

TWA 800 Explosion Report

Flt. No. BBE 507	07/17/96	Eastwind Airlines	Destination: KTTN
B-737-200	N221US	O/O Time: 1951/2010L	O/I time:2101/2103L
Capt: D. McClaine #203	F/O: V. Fuschetti 215	Domicile: GSO	
Occurrence Location: Hampton 236 Radial 20 DME	Occurrence Time: About 2030 Local	Wx Conditions: High Cirrus Clouds. Dusk, 40 vis.	

Report: Flying over the Sandy Point VOR we asked for the 247 Radial off Sandy Point to intercept the Hampton 236 Radial (V-139), and were denied because of traffic. So we proceeded to Hampton as we were filed and on the way were told to descend from FL 240 to FL 200. Just prior to the descent; I spotted TWA 800 which appeared to have either one landing light ON, or two very close together ON. It was a very bright light and was moving somewhat toward us, but still crossing our path from right to left. The light was a little off color for a landing light so at first I thought it might be a fire, but didn't see any smoke trail which should have still been visible at the time if there were one. So I passed it off as a landing light from a very large aircraft such as a B-747 which appeared to be just out of JFK. It was definitely the brightest light in the sky.

Just as we were about to level off at FL200 we were told to descend to 16,000 MSL with a good rate through FL180. Passing through FL 180 we turned over Hampton to intercept the 236 Radial. Passing 17,000 feet I flicked ON my left inboard landing light to signal the other aircraft, (TWA 800) that I had him in sight. The aircraft appeared then to be slightly left of our 12:00 position (about on the Hampton 236 Radial) and at about 15,000-13,000 feet MSL at about 15-19 DME. As I flicked on the light the other aircraft exploded into a very large ball of flames. Almost immediately two flaming objects, with flames trailing about 4000 feet behind them, fell out of the bottom of the ball of flame. It was too dark to identify any objects or see any debris. (I thought the objects to be the wings, which were full of fuel.)

I immediately called BOS ATC and reported an inflight explosion out over the water, I stated this twice but didn't get an immediate reply. ATC then issued a couple of instructions to at least two other aircraft, routine messages. Then another aircraft; Lufthansa, I think, reported that there was indeed an inflight explosion and gave a position report off JFK. I then came back and stated that the explosion and column of smoke was on the Hampton 236 Radial at 20 DME; which at this time was right where we were. The smoke column was just to our left side. Another couple of aircraft came up and also reported seeing fire falling into the sea. ATC then started a short roll call. My First Officer then said to me that he thought it was TWA 800. ATC called TWA 800 a couple of times with no reply. I then said to ATC, "I think that's them." He replied, "I think you're right." I then said, "God Bless them."

F/O Fuschetti and I then quickly discussed orbiting the sight or whatever action we could take. Since ATC made no request we decided to continue on to Trenton because of the darkness below, passengers on board and our fuel state. We were then handed off to New York ATC and told to descend to 12,000 feet with following descents to 4000 feet. During the descent to 4000 feet a Navy plane called New York for vectors to the scene so he could help out. We told him it was on the Hampton 236 radial at 20DME and offered our help to New York. We were then switched over to McGuire ATC for our approach into Trenton. The rest of the evening went uneventful. I did call Eastwind Dispatch at Trenton to report the explosion and at Greensboro once more called and spoke to the Dispatcher and the Director of Operations for Eastwind Airlines.

Prior to the explosion I did not see any missile, air to air or ground to air, as I have seen in the press. I did mention this to my F/O just after the explosion. I still think it was a landing light I saw that was ON the other the aircraft,(TWA 800) but can't rule out that it may have been an engine or wing fire due to the color of the light and its brightness. I'm not that familiar with a B-747 landing lights.