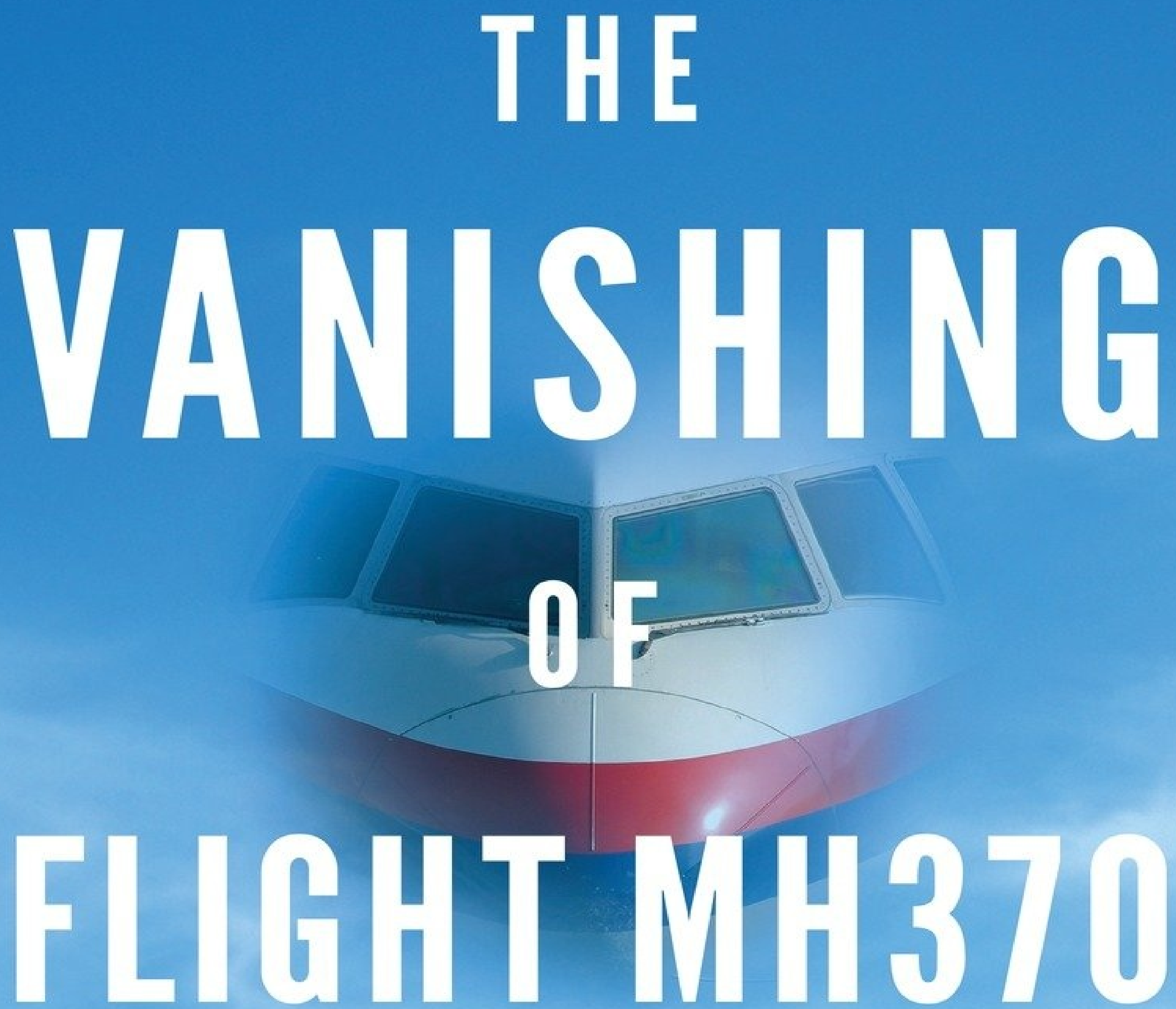

THE VANISHING OF FLIGHT MH370

The True Story of the Hunt for the Missing Malaysian Plane

CNN Aviation Correspondent

RICHARD QUEST

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To my colleagues at CNN both in front of and behind the cameras. Without your collective efforts, th book would not have been possible. We truly did go "all in" to cover this story. And we will continu to do so, wherever it goes.

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INTRODUCTION

“Where’s that plane?” If there is one question I get asked most by CNN viewers these days, this is it. From politicians and CEOs to doormen and cabdrivers, time and again they want to know, “What happened to that plane? Where is it?” Malaysia Airlines flight MH370—with 239 people aboard—departed from Kuala Lumpur shortly after midnight on March 8, 2014, bound for Beijing, China, and has never been seen since. Despite the largest aviation search in history, virtually nothing was found of the aircraft in the wake of its disappearance. Sixteen months later, thousands of miles from the flight’s path, a piece of an airplane’s wing washed ashore on Reunion Island. Still, this bit o evidence and a flimsy trail of electronic satellite data are all we have to go on—plus a huge amount o speculation and confusion.

“The most difficult search ever undertaken in human history.”[1] When Australia’s prime minister Tony Abbott uttered those words in April 2014, it was not just the usual hyperbole of a politician. What happened to MH370 has been described as a unique, unprecedented, and extraordinary mystery Planes may crash, but they are not supposed to disappear without a trace. Earlier ocean crashes, such as Air France 447 or Air India 182, have demonstrated that wreckages can typically be located withir hours. Airlines today own the most modern aircraft, featuring up-to-date navigation technology, whil regulations govern everything from the number of hours a pilot can fly to the fire-resistant fabric use in the passenger seats. Despite the precautions, no one has been able to pinpoint the final resting plac of MH370 and those on board. All the while we know that if you lose your iPhone, it can be traced within minutes.

At the heart of this mystery remains the question of the cause of the plane’s disappearance. Was i mechanical, or was it criminal: Did someone deliberately take over the aircraft and set it on a course to the south Indian Ocean, intending to kill all on board? Would that someone turn out to be an unknown hijacker or terrorist, or could it have been one of the pilots?

I have spent hours debating the possibilities of what *might* have happened to MH370 with those who declare what *must* have happened. Frequently, whenever I suggest that they keep an open mind because, unsatisfying though it is, we don’t know, there is the inevitable “ah, but surely . . .” followe by a series of half-truths, myths, and rumors that have been allowed to enter the debate and fester.

Do I have a view of what might have happened? I do, and I will share it. In doing so, I am not blir to the obvious options, but prefer to keep an open mind on the eventual outcome. As will become cle in the chapters that follow, as a television journalist, I became frustrated, and even angry, with some of the pundits with whom I had to work who were quite prepared to convict the pilots long before any evidence had been found. Instead, this book will stick to the facts as we know them. In the end, you will be left to make up your own mind about where you think the evidence leads.

