

DOCKET NO. SA-516

APPENDIX U

**NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, DC**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT
NYANG CAPT. CHARLES PALMER
JANUARY 11, 1997
(23 pages)**

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BEFORE THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20594

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IN THE MATTER OF TWA FLIGHT :
800; INTERVIEW OF: :
CAPT. CHARLES A. PALMER. :
- - - - - X

TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

The above entitled matter came on for interview pursuant to notice before NORM WIEMEYER, NTSB Official, at the New York Air National Facilities in Westhampton Beach, New York, on January 11, 1997.

1 APPEARANCES:

2

3 NORM WIEMEYER

4 NTSB Official

5

6 TERRY STACEY

7 Trans World Airlines Representative

8

9 LOU BURNS

10 Air Line Pilots Association

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12 SCOTT METCALF

13 Federal Bureau of Investigation

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15 AL CLEMENS

16 Federal Aviation Administration

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WITNESS:

CAPT. CHARLES A. PALMER/C-130 Navigator, New York Air
National Guard.

(Tape 1, Side A, first interview.)

(No exhibits were presented or accepted into evidence
at or as a result of this interview.)

1 PROCEEDINGS

2 MR. WIEMEYER: The date is January 11th,
3 1997. We're at the facilities of the New York Air
4 National Guard, in Westhampton Beach, New York.

5 At the present time we are conducting an
6 interview with Capt. Charles Palmer, who was a -- the
7 navigator on the C-130 on July 17th, 1996.

8 Good morning, Capt. Palmer. I'd like to
9 start out by asking you some administrative questions.
10 Could you please state your full name and spell your
11 last name, please.

12 CAPT. PALMER: Charles A. Palmer,
13 P-A-L-M-E-R.

14 MR. WIEMEYER: And an address that we can
15 meet you at?

16 CAPT. PALMER: Yes, 150 Riverhead Road,
17 Westhampton Beach, New York, 11978.

18 MR. WIEMEYER: And do you have a telephone
19 number that you could give us?

20 CAPT. PALMER: (516) 288-7432.

21 MR. WIEMEYER: I understand that you were the
22 navigator on the C-130 that was flying off of the coast
23 of Long Island on January 7 -- or July 17th, is that
24 correct?

25 CAPT. PALMER: Correct.

1 MR. WIEMEYER: Would you briefly tell us what
2 you experienced during that flight and where the
3 aircraft located during those experiences.

4 CAPT. PALMER: Okay. It was about 2030 hours
5 on the night of July 17th. We were about nine to 10
6 miles south of the Hampton vortac, over the water, and
7 we were basically coming around on a left turn -- left-
8 left turn and going in a southerly direction to do some
9 search pattern work. So, we were coming around 3-3-0,
10 2-7-0, 2-2-0, then going out a 1-8-0 heading.

11 So, while we were basically in a southerly
12 direction, at about 1,000 feet, we saw like a flash
13 over at our 1:00 o'clock, 1:30 position on -- out of
14 the cockpit area. One of -- one of -- one of the guys
15 up in the front said, "Hey, what's that over there?"

16 So, the radio operator and I, we kind of got
17 up 'cause we just had to move a little bit forward to
18 see what was going on. And we said, "Wow!" It was
19 like a -- like a -- like a flash of light.

20 So, we turned the aircraft over in that
21 direction and said, let's head over for there. So,
22 that was probably about a -- I don't know -- 2-3-0,
23 2-4-0, heading to get over there.

24 So, we're chugging along over there. And we
25 had gotten radio communication from one of our

1 helicopters -- I think it was colonel -- Maj. Meyer's
2 crew that he had said there was still some -- some kind
3 of debris in the air, and stuff like that.

4 So, we kind of backed off the speed a little
5 bit, not to get there as quick. So -- but we were
6 still headed right at 12:00 o'clock position where we
7 saw the -- the -- like, the fire and the flames and
8 stuff.

9 When we basically got to the position --
10 actually, before we got to the position, it almost like
11 -- like you could see the silhouette of like -- like
12 a -- like a boat. Like it had the same kind of
13 silhouette kind of like a fat -- kind of like an oblong
14 shape. So, I had thought, wow, it looked like a boat.
15 'Cause usually on a night like that in July you usually
16 typically think of boats around here on the island and,
17 you know, Westhampton Beach.

18 So -- but as we got closer it just looked --
19 well, of course, as you got closer then, of course, you
20 saw more of the flames. So -- so, what I did as soon
21 as we got there and we saw it -- of course, I marked
22 the position exactly where we were, and I got a GPS
23 coordinate and I got it off the sub-contained
24 navigation system.

25 And I gave that position to the radio

1 operator, who then in turn called our Supervisor of
2 Flying here to show what -- that there was some kind of
3 fire, or something going on here at this location. So,
4 I gave him that. And then, for boats or anybody else
5 that wanted to come out, I then quick plotted a radio
6 and beamed me off Hampton and off Kabresky too, so if
7 anybody took off out of here they could just truck on a
8 radio out of here, or off Hampton too -- they can just
9 cross -- you know, cross and they know exactly where we
10 are.

11 So, we started circling around. And
12 basically one of the guys up front, of course, said,
13 wow, that looks like a -- like a plane, or something.
14 You can just see the silhouette. And we were probably
15 still at -- at that point we were probably still at
16 1,000 feet, maybe 800 feet. We -- we weren't down low
17 at that point.

18 We got there probably within six minutes from
19 the time we saw it. It happened about 8:00 -- I guess
20 it was about 8:32, 8:33, somewhere in there. And we
21 were on-scene by like 8:40, 8:42. Somewhere in there.

