

## THE TRAGEDY OF FLIGHT 800

# Cargo door shows no sign of bomb; search continues

ASSOCIATED PRESS

EAST MORICHES, N.Y. — Tests failed to show bomb traces on a piece of the front cargo door from TWA Flight 800, a source said Thursday, dimming hopes for proof that a blast in the hold shattered the 747 in midair.

A source close to the investigation, who spoke to the Associated Press on the condition of anonymity, said the door did not show

traces of bomb residue and did not have scars usually left by an exploding bomb.

In an inspection of the door, "Nothing ... jumps out at us," the source said. "Nothing that looks like it is going to get us closer" to proving what destroyed the plane. "We have to find the piece where it was blown up," the source said.

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## Bomb leads list of possible causes

Authorities continue to study three possible causes:  
 ● **BOMB ABOARD:** The leading theory. Investigators are studying whether a bomb could have been placed in the hold, the nose wheel or in a food cart.  
 ● **MISSILE:** Hard to ignore. Numerous eyewitnesses from various vantage points who say they saw unusual streaks of light

in the sky prior to the explosion. This theory has been spoken of less in recent days as the bomb theory has moved to the front.  
 ● **MECHANICAL:** Sources say this theory holds only a 5 percent to 10 percent chance of being responsible. Investigators are studying these possibilities: fuel tank explosion, major structural failure and an engine explosion.



The mission of the USS Penobscot Bay, above, is to monitor the security zone while Navy divers search for the wreckage of TWA Flight 800 jet. Below, Coast Guard crewmen arrive in a Zodiac boat.

## ON THEIR GUARD

# Aboard ship: Grim work drags on

By ANGELA PASCOPELLA  
Staff writer

**ABOARD THE USS PENOBSCOT BAY** — Under a cloudy, foreboding sky mixed with fog and engulfed in six-foot swells, the Coast Guard cutter Penobscot Bay chugged about its mission Wednesday.

The 17 men aboard the 140-foot icebreaker carried on their typical routines — cooking hot lunches for the crew, checking the engine room for problems and steering the ship on a southwesterly course to the security zone.

The security zone is what the Coast Guard has been enforcing for the past two weeks, since TWA Flight 800 exploded and crashed in the Atlantic Ocean July 17. It has a 5-mile radius outside the crash site and it lies about eight miles southeast of East Moriches, Long Island.

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# 'We try not to get too involved'

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Since day two of the search and rescue mission, the cutter has been going continuously, except for a two-day break.

"This mission has changed from a search for survivors to a search for loved ones that haven't been reunited yet," said Seaman Vincent Sammarco, who steered the ship toward the zone as fog rolled across the seascape. "The security zone is to keep civilian vessels out ... keep them out of the way of Navy divers. When people come in they ... get curious and they get in the way."

Most boaters are curious, but many are respectful of the search. "A lot of them will come out and call the Coast Guard and say, 'I know there's a zone out there. Where is it and where can I go?'" said the executive officer, Lt. j.g. Brian Finney, a 12-year Coast Guard veteran and father of 11- and 13-year-olds.

In the distance, about eight miles east of the Penobscot, the captain and executive officer study the Navy's gray USS Oak Hill, in charge of naval underwater operations, and USS Grapple and USS Grasp, salvage ships. They look like tiny plastic toys from a child's bathtub game, obscured by the fog. No action can be seen from the Penobscot.

About 150 divers from the

Navy, Suffolk County and Nassau County Police and New York State Police are expected to pull up a main section of the fuselage by Tuesday, using slings to hoist the wreckage, according to Chief Warrant Officer Dexter McKinney, a 19-year veteran and father of two.

"We try not to get too emotionally involved ... in the pain, the suffering and the sadness of the whole thing ... because it would affect our performance. Emotionally, we have to control ourselves and maintain a certain standing professionally," McKinney said as the Penobscot rolled back and forth, leaving at least one Coast Guardsman sick.

Petty Officer John Carroll, the ship's cook who offered saltine crackers and Sprite to ill civilians aboard, said that finding a stuffed animal, a replica of one his 3-year-old son has, was tough. "I said to myself they [the plane victims] went to a much better place and they left one home and they left things behind and it's our responsibility to go pick them up," said Carroll, 33.

As the cutter's exhaust pumped out diesel fumes that left a stench while it patrolled one side of the zone to keep boaters and fishermen away, the crew talked about long days and nights, when sleep was a luxury aboard an often-heaving ship.

They talked about constantly

peering across the water, looking for remnants of the plane.

Oncoming waves Wednesday rolled over the rounded bow of the ship and sent foam-green sheets of water across the decks before roaring through the scuppers, or drains.

"It gets very tiring, it's tiring on the eyes and when the weather is rough ... you get bounced around a lot," said Finney, as the ship's radio squawked with messages from other search and rescue craft.

Petty Officer Thomas Ponte, a 28-year-old Newington native, was awaiting time in his "rack" — the seafarer's term for a bed. "I haven't seen it since 1 this morning," said Ponte, as it approached 11 a.m. in the galley and the television above flickered with images from the Olympic Games in Atlanta.

"Most [missions] it's not this much debris. Most times you know where the vessel has gone down, or where the person went overboard. This was a 320-square-mile search area," Ponte noted.

The days of finding dozens of pieces — from a Mickey Mouse doll and Pampers to dinner trays and seat cushions — have been washed away with the current. Although the Penobscot Bay has found more than 500 items of debris, including pieces 60 miles off the Long Island shore, Wednesday they did not find a thing.

The day's mission was cut short

when a storm rolled in with 40 mph winds, and 8- to 12-foot swells. The storm forced closure of Penobscot's Shinnecock Inlet base to returning vessels because seas were running too high. That left the cutter to head to fight its way to the Governor's Island station at the tip of Manhattan.

This grim assignment is unusual for the Penobscot. Its customary role is smashing winter ice in the Hudson River so tankers can deliver heating oil.

But in summer, the cutter enforces commercial fishing laws and rescues sailors from sinking boats or those lost overboard. The searches are often of short duration, lasting no more than 36 hours.

"This is kind of [our] turn to assist in the big one," said Lt. John J. Arenstam, the commanding officer and father of two young children. "Everybody, no matter what your job or your occupation, you want the big one. You want the Olympics, you want the biggest story, you want Watergate ... In our case you don't want it to happen. But if it does, it's nice to be able to be part of that big one."

But Arenstam added that regardless of the enormity of the crash, lives were lost. "Whether it's one [death] or 230 it's still a tragedy," said Arenstam. "But this is what you do. This is why you joined."