• • •

The disappearance of MH370 has been a serious failure for the multibillion-dollar aviation industry, revealing disturbing facts and behaviors. That one of the most advanced aircraft in the world should

vanish, while an airline left hundreds of desperate families waiting for news of their loved ones, is unpardonable. In response, airlines have rewritten their rules from top to bottom. An alphabet soup o international organizations responsible for air travel safety held high-level meetings and set up a task force to look at ways to ensure that planes are always being tracked in real time. Even CEOs I spoke t were as astounded as the general public that planes were not always being tracked to a fine point of precision. Some of the changes did not come soon enough: as suspicion about MH370's pilots increased, discussions were held about a "two-person in the cockpit" rule, stipulating that if one pilot temporarily leaves the cockpit, he or she should be replaced by a flight attendant. Yet the considerabl amount of talk led to very little action. If such a change had been made, the crashing of Germanwing 9525, in which a rogue pilot deliberately flew his airliner into a mountain, possibly would not have happened.

When all is said and done, MH370 boils down to one simple fact. For the first time since the Wright brothers first flew, this industry, which prided itself on a policy of "safety first," is having to cope with the unthinkable: a plane disappeared. It is no wonder the head of the airline organization IATA, Tony Tyler, decried, "A large commercial airliner going missing without a trace for so long is unprecedented in modern aviation. And it must not happen again."[2]

The fascination with MH370 goes deeper than an aviation story. International diplomatic and political issues have been raised too. More than 60 percent of the passengers on board the plane were Chinese citizens, and the Chinese government wasted little time in flexing its muscles on their behal The relatives of Chinese victims were put up in a Beijing hotel where regular briefings were given by low-level Malaysian government and airline officials. These were acrimonious events, interrupted frequently by hysterical outbursts from distraught family members frustrated at the lack of information they were being given. The way the relatives were treated was shabby at best.

Then there was the role of the Malaysian government itself. Were they a bunch of incompetents who had no idea what they were doing, doomed to make mistake after mistake? Or perhaps the truth was something more sinister: a cover-up for an erroneous military strike? Few people will deny that the first weeks of this crisis were not something of which the Malaysians can be proud. As the tensions rose across the South China Sea, the fate of MH370 rapidly became entwined in a diplomati game of realpolitik, mystery, intrigue, and failure.

• • •

So why did I decide to write this book?

To begin, there is my own personal relationship to this story. Sixteen days before MH370's disappearance, I met and flew with the plane's first officer, Fariq Hamid, filming him for a segment on CNN. Immediately after the story of the plane's vanishing broke, I found that a three-hour flight with someone I had met only once, more than two weeks prior, had now taken on a new importance, and everything about that trip was suddenly the focus of great attention. Conspiracy theorists had a field day. My Twitter account was inundated with comments suggesting that somehow CNN and I ha known "something was going to happen" or that we perhaps knew where the plane was. (We didn't, and we don't.)

During that trip to Malaysia in February 2014, I had also spent time with the CEO of Malaysia Airlines, or MH, as it's known by its IATA airline code. The airline was in deep financial trouble we before MH370. Its business model was failing and the carrier was being squeezed. On one side are th Gulf Three carriers—Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways—siphoning off the long-haul customers; o the other side is the low-cost airline AirAsia, also based in Kuala Lumpur. Nutcrackered in the middl Malaysia Airlines found it impossible to be financially viable. In short, this proud airline, flying for

more than half a century, had to find its role in the new world of air travel. Having just traveled to Malaysia to do a story on MH, I was familiar with the difficulties the company was facing and the actions being proposed by the CEO Ahmad Jauhari Yahya (AJ) to put things right. I spent several hours with AJ discussing his strategy for turning MH around. As I will tell you later, I also learned what sort of a leader he would be in the event of an emergency.

From the very first reports of a plane being reported missing to the long weeks and months of searching, I covered almost every aspect of this story: from interviewing grief-stricken relatives; to interpreting and analyzing the sometimes illogical actions of the Malaysian authorities; to explaining then discounting the outlandish and outrageous theories being put forward about what had happened . . . too often being the only voice willing to stand up to the disparaging, unfair comments about the crew on board.

I was very fortunate to be part of a team at CNN that covered this story like nothing we had seen before. Our reportage of MH370 was the first full-scale example of the policies put in place by CNN' new CEO, Jeff Zucker. Jeff had said we should do fewer stories and hit them hard—“own them,” as h put it. MH370 took over our airwaves for weeks. Everyone knew this was an experiment for CNN, trying a different way of covering major stories. Would it work? Senior staff would sometimes question the policy while expressing full fealty with it in public. Perhaps this wouldn’t matter at another network. But CNN is the most-watched news network in the world. Everyone had a view on how we covered the plane.

I have reported on aviation for the best part of three decades. The first crash I covered was the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988. From Lockerbie to Concorde to Swissair to Air France to Malaysia (370 and 17) and so many incidents in between, I have been involved in the instant analysis required once we get reports that a plane is missing. Months and even years later, I am the correspondent who plows through the accident inquiry reports, trying to make pages of aviation-speak understandable for a general audience. I have sat in numerous cockpits in the air and on the ground. I have “flown” in many simulators and tried my hand “at the wheel.” I am not pilot, and I have never pretended to be. My job is to understand this fascinatingly complicated world, and help the viewer realize what happened and why.

This book is told from the perspective of one who covered this incident and who continues to report on the developments, whether the search and recovery or the steps being taken to make sure it never happens again. It is not an academic textbook, bristling with footnotes. It will not go into every moment of those first days to prove all the inconsistencies that took place. Malaysia’s deficiency in handling the communications is well documented; I don’t need to go chapter and verse into every misstatement and error. This book will not satisfy the reader who has already made up his mind abou what has happened and is prepared to convict either pilot of mass murder. Nor will it satisfy the read who is determined to believe that the Malaysians made a terrible job of every aspect of the investigation rather than just a lousy job on the information front. It certainly won’t satisfy the #avgeek who will be seeking a more in-depth treatise on ACARS, ECAM, Satellite Doppler, and Burs Offset Frequency. Instead I hope to give you a feel for those first frantic days when the search was at its height, followed by the weeks of bewilderment and puzzlement that nothing was found of the jetliner until the flaperon washed ashore.

I have dedicated this book to CNN and my colleagues at the network who worked with me on this story. The sheer dedication everyone brought to the story was extraordinary. This book has been written by drawing on their countless hours of journalism, the thousands of emails that were sent among us, reporting developments, arguing different avenues of inquiry, constantly challenging and debating outcomes. It was a tremendous experience to be a part of such first-class coverage.

I have loved aviation since the first time I flew in the late 1960s, on a holiday flight from

Liverpool Speke Airport to Sitges, Spain. The plane was a Cambrian Airways BAC 1-11, a small, noisy craft that would fail all environmental rules today. I remember getting off the plane, walking down the steps, and looking back at this machine glistening in the rain, and thinking, How did that metal get in the air . . . and stay there? I can still spend hours at airports watching planes on takeoff, guessing that moment when one of the pilots will call “rotate” and the plane will bite into the air. As planes get bigger, and the ultra-long-haul flight becomes more common, the fact that MH370 happened is worrying, for it should never have happened. The fact it did is the reason I wrote this book.

THE FACTS

PLANE AND PASSENGERS

Aircraft Reg: 9M-MRO
Aircraft Type: Boeing 777-200ER
Built & Delivered: May 29, 2002 (11 years 9 months 9 days)
Flight Hrs: 53,465
Comms: 3 VHF radios, 2 HF radios, 1 SATCOM, 2 ATC transponders

Souls on Board: 239
Crew: 12
Pax: 227

NATIONALITY OF PASSENGERS

China: 152 (67%)
Malaysia: 50 (16% of passengers; with crew, 20% of souls on board)
Indonesia: 7 (3%)
Australia: 6 (3%)
India: 5 (2%)
France: 4
United States: 3
Canada, Iran, New Zealand, Ukraine: 2 (from each country)
Hong Kong, Netherlands, Russia, Taiwan: 1 (from each country)

THE PILOTS

The Captain: Zaharie Ahmad Shah. Malaysian, age 53. Total flying hours: 18,365 hours. Experience on 777: 8,659 hours. Joined Malaysia Airlines in 1981.

First Officer: Fariq Abdul Hamid. Malaysian, age 27. Total flying hours: 2,763. Experience on 777: 39 hours. Joined Malaysia Airlines in 2007.

WHO’S WHO

Najib Razak—Prime Minister of Malaysia since April 2009
Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein—Defense Minister of Malaysia and, during MH370, Acting Transport Minister
Dato’ Sri Azharuddin Abdul Rahman—Director General, Department of Civil Aviation Malaysia
Ahmad Jauhari Yahya (AJ)—CEO of Malaysia Airlines (retired 2015)
Tony Abbott—Prime Minister of Australia, September 2, 2013–September 2, 2015
Warren Truss—Deputy Prime Minister of Australia
Angus Houston—Chief Coordinator, Joint Agency Coordination Centre (JACC)
Jeff Zucker—CEO of CNN Worldwide

THE FLIGHT

MARCH 8 (MALAYSIA STANDARD TIME)

00:27 Push-back
00:41 Takeoff
00:42 Directed to Igari (waypoint)
00:50 Directed to climb FL350
00:50 Read-back FL350
01:01 Advises reached FL350
01:07 ACARS last transmission (provided total fuel remaining)
01:07 Repeats FL350
01:19 Handoff to Vietnam “Contact HCM 120.9 good night”
01:19 Read-back “Good night Malaysian 370” LAST WORDS
01:21 Transponder switched off
01:22 Last ATC radar—probably BITOD
01:25 MH370 deviates from flight plan
02:22 Last primary radar fix (Malaysian radar)
02:25 First handshake FROM the aircraft (of unknown cause)
02:39 Unanswered phone call ground TO plane
03:41 Second handshake FROM the ground
04:41 Third handshake FROM the ground
05:41 Fourth handshake FROM the ground
06:30 Scheduled landing time in Beijing
06:41 Fifth handshake FROM the ground
07:13 Unanswered phone call ground TO plane
07:24 Malaysia Airlines announces plane missing
08:11 Sixth handshake FROM the ground
08:19 Seventh handshake FROM THE PLANE (probably from power loss through fuel exhaustion)
09:15 Failed handshake FROM the ground: plane didn’t answer

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TIMELINE OF SEARCH EVENTS

2014

March 8: MH370 takes off and goes missing.
March 10: First mentions of turn-back in press conferences.
March 15: Malaysia PM admits plane turned back. Sets up corridors.
March 24: Malaysia PM confirms plane kept flying and went down in south Indian Ocean. Searching begins off Australia coast.
March 28: Search zone shifts dramatically.
April 7: *Ocean Shield* hears pings from black boxes—turns out to be false.
April 14: Bluefin-21 underwater vehicle is deployed to search most likely areas.
May 28: Bluefin-21 completes underwater search with nothing found.
May 29: Bathymetric survey of search zone begins.
October 6: *Go Phoenix* begins underwater search of 26,000 square miles.

2015

January 29: Malaysia officially declares MH370 an accident; all the passengers and crew are presumed to have lost their lives.
April 16: Malaysia, China, Australia announce extension of search to 46,000 square miles.
June 3: Malaysia, China, Australia announce if nothing found, there will be no further extension of search. Effectively, it will be ov
July 20: Debris believed to be the flaperon from MH370’s wing washes ashore on Reunion Island.
September 3: French officials affirm “with certainty” the debris found on Reunion Island is the flaperon from MH370.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAIB—Air Accidents Investigation Branch; the UK air accident investigating agency.
ACARS—Aircraft Communication and Reporting System; sophisticated data communication system from the plane.
AMSA—Australian Maritime Safety Authority; Australia’s maritime regulator.
Annex 13—Agreed international rules on how aircraft accident investigations are to be carried out.
ATC—Air traffic control.
ATSB—Australian Transport Safety Bureau; the Australian air accident investigating agency.
BEA—Bureau d’Enquêtes et d’Analyses; the French air accident investigating agency.
CAAC—Civil Aviation Administration of China; China’s regulator.
CVR—Cockpit voice recorder. Records conversations in the cockpit; one of the two black boxes carried by commercial aircraft.
DCA—Department of Civil Aviation; Malaysia’s regulator and air accident investigating department.
FAA—Federal Aviation Administration; the US aviation regulator.
FDR—Flight data recorder. Records parameters of the flight; one of the two black boxes carried by commercial aircraft.
FO—First officer; the junior pilot who sits in the right-hand seat.
IATA—International Air Transport Association; organization representing the world’s airlines.
ICAO—International Civil Aviation Organization; UN body responsible for international regulation of air transport.
JACC—Joint Agency Coordination Centre; agency created by Australia to coordinate the government’s support for the search for MH370.
KLIA—Kuala Lumpur International Airport; also known as KUL.
NTSB—National Transportation Safety Board; the US air accidents investigating agency.

CHAPTER ONE

FIRST HOURS

Richard, a plane has gone missing.

—CNN director of coverage

In the world of CNN, I always know when big news has happened—my BlackBerry goes into meltdown. Friday, March 7, 2014, was one of those times. I had been out for a quick drink with friends to celebrate my upcoming birthday, and figuring that if the news desk needed me they could call, I had left my device on the kitchen table. When I got back home, a quick look told me somethin had happened.

Short, terse, urgent: "Richard, where are you?" "Are you near the office?" "Call in now." They were the usual emails from determined producers who, covering a major story, are anxious to get whatever content they can to "keep the beast fed." According to the time stamps, the emails had started arriving in my in-box faster, the subject lines blaring with more urgent wording. It was 7:25 p.m.

I quickly read the gist of what had happened. A Malaysia Airlines plane had gone missing. The flight number was MH370, and it was flying from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. No one knew much mor Having covered aviation for decades, I had learned by harsh experience that the first thing to do, ever before returning my producer's call, is to find out the basics about what make and type of plane was involved. A fast check of several websites told me one important fact: MH370 was a Boeing 777. That's all I needed to know. This was a large wide-bodied passenger plane with several hundred people on board, and as I remembered, there had never before been a fatal crash of a 777.

Within seconds, an email arrived from the CNN International Desk enclosing the statement from Malaysia Airlines. Released at 7:24 a.m. Malaysia time (7:24 p.m. the previous evening in New Yor it confirmed what I had discovered:

> Malaysia Airlines confirms that flight MH370 has lost contact with Subang Air Traffic Control at 2.40am on 8th March. MH370 was expected to land in Beijing at 6.30am the same day. The flight was carrying a total number of 227 passengers (including 2 infants) 12 crew members. Malaysia Airlines is currently working with the authorities who have activated their Search and Rescue team to locate the aircraft.

Immediately, I called the news desk in Atlanta. I wanted to check in and let them know I had received the messages and was now getting ready to come back to work. I could tell by the backgrou noise and the brief, to-the-point replies that everyone was gearing up for what we all knew would be

very long hours ahead. With a large, wide-bodied plane officially missing, and hundreds of people of many nationalities likely to be involved, this story was big, and it was going to get even bigger in the coming hours. The word from Atlanta was simple: "Get back to the bureau as fast as you can, we are going to need anything and everything you can offer."

Before heading to the studio, I needed to know more—the aircraft's routing, the weather that lay i its path, the airports involved, the aircraft's date of manufacture, even previous incidents for both the airline and that particular type of airplane. In the immediate hours of television news coverage, knowing these facts is crucial just to keep broadcasting. Spending ten minutes online, reading a variety of websites, and seeing what Twitter's #avgeeks are saying is often the fastest way to get som basic information. After all, there are thousands of people in the aviation business, and when a crash occurs many of them are discussing online what they have seen, heard, or know.

Of course, one can always contact the airline and government agencies directly responsible to get whatever information they will offer, but CNN has many staffers making those calls. Later, I will contact my own inside sources to get off-the-record briefings that will give me far more information than an airline press officer who just happens to be the person who answers the phone. Rather than making calls, in the first hours following a plane crash, I do the basic research and get going. The programs need me on-air, not sitting on hold.

Preparing to head to the studio, I quickly put on a fresh shirt and suit and chose an appropriately dark tie. During the Asian financial crisis in 1997, I'd worn a red tie on the air and received a whole slew of complaints from viewers in Asia saying this was inappropriate because red is the color of prosperity and luck. Making sure I was properly dressed was important. Since I would be talking abo plane crashes and missing passengers for hours to come, I wanted to look suitably somber without being funereal.

Arriving at the Time Warner Center, I was told to go straightaway to Studio 73 on the seventh floor. My first broadcast would be on *Anderson Cooper 360º*, talking to Anderson. The first report is always the trickiest. I needed to make sure I didn't say anything I would have to backtrack on within few hours. Anderson asked me the basics, and I was able to give him information about the aircraft and some background on Malaysia Airlines, and then I reported how the plane had been in the cruise, the safest phase of the flight, when it disappeared. With few details, I didn't want to go any further.

After speaking to Anderson, I moved from the large, glamorous studio of *AC360º* to a "flash studio," a small space with a desk, lights, and a single camera. Designed to connect an interviewee to the other parts of the network, it's a quick and easy way of doing many live reports. As the correspondent, I basically sit in the same seat and do multiple reports into lots of different programs. Over the next few weeks I was to spend hours sitting in flash studios at all times of the day and night

From the flash studio, it was back to the seventh floor to *Piers Morgan Live*. The program was prerecorded on that Friday night, but now, with the breaking news on MH370, the plans drastically changed. The producers abandoned the taped show and prepared for a live program instead. Since Piers was in Los Angeles, I sat in the studio alone. As I waited for the show to begin, the producer sa in my ear that Piers was caught in traffic and hadn't arrived at the CNN Los Angeles bureau. If he didn't make it to his studio in time, I might have to anchor the start of the show. I marshaled the few facts and got ready to lead the program. At the last moment Piers arrived, ready to go. I felt both disappointment and relief: disappointment that I would not have a "big moment" and relief that I wouldn't have a chance to "mess it up." Actually, you can't win in this situation; no matter how good you are, the management always resent the fact that they haven't got the person they want, and the best I could have hoped for was a begrudging "he did very well, all things considered." All in all, we were better with Piers!

The interview went long; Piers was filling time and using me to do it. There was an unfortunate

moment. Having been on-air now for more than ten minutes, we came back after the break and Piers started up again, introducing me as “the aviation correspondent,” which is one of my titles at CNN. H then said something to the effect of “Hang on, Quest isn’t an aviation correspondent!” What? I grimaced and battled on through the report. It is never pleasant when a colleague undermines you on-air, even by accident! I made my views clear to Jonathan Wald, his executive producer, who got the point. This wasn’t just a petty spat over titles (I have never really cared about them one way or the other). It had to do with credibility. How on earth do we expect the viewer to accept what we are saying when our own colleagues are dismissing what we are claiming to be? Piers had the very good grace to email me, apologizing and explaining that he didn’t know that was one of my roles, and whe he saw the title in the prompter, he’d assumed it was a mistake. It was a minor moment as I faced the rest of the night’s broadcasting.

CNN was now in full “Breaking News” mode. It’s a formidable thing to witness. The network wit its huge resources was moving into high gear. Like the proverbial oil tanker, it may be slow to start, but once it gets going, it takes on a speed and momentum of its own. At the very minimum, producer were being brought into the newsrooms to help put together and broadcast longer news bulletins dedicated to the story. The international news desk in Atlanta was starting to consider where to dispatch correspondents, producers, and camera crews. Obviously we needed to send staff to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, as fast as possible. We also needed to consider sending more staff to Beijing, and possibly Vietnam. Local staff were being brought into the bureau in Hong Kong, while others were being woken up in London to be ready to cover the extra programming that would be required the nex day. Anyone who had any contacts in the aviation industry, or within the governments involved in the search, or who might know anyone who had information, was now being roused to hit the phones. Th problem for all twenty-four-hour news broadcasters was, of course, that in those first hours we just simply did not have the facts, and yet we had to keep broadcasting about the story. Essentially, we were relying on the one statement from Malaysia Airlines, admitting the plane was missing, the route it had taken, and the number of people on board.

Armed with these few facts and a lot of background, we got under way. When there’s a breaking story of this size, you just have to keep going. So I filled time. I gave lots of background details on th airline, the aircraft, the cities the plane was flying to, the sorts of passengers who were on board. As a journalist, I have two areas of distinct specialization: business and aviation. Networks have correspondents for a reason, not just to give them a pretty title. We have studied the subjects we cove and are able to draw on a deep well of background knowledge. In my case, this goes back more than twenty-five years.

Newbies to twenty-four-hour news find “keeping going” the hardest part of the job. Reporters wh are used to tight, structured, network-news live shots of just a couple of minutes suddenly find themselves having to fill hours of airtime. They are overwhelmed by the effort to keep up the momentum without straying too far from the facts.

After the first few hours, I had confirmed the serial number and registration of the aircraft involved, 9M-MRO, as well as its age: it was just under twelve years old. I knew that one of the first questions asked would be about the safety history of the Boeing 777. Thinking of those viewers watching around the world, perhaps in airports, about to board a 777, I usually answer that sort of question with, “So far as we know, very safe.” The last thing they want to hear is CNN’s aviation correspondent starting to hem and haw about the 777’s safety record, raising issues when, at the moment, none existed. I am not being dishonest or disingenuous; there is plenty of time for nuanced answers later on.

In the case of the safety history of the 777, I had nothing to worry about. The 777, which first cam into service in 1995, has an exemplary safety record. In almost twenty years, there had never been an

accident where passengers had died in a plane crash. In 2013, Asiana 214 crash-landed in San Francisco. Two passengers died after they escaped from the aircraft and were run over by a fire truck responding to the accident. A third passenger died later in the hospital. The only other major 777 incident at the time of MH370 was the crash landing of the British Airways Flight 38 at London Heathrow. That came about because ice had formed in the fuel lines during a frigid flight from Beijing. When the ice jolted free, it blocked the line and starved the engines of fuel. The plane lost power and glided the last few miles to crash just short of the runway. Fortunately, everyone survived.

Having seen the state of the crashed aircraft with both Asiana and British Airways, I find it a miracle that no one was killed when the planes hit the ground—a testament, I have no doubt, to Boeing's ability to build superb airplanes (and the same is true for Airbus!). The 777 was, and still is among the safest aircraft, and I had no hesitation in saying so on-air, then or now.

The hours went by, and I did report after report. Then something bizarre transpired that would change my relationship to the story of MH370. I received an odd email from Brian Walker, a senior colleague on the international news desk in Atlanta.[1] Brian wrote about a blogger who had been posting pictures on a website. "Richard, this is really weird. This poster says it is a photo of the co-pilot of the Malaysia flight . . . were you ever on one? Could you have met these guys?" In the photograph attached, I was standing in the cockpit behind the pilot who was now being named as the first officer on MH370. I was shocked—indeed, there I was, sixteen days earlier, in the cockpit of a 777 with Fariq Hamid.

This picture, which had been posted on Hamid's Instagram page, was rapidly being circulated nov that the names of the flight crew of MH370 were becoming more widely known. The captain was Zaharie Ahmad Shah, and his first officer was Fariq Abdul Hamid. A flurry of emails about this picture went back and forth between me and senior editors in Atlanta, along with our staff in Asia. Obviously, before we could broadcast that I had met and flown with Hamid, we needed to be absolutely certain he was the first officer on that plane. We showed the picture to a senior vice president at Malaysia Airlines, who verbally confirmed that Hamid was indeed the first officer on MH370. I knew then that my relationship to MH370 was about to become a bit more personal.

The photo had been taken during an assignment I had been given in Malaysia, a couple of weeks previously, for CNN *Business Traveller*, the travel show I have presented for twelve years. Ironically in my live reports over the last few hours, I had been drawing on what I had seen and learned about th airline during my trip to Malaysia without realizing that one of the people I had met was involved with the missing plane. Now it became known that I had a direct connection to a key player.

With this picture circulating, the questions were starting to come thick and fast about the assignment, and what I had seen and learned. The reason we had gone to Malaysia in the first place was because of the rich travel and tourism stories the country had on offer. The country is a wonderfu tourist destination in its own right, and it's also a major transfer airport from Europe to Asia and Australia. The airline and the local authorities had promised us excellent access. The core of our program was to be a feature on Malaysia Airlines, which was restructuring to face competition from the newer, nimbler airlines.

The fact that Malaysia Airlines (MH) was in a dreadful financial state was well known. MH had lost money for the past three years. Its load factor—the measure of how full each plane was with paying passengers—was around 4 to 5 percent lower than its competitors. The airline's business was being squeezed between rival airline models. On the one side was Tony Fernandes's phenomenally successful AirAsia, which is headquartered in Bangkok and regularly fills its planes with more passengers than MH. On the other side were the Gulf Three: Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways, which daily send giant wide-bodied planes into Bangkok, and take Malaysia's high-spending busines passengers to Europe and the United States.

At all levels of passenger demand, MH was in an impossible position, caught in the middle. Both AirAsia and the Gulf Three were bigger, better resourced, had a considerably lower cost base, and, frankly, were much better run. Their business models had been designed and refined for the new, hars world of aviation, while poor old Malaysia Airlines was left flying like a traditional flag carrier, with a fleet of aging long-haul planes, out-of-date working practices, and huge losses on the balance sheet

The problem facing MH was the classic one faced by many national carriers. These dinosaurs hav long enjoyed privileged status in their home airports, yet are now facing brutal competition from two different aviation models. Some, like the Hungarian airline Malev, don't survive. Others, like Swissair, get gobbled up by larger neighbors, such as Lufthansa. And there remains an entire cadre of airlines, of which MH is one, that struggle to find a profitable role, constantly trying to reinvent themselves to little effect.

Malaysia Airlines is a proud airline, having carried the national flag from 1947, or 1972, depending on your political definition of when it started flying in different national guises. Whether long haul or regional, MH had decades of know-how, but now needed dramatically to restructure itse if it was to remain viable. Obviously, MH was never going to go out of business; national pride woul never have allowed that, and anyway, its major shareholder was Khazanah Nasional, the national sovereign wealth fund that before this crisis owned more than 60 percent of MAS, the holding company. After the twin tragedies of MH370 and MH17, the airline could not continue as a stock-market-listed company. Passenger numbers were down. Morale was low. The losses were mounting. The airline would need to be completely restructured or it would continue losing money for years.

Within six months of MH370, the plan was announced. Called "Rebuilding a National Icon," the recovery strategy was dramatic, drastic, and necessary. The national fund bought out the remaining shareholders in late 2014 and delisted the company from the stock exchange. Malaysia Airlines was then fully privatized. In the next six months, a new CEO, Christoph Mueller, joined MH from Aer Lingus. His restructuring plan announced in 2015 involved shrinking the airline by losing six thousar jobs, around 30 percent of the workforce, and shedding unprofitable routes. A new holding company, Malaysia Airlines Berhad (MAB), replaced MAS, Malaysia Airlines Systems. Now, at least for the time being, the airline is in the private sector, and its financial workings are being restructured out of the glare of constant publicity and the obligation to report results.

None of this had taken place, of course, when we went to Malaysia to film CNN *Business Traveller*. At that point, the airline and its financial performance were very much under scrutiny. Chief executive Ahmad Jauhari Yahya had already introduced a turnaround plan, cutting routes and making the airline more efficient.

Now Malaysia Airlines wanted to tell the world why it should survive and it was prepared to give us almost unprecedented access to do so. The plan involved me; my producer, Pamela Boykoff; and cameraman Scott Clottworthy flying from Hong Kong to Kuala Lumpur on MH9185 and filming on board the flight. The airline's intention was to show us their business class and how they were improving service. Best of all, we were expecting to film the pilots in the cockpit during the flight. In the post-9/11 world, getting to film in a cockpit while a plane is in the air is just about unheard of without special permission, which takes ages to get.