22 So, we were circling around. We started
23 get -- radio communicating with our Supervisor of
24 Flying, of course, immediately. And I don't know if it
25 was him that was on-line, or it might've been the radio

1 operator, that actually started talking to Moriches
2 Coast Guard station, as far as what we saw, what was
3 happening.

4 The Navy began relaying us information that
5 they had a boat I think in the area of two -- maybe
6 about two or three miles off the coast. But I wasn't
7 sure really where the boat -- where the boats were at
8 that point. So, we were just circling, circling.

9 And -- and then our -- and our helicopter,
10 then, was on-scene, too -- both of them. And they were
11 communicating 'cause they were down low. They were
12 more at about 100 feet. We were talking to Maj.
13 Meyer's crew; and he was telling what he was seeing.
14 And he was -- well, he'll tell you, of course, what --
15 what he saw when he comes in.

16 But he was -- we were communicating with him,
17 what he was seeing; and where he was at; was he south
18 or north; and kind of where the drift was, and stuff
19 like that.

20 And -- so we were on-scene -- let's see.
21 That was 9:00 o'clock. Boy, we didn't come back to the
22 base until, like -- was it about 11:00? Maybe 11:00,
23 11:30 is when we actually came back here.

24 And we had talked to some of the NTSB guys at
25 that point -- I guess -- I don't know if they were from

1 NTSB or -- I'm not sure. But, basically, they kind of
2 gathered us up in the conference room about midnight,
3 12:30. And then we actually wound up going out again.

4 We went up again to see what any kind of work
5 we could -- or any help we could provide. And then, I
6 guess somebody had come up with a -- kind of an idea or
7 two -- being it was so dark -- to illuminate the area,
8 is basically what we had said that we could actually do
9 some flares to be able light up the area. So, some of
10 the people who were scanning actually thought it was
11 good because then they were able to see what they
12 were -- you know, they could see some of the debris
13 from the wreckage, and stuff.

14 By the time we left here it was like 4:00 in
15 the morning, by the time the crews left; debriefed;
16 they fed people; and stuff like that.

17 MR. WIEMEYER: What other aircraft were in
18 the area?

19 CAPT. PALMER: It was the helicopters, us,
20 and just the boats.

21 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. When you said
22 helicopter, that's two helicopters?

23 CAPT. PALMER: Yeah. Was it? Geez, I tell
24 you. It's something, like, to try to --

25 (Pause)

1 CAPT. PALMER: I guess it was two. Yeah. It
2 was Meyer, Ruvola. Yeah, I guess it was two. Yeah.
3 But I tell you, I can't believe wouldn't remember a
4 major point like that at this point. But, yeah, two.

5 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Did you happen to keep
6 the fox -- the work that you did with regards to being
7 able to guide people out there and where you were
8 located, and things?

9 CAPT. PALMER: Did I give that to the -- I
10 know I showed it to the NTSB guys when we had the
11 debrief, 'cause when I came in I figured they'd want to
12 see that. So, I put the paperwork together, the chart.
13 And I kind of, like, just put it together as a folder.
14 And I brought it in there. And they did review it, but
15 they didn't take it from me.

16 I don't know if that would still be in my
17 bag, or not. I'm not really sure. But it was reviewed
18 by the guys that night. You know --

19 MR. WIEMEYER: Well, the --

20 CAPT. PALMER: -- they showed exactly where
21 we were, and I showed them. And I -- you know, I
22 showed them where the wreckage was. And then, some of
23 the other aircraft; like, where the Coast Guard boat
24 was. Where they -- the direction they were going. I
25 kind of like put that on there --

1 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.

2 CAPT. PALMER: -- approximately where they
3 were.

4 MR. WIEMEYER: If you wouldn't mind checking
5 your bag and see if you still have --

6 CAPT. PALMER: Okay.

7 MR. WIEMEYER: -- that. If you do have it,
8 we would like to make a -- some copies of it. That
9 would --

10 CAPT. PALMER: Okay.

11 MR. WIEMEYER: -- be very helpful to us.

12 CAPT. PALMER: Okay.

13 MR. WIEMEYER: Did you have GPS aboard the
14 130?

15 CAPT. PALMER: Yes.

16 MR. WIEMEYER: Were you using it?

17 CAPT. PALMER: Yes.

18 MR. WIEMEYER: Did -- and do you have those
19 plots?

20 CAPT. PALMER: They would've been on the
21 chart, too. On the paperwork.

22 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.

23 CAPT. PALMER: Yeah.

24 MR. WIEMEYER: They -- do you recall the Navy
25 P-3 being in the area?

1 CAPT. PALMER: Yeah, now -- they -- yeah, he
2 was there later. Later. Yeah.

3 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Is there anything else
4 about the distribution of the wreckage that you can
5 be -- that you saw on the water that you can be real
6 specific about?

7 CAPT. PALMER: Well, like I was saying, it
8 was -- it was, actually, almost kind of like a long
9 football field. Like, kind of like oblong. And -- and
10 it was just a lot of flames, and stuff like that.

11 It was just really scattered in kind of a
12 general area. Like, in an oblong football. Like --
13 like, you didn't see stuff scattered, like, all over
14 the place. It was very -- I don't want to say
15 contained. But I -- I -- yes, it was very -- somewhat
16 contained.

17 And that was the -- the -- the stuff was,
18 like, burning. As far as other stuff that was -- like,
19 seats and rafts, and stuff like that, that was -- that
20 was more scattered. That kind of thing -- but that
21 wasn't on fire though.

22 But what -- when you're up at 1,000 feet you
23 can actually see, like, the silