

## Aviators IG Interesting News #12 – Pushed to the limits

**Aviators IG interesting facts:** Singaporean singer JJ Lin (林俊杰)'s 2013 song *Practice Love* (修煉愛情) from the album *Stories Untold* (因你而在) is based on this accident, as a close friend of the artist was killed on the flight.

### **Brief Summary**

SilkAir Flight MI 185, while on its way to Singapore from the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, nosedived into Musi River near the city of Palembang in South Sumatra, Indonesia, on 19 December 1997 at about 4.13 pm local time. The plane was almost completely destroyed and all 104 people on board were killed. There have been differing opinions as to what caused the crash, but official investigations found no conclusive evidence to support any particular theory. After the incident, SilkAir stopped using the number MI 185 for its daily afternoon Jakarta–Singapore flight.

### **Description**

The plane left Jakarta's Soekarno-Hatta International Airport at 3.37 pm local time and was scheduled to arrive at Singapore Changi Airport at 6.05 p.m. Singapore time. Of the 104 people on board, 46 were Singaporeans, including the pilot, five other crew members and 40 passengers. One of these passengers was Bonny Hicks, a model-turned-writer who sparked a controversy in Singapore in 1990 with her book *Excuse Me, Are You a Model?*

At 4.10.18 pm local time, the Jakarta air traffic control (ATC) informed MI 185 that it was abeam Palembang and instructed it to maintain its cruising level of 35,000 ft and to contact the Singapore ATC when at PARDI, an ATC reporting point. MI 185 acknowledged the message at 4.10.26 p.m. local time – this was the last communication between the Jakarta ATC and MI 185. The Jakarta ATC radar recording showed that the plane was still at 35,000 ft at 4.12.09 pm local time, but had plunged to 19,500 ft 32 seconds later, shortly before it hit Musi River in Sungsang district.

The aircraft was a 10-month-old Boeing 737-300 and was the newest in SilkAir's fleet. It had been flying in clear weather and had not sent out any distress signals prior to the crash. A witness claimed that there was an explosion before the plane plunged into the river, but investigators later found no evidence of this.



*Figure 1: The aircraft involved in the accident*

### **Recovery operations**

What started as a search and rescue mission soon turned into a search and recovery operation, as it quickly became clear that there was little hope of finding survivors. As the plane had broken up in mid-air and crashed into the river at high speed, both the aircraft and the people on board were severely disintegrated.

Search operations focused on the murky waters of Musi River, while air and land searches were also carried out. Parts of the empennage (tail portion) were found on land, but most of the wreckage was recovered from the river within an area of about 60 m by 80 m. When recovery operations ended in mid-January 1998, 73 percent of the plane (based on its empty weight) had been recovered.

Most of the recovered wreckage comprised small mangled pieces. Two of the most significant finds were the flight data recorder (FDR) and the cockpit voice recorder (CVR), which together formed the aircraft's so-called "black box". The human remains were similarly fragmented – various body parts were recovered, but there were no intact remains. Only six victims could be positively identified from the remains.



*Figure 2: The aircraft remains recovered from the site*

### Memorial for the victims

A mass burial for the victims was held on 19 January 1998. SilkAir has since erected a memorial at the burial site, located within the Kebun Bunga (Botanical Gardens) near Palembang. This is the final resting place for all the victims' remains except those of three identified victims that were flown back home. Another memorial stands at Choa Chu Kang cemetery in Singapore. Also paid for by SilkAir, this black marble memorial was unveiled in December 1998.



*Figure 3: Families paying their respect to their loved ones involved in the crash*

### Investigations

The National Transportation Safety Committee (NTSC) of Indonesia led the official investigations, with assistance from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) of the United States (US), the Singapore Ministry of Communications and Information Technology and the Australian Bureau of Air Safety Investigation. As part of the investigations, the black box and other aircraft components were examined by experts in Indonesia, Australia, France and the US.

According to the final report released on 14 December 2000, both the CVR and the FDR had stopped recording shortly before impact but at different times – the CVR at 4.05 pm and the FDR at 4.11 pm. The NTSC found that the recorders had not malfunctioned, but it could not explain why they stopped and why the stoppages occurred at different times. In fact, the NTSC found no evidence to firmly support any of the possible explanations for the crash, including mechanical or electrical failure, weather, air traffic control and pilot action. It attributed the lack of conclusion to the absence of data from the recorders for the plane's final moments and the severe fragmentation of the wreckage.

Of all the scenarios considered, the most disturbing was that of pilot suicide. The mysterious circumstances surrounding the tragedy sparked early speculation that the pilot had committed suicide at the controls. When investigations uncovered his disciplinary problems at SilkAir and financial troubles, the speculation intensified. In August 1999, the NTSC suggested in an interim update that the crash could have been intentional. This led to the Singapore police being called in to investigate whether the incident was indeed a case of suicide-cum-murder. However, the police eventually concluded that there was no evidence that the pilot or any other crew member had the intention or motive to commit suicide by causing the crash. Although the

NTSC also took this stand in its final report, the US NTSB concluded separately that the cause was intentional pilot action and this later became the basis of a 2001 lawsuit filed in Singapore against SilkAir.



Figure 4: A brief image of MI185 flight plan on that day of the accident

### **Lawsuits and compensation**

The incident led to several lawsuits in Singapore and the US against SilkAir, Boeing and other manufacturers of the aircraft's parts. Many of these cases were eventually settled out of court. The first trial took place in the Singapore high court in 2001, where the families of six victims sued SilkAir for negligence and sought higher damages than what the airline had offered. The basis of their lawsuit was that the pilot or co-pilot had caused the crash. However the judge dismissed the case; their subsequent appeal was also rejected. Most of the other families had accepted SilkAir's compensation of between US\$140,000 and US\$200,000 per victim.

Boeing and several aircraft-part manufacturers were also sued in various US states by over 30 families of the victims. In 2004, in the first US trial, the jury in the Los Angeles superior court found that defects in the plane's rudder control system were to blame and the court ordered the manufacturer Parker Hannifin to pay US\$43.6 million to the families of three victims; neither Boeing nor SilkAir were found to be at fault. Evidence of the faulty rudder had been recovered in 2003. After news of the discovery emerged, Boeing dropped its claim that pilot suicide had caused the crash and withdrew its lawsuit against SilkAir, and SilkAir's insurer likewise dropped its lawsuit against Boeing.

Till this day, the mystery incident remains unclear whether it was a deliberate act by one of the pilot of the aircraft or it was a defect with the model of the aircraft. Nevertheless, the case is closed due to inconclusive results. In the aftermath of the crash, as well as with worsening conditions for Asian aviation in general due to the financial crisis, SilkAir terminated its Singapore-Jakarta service, and has not returned since.

Prior to the crash, the route was served by both SilkAir and parent company Singapore Airlines; as of 2017, the route, which is the second-busiest international route in the world, is served by Singapore Airlines and its budget offshoot Scoot, which combined, serve Jakarta a combined 79 times weekly (up to 12 daily flights).

### **References:**

Crash of SilkAir Flight MI 185:

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