Before 9/11, passengers visiting the cockpit during flight was always a possibility on non-US airlines. Pilots were often agreeable to inviting young children (and their #avgeek parents) to the fron of the plane to see them at work. I well remember as a child that one of the best things about our holiday flights to Spain was asking to go to the front and the flight attendant (we called them stewardesses in those days) coming back and saying, "Yes, the captain says please come up and say hello." I would walk nervously into the cramped, noisy cockpit of those older planes, looking at the dozens of switches and knobs (many more than in today's computer-driven flight decks) and gazing

out of the front windows at the fluffy white clouds below and the glorious blue sky in front. Perhaps that's where I felt my first love for aviation. In the US, even before 9/11, the FAA always had much stricter rules forbidding nonairline personnel from visiting the cockpit in flight. Occasionally one would be allowed to do it for filming purposes, yet 9/11 made it just about impossible to get into the cockpit, sometimes even on the ground.

The only time I can recall being allowed in the cockpit of a US plane during flight was on a Boein 777-300LR, when it attempted the longest flight in the world. A few dozen journalists were flying from Hong Kong to London, "the long way around the world." We flew eastward, crossing the Pacifi the US, and the Atlantic, covering 11,664 miles. The flight time was twenty-two hours twenty-two minutes, still in the record books as the longest passenger flight ever. As the flight was classed as "experimental," it was not covered by normal FAA rules and we were all security cleared, so access t the cockpit was available.

Cockpit access rules in parts of the world other than the US are frequently more accommodating, even today. Airlines and regulators will give permission for cockpit filming if you ask in advance an they obviously know who you are and what you're about. Malaysia Airlines was keen to pull out all the stops to make this visit go extremely well and it seemed everyone was prepared to do whatever was necessary.

When we boarded the 777 in Hong Kong, I asked the purser if I might say hello to the captain as a courtesy. If we are expecting to film on the plane, it is polite to let the pilots know our intentions, especially when we hoped to use our low-powered radio microphones during our filming. I was brought to the cockpit and met Captain Andrew Liu and First Officer Fariq Hamid. Captain Liu had been briefed about our project and was expecting us. He could not have been more charming and welcoming, making it clear the crew would help us in any way they could. And he offered up a bonus Would I like to be on the flight deck for takeoff from Hong Kong? I became that nervous kid again, relishing the prospect of being in the cockpit for takeoff of this 777! Of course I said yes. With my colleagues filming our departure out of the passenger cabin window, I went back to the cockpit for takeoff.

Pilots take turns flying the plane. One of the problems we had in covering MH370 was that my colleagues kept calling the two men at the controls pilots or copilots. Normally this wouldn't be significant, but here, it was crucial to the story. Time and again I had to remind them to be more precise: The captain always sits in the left-hand seat and is always the pilot in command of the aircraft; the copilot, who is usually a first officer, sits in the right seat. One will fly the outbound sector, while their colleague does the return leg.

As we prepared for departure, Liu and Hamid were joined by a third pilot, which was unusual for such a short flight. Captain Liu explained to me that the extra pilot was a check pilot because First Officer Hamid was new to the 777 fleet. He had spent most of his time at Malaysia Airlines flying either the single-aisle 737 or, more recently, the bigger Airbus A330, and had spent the past few months in the simulators, training to fly the bigger, wide-bodied 777. Pilots are licensed to fly only certain types of aircraft at any given time. While the license will cover a range of planes from a particular family of aircraft (A319 pilots, for example, can fly the A318, A320, A321), a pilot must retrain to go from a narrow-bodied jet like the 737 to a much bigger, wide-bodied aircraft like the 77 Even though both aircraft are made by Boeing, they have very different cockpits and systems, and several months of training in the simulators are required to make the transition. I was astonished to learn that this was Hamid's first or second flight "on metal" rather than in the simulator.

Captain Liu is a very senior captain with training responsibilities at MH and therefore was permitted to supervise the newbie Hamid, who would be flying the leg to Kuala Lumpur under his supervision. The third pilot was there to oversee the whole operation, just in case. I assumed that Liu

had flown the outbound leg to Hong Kong.

~~In an interesting quirk of procedure, it is normal policy at Malaysia Airlines for the captain~~ to tax the aircraft out to the runway, regardless of which pilot's turn it is to fly the plane. This is a throwbac to the days when there was only one wheel for steering a plane on the ground, and it was next to the captain's seat. While today's 777 have tillers for both pilots to steer on the ground, apparently the "Only Captains Taxi" rule has been preserved. Also, I am told, because taxiing can be tricky in congested airports, the feeling remains that the more experienced pilot should always drive the plane on the ground. This has always struck me as a bit odd; it means the captain does all the hands-on wor taxiing the plane out, then gives the controls of the aircraft to the first officer, who has not yet handle the plane, just before the takeoff roll. Many airlines have this rule, but it seems to be often skirted around.

We reached the runway, and Liu formally gave the controls to Hamid. They performed their final checks and clearance for takeoff was given. Hamid put his hands on the double thrust levers and pressed them forward just a bit. Almost instantly, the electronic dials came to life as the Rolls-Royce Trent 800 engines spooled up their phenomenal thrust and the plane began to move. Once Hamid saw that the engines were responding, he pushed the levers all the way forward to get to takeoff power. With the power dramatically increased, the aircraft started to pick up speed.

Takeoff is exhilarating in the cockpit. For pilots, it may all be in a day's work, but for someone who doesn't experience it that often, it requires a leap of faith that the plane will get to flying speed before reaching the end of the runway. I was once sitting in the cockpit of a fully fueled Qantas 747 taking off from Auckland, New Zealand, bound for Los Angeles, when I asked the captain if he ever had a moment of doubt that the laws of aeronautics wouldn't apply that day. He looked at me as if I was mad.

As the speed increased, Liu made the standard speed callouts to Hamid, who was staring straight down the runway: "One hundred knots," followed ten seconds later by "V1," the last moment they could decide to abort the takeoff. After V1, whatever happened, they had to take off. Now, with the plane reaching flying speed, Liu called out, "Rotate," the signal for Hamid to pull back on the steerin wheel, bringing the aircraft nose off the ground, increasing the angle of attack of the wings, and givin the aircraft the extra lift to get into the air. It was textbook.

With the plane in the air, the autopilot was engaged and the departure checks completed. Then we were able to chat, and I got my first good look at Fariq Hamid, a man who had all our lives, literally, in his hands. He had been with Malaysia Airlines since 2007. He had around 2,700 flying hours, most of it on the 737 fleet, which made him a reasonably experienced first officer. With the exuberant and very senior Captain Liu next to him, Hamid didn't talk much, unless he was spoken to. Not that he wa overawed; rather he was being respectful and concentrating on flying the plane: after all, it was one o his first flights in a "real" cockpit. I asked him why he was making the change from the 737 to the 77 fleet. He told me he had always loved flying, and moving to the 777 fleet would allow him to fly to more interesting destinations, like Sydney and London. He also said flying the 777 was much easier than the 737—the plane handled beautifully. I was curious to know how different it was flying a real metal plane compared to the training he had done in a flight simulator. He said the simulator was more difficult than the real thing, which was very easy to fly.

Leaving the pilots to their job, I returned to mine: back to the cabins to film the material we needed for *Business Traveller*. Filming on planes is always a bloody nuisance. Novice producers and reporters love the idea of doing it, but frankly it's nothing but hassle and trouble. You are usually getting in the way of the cabin crew trying to do their job, often waking up fellow travelers trying to sleep, or, worst of all, enraging a passenger who sees what you're doing as a gross invasion of their privacy. There's always one truculent passenger who complains and makes a fuss.

When I first did in-fight filming in the late 1980s, carriers like British Airways had a quaint rule that you couldn't film passengers' faces. We always had to film from the rear of the plane looking forward, only getting the backs of heads. The reason was, of course, that there might be people on board who were traveling with people they shouldn't be with, or they had told the boss they were doing something else and shouldn't be there at all. This rule has greatly relaxed in recent years and now all you have to do is make sure no one objects. Of course, there is always one person who does, even just to be difficult, and we have to film around them.

On this flight, Malaysia had made the necessary announcements to the passengers and we had car blanche to film what we wanted. It was the easiest on-board filming I had done in years. I even managed to eat a meal and take a snooze halfway through.

About an hour or so out of Kuala Lumpur, the purser returned to take us back to the flight deck fo landing in the Malaysian capital. This time I was joined by cameraman Scott Clottworthy, who was going to film our arrival from the pilots' viewpoint. We had reached the top of descent, and Hamid was to begin the initial procedures to take us back to land—but not before he had to navigate around some very nasty-looking storm clouds. This was entirely normal for this time of the year in Southeas Asia. The cumulonimbus clouds build up in the late afternoon, fueled by hot temperatures, rising humidity, and shifting winds. Liu discussed with Hamid the best way he should fly around this large weather system.

I am a nervous flyer, even after all these years. The sight of these giant clouds ahead set me wondering what would happen if we just barreled our way through them. Liu showed me the weather radar screen, which had a large patch of red in the middle indicating the clouds ahead. The 777 is a large plane and flying through the clouds would not cause it any physical harm, though it might well be very uncomfortable for the passengers in the back. Since flying passengers smoothly is part of an airline pilot's job, Hamid knew he had to fly around the clouds if he could. He executed long, gentle turns using the heading select on the autopilot as the plane continued its descent. All in a day's work for the pilot.

I had spent part of the flight wondering whether filming Hamid while he landed the plane was suc a good idea, considering his inexperience on the 777. Of course, Hamid was qualified to land the aircraft, and he certainly knew the airport, since he had landed 737s there hundreds of times. For me, however, his flying competence wasn't the issue. Doing this complicated task in the privacy of your own cockpit is one thing; doing it with a TV camera from CNN behind you is something else. After thirty years of working in television, I can confidently tell you people become much more nervous when the watching eye of the camera lens is on them. Novice reporters often ramble nonsense, new CEOs suddenly become incoherent, and some people just freeze.

For Hamid, who was landing the new, bigger plane under the watchful gaze of senior colleagues, i would have been daunting enough on an ordinary day, but now he had the extra pressure of a camera from CNN sitting behind him, recording his every move. I wasn't being overly cautious. The TV world is full of examples of projects that "seemed like a good idea at the time" and ended up as disasters on the front pages of newspapers. Here, any incident didn't even have to be serious or life-threatening. A slow or delayed descent, a missed approach requiring a go-around at KL . . . anything out of the ordinary could cause us problems. I knew from long, bitter experience that if something went wrong, it would soon become known that CNN was in the cockpit, and even if we were there wi permission, we would become part of the story and get the blame.

I wanted the footage badly, but I also knew I didn't want an incident on my hands. So I gingerly asked Captain Liu whether it was wise for us to be putting Hamid under more stress by filming his landing the plane. My hope was that Liu would decide to land the aircraft himself. Instead, his answe was immediate and unequivocal: Hamid was one of the best young pilots at Malaysia Airlines.

"Exceptional" was how Liu described him; there was nothing to be concerned about. Still, I freely admit that as the plane began its final approach to KL, I was more than a little nervous.

Takeoff is exhilarating; landing is terrifying. The tension in a cockpit goes up several notches; pilots become much more focused; radio calls are terse; knobs are twiddled, levers are pulled, and th aircraft shudders as it's reconfigured to return to land. The cockpit visitor spends ages looking out of the window for the strip of concrete that's supposedly out there before finally spotting the bright approach and runway lights in the distance. One pilot describes doing a good landing as more art than science. You want the aircraft gently but firmly to kiss the runway. With the plane now well into its descent, I paused to look around the cockpit and wonder at the marvel that is modern aviation and the pilots at the controls.

While Scott was filming the landing using the big professional TV camera, I decided to film it on my iPhone. I'm not sure why—it seemed like a good idea, and I thought it might give us an extra angle we could use in the show. Hamid, steady as a rock, one hand on the thrust levers, the other on the yoke, eyes never leaving the runway, calmly brought the plane over the threshold as the automati voice called out the minimum heights. Finally, touching the aircraft down, right on the center line, before the spoilers and reverse thrust engaged, slowing the aircraft to taxiing speed.

At this point, Liu announced that Hamid should do the taxi into the terminal to gain experience in steering the much larger aircraft on the ground, which he did effortlessly. When I asked the captain how Hamid had performed, he answered without hesitation that the landing had been "textbook perfect."

With the plane parked at the gate, we prepared to say our goodbyes. There were the inevitable photos taken with the crew. They had been so very kind to us, the least I could do was smile for a quick selfie . . . including the one with Fariq Hamid that would be widely shown weeks later. Today I am relieved that I didn't do my usual joke when taking these photos. Sometimes, when I'm wearing a suit and tie and people ask for selfie photos, I try to make the shot more interesting, so I hold up my tie as if the other person is strangling me. You can see in the photo as I grab the tie, and then think better of it. Thank God I did. It would have been horrible to have such a picture being shown around the world at such a tragic moment. Hamid put that photo onto social media, and as I sat before a stud camera three weeks later, it was very quickly being distributed around the world.

• • •

Now came the moment at CNN when we had to decide what we would do or say, if anything, about this photograph and remarkable coincidence. We had content that gave us a different perspective, and that material was exclusive, including video of one of the pilots flying a plane. This video was on a server in Hong Kong, so the call went out to get it all transferred as soon as possible to the CNN servers in Atlanta, along with anything, and I mean anything, we had from that trip.

Sitting in a small, dark flash studio in the middle of the night, I had an awful feeling about how this coverage might develop. In the vacuum of twenty-four-hour news, as you wait for more details, overzealous producers might start to inflate this small portion of the story, and I would rapidly become part of it. I would be questioned and pushed to say more and more about what had happened on that short flight to Kuala Lumpur. No one intends for this kind of thing to happen; it's just the way it is, and I needed to stop it as soon as I could, but at the same time I had to be realistic. As a network on the biggest story of the night, we had something no one else had. At that point we had no idea how big this story was going to get, or how long it would last. We were dealing with a plane crash, an eve that happens several times a year. These stories typically lead the news for a week or two, depending on the airline and where in the world the crash happened. We did not know we were going to be

dealing with aviation’s biggest mystery.

I sent an email to Mike McCarthy, our senior vice president of CNN International, expressing my reservations and enclosing a draft email I wanted to send to the whole network. “Please use this sympathetically,” I suggested we tell producers. “You are looking at the pilot involved in this accident, flying a 777 three weeks before he probably perished at the controls.” Mike immediately agreed and sent out a network-wide email, adding his own comments that it was “important we give the context around the video.”[2] He noted that while the video was important for our coverage, there had to be “sensitivity in how it is written to.”

The video of Hamid flying the plane was used sparingly. Obviously the *Business Traveller* show from Kuala Lumpur could not be broadcast either that month, or indeed at all. All the material shot i the cockpit, except for a very short clip of Hamid flying the plane, would be shelved. To show more o the material would be a gratuitous intrusion into grief, without adding anything to the understanding of the story.

There were other moments from that visit to Malaysia Airlines that would also be important to m as I covered the story in the days ahead. After we left Zahari and Hamid in the cockpit, we were due t film in the airport and interview the chief executive of Malaysia Airlines, Ahmad Jauhari Yahya, whom everyone called AJ. The interview would be done in the new first-class lounge. MH was proud of its new facility and its enhanced service and comfort. They wanted to show it off to us, as another example of how the airline was changing. It was a good place to talk to the CEO.

AJ is not your typical airline CEO. He is much quieter, less assuming than many of the larger-thar life, boisterous men who tend to make it to his position. As I will discuss later, this different style an temperament, and a lack of experience in running an airline, may have made a difference to the way Malaysia Airlines handled this crisis. For the moment, though, everything I was learning about the airline, and AJ’s plans to turn it around, would, eventually, significantly help me in the coverage of the story once MH370 vanished.

One incident from that February 2014 trip to Kuala Lumpur soon became embarrassing. As Malaysia Airlines was to be featured so prominently in CNN *Business Traveller*, I agreed to be interviewed by *Going Places*, the airline’s in-flight magazine. It was a standard feature in which each month someone is asked the same set of questions. I had completely forgotten that I had done this interview, until in the midst of the crisis I started getting emails from readers wanting to know why I was in the airline’s magazine when I was all over CNN covering the missing plane.

I read the magazine and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. In the end, I cringed. The last question I was asked, “What did you most enjoy about Malaysia Airlines’ famous Malaysian hospitality?” I answered, “Being invited into the cockpit was the highlight by far.” I went on to gloat that it was “a rare treat in this security-conscious day and age . . . It was phenomenal to see two talented professional and experienced pilots handling this magnificent machine.”

All of this was true, and I stand by every word; it just looked in horribly bad taste and was very poorly timed in light of what had just happened and the accusations being thrown about. The magazi interview was the last thing I wanted to have going around while I was front and center of covering this story. It fed the conspiracy theorists who were determined to believe CNN and I were somehow involved in whatever had taken place and had behaved disreputably. We had a short discussion at CN about this article, and, of course, there was nothing we could do about it. We just had to be ready to answer any questions that were raised. It was out there, on the planes, and that was that.

So on March 7, 2014, I found myself in the studios on that Friday night, broadcasting about something that had just happened, about which I had more than a bit of background and in-depth knowledge.

Like many other aviation correspondents and pundits, I had little doubt that the story tomorrow

would be “daylight and the first debris from the missing Malaysia plane has been spotted in the South China Sea . . .” This would then flow into the rhythm that these stories assume. I was wrong. The morning would bring no debris, and the story was about to take some extraordinary turns.

As for that video I took of Hamid landing in Kuala Lumpur, it is still in my iPhone. I can’t delete it. In the days and weeks after MH370 was lost, I would watch it frequently, looking to see if I had missed anything, as if this one-minute ten-second piece of video might give me the answer to what had happened. I studied Hamid’s face, looking at the runway ahead, wondering if he was involved in what happened that night in March. Then I looked at his hands on the thrust levers and wondered if they were the ones that had turned off transponders, reset autopilots, and sent the plane off deep into the south Indian Ocean. Ultimately, I watched the videos we shot on that Hong Kong–to–Kuala Lumpur flight and wondered, Hamid, what *did* happen on that flight to Beijing?

I have racked my brain to recall all the inconsequential chatter we made in the cockpit, and whether there was anything significant, a hint, a scintilla of importance. Something that in hindsight might give a tip-off that he was not in his right mind or was planning anything untoward. Of course, nothing has come to mind, which made listening to all the criticisms of the pilots in the days after all the more difficult. There is, at the moment, not a shred of reason to believe that this young pilot took over the plane, flew it to the south Indian Ocean, and murdered all those on board. Not a shred. To me he seemed a charming, unassuming young pilot who loved flying and who was looking forward to visiting new, exciting destinations.

CHAPTER TWO

KUL TO PEK

Good night Malaysian Three Seven Zero.
—Zaharie or Hamid

On the night of March 7, 2014, passengers began arriving at Kuala Lumpur International Airport to check in for MH370, the overnight red-eye flight to Beijing. The 777 aircraft, with two classes of service, could carry up to 282 passengers; tonight there would be at least fifty empty seats, busy but by no means full.

The passenger mix was exactly the sort one might expect to see on this type of flight. Business travelers making their way between the capital cities after a long week's work, families returning home after a relaxing holiday in Malaysia, groups of workers from the same company who had been a conference, and wanderlust lovers who were heading for an adventurous vacation in Beijing. The oldest passenger on board was seventy-nine-year-old artist Lou Baotang, a calligrapher who had been attending a convention in Kuala Lumpur. The youngest was Weng Moheng, aged just twenty-three months. Reading the passenger manifest, one realizes the passengers, from fourteen countries, clearly came from every walk of life. Old and young, they were the passengers we see every day in the world's airports, weary from long hours of traveling, excited by the adventures ahead or simply happ to be heading home.

In fact, there was nothing remarkable about MH370. It was your typical red-eye flight between tw major destinations, the sort of flight that is the backbone of any airline's route network. Connecting Kuala Lumpur with Beijing, this flight (and its successor flight MH318) was an essential route for Malaysia Airlines. MH370 carried passengers who were traveling point to point between the two capital cities, as well as valuable transfer passengers (known as sixth-freedom traffic) who were usin Kuala Lumpur as a hub, transferring from other destinations. The plane also carried tons of lucrative cargo for the growing electronics industry as well as an assortment of other goods. On paper, MH370 was an important flight for Malaysia Airlines, but otherwise there was nothing that would draw attention to it.

The very timing of the flight, leaving late at night and returning to Malaysia in the afternoon of th next day, was chosen so that passengers could make convenient connections over Malaysia Airlines' Kuala Lumpur hub. In the battle of aviation under way in Asia, Kuala Lumpur prides itself on being one of the fastest-growing hubs, promising speedy connections, where passengers from Europe and Australasia can connect.

The flight was crucial for Malaysia Airlines as it built up its business with Chinese travelers. To d this, the airline would often discount tickets in the Chinese market, attracting Chinese passengers wh wanted to connect through Malaysia to other domestic destinations as well as regional flights in Southeast Asia, and, of course, on to Europe. More than 65 percent of the passengers on board the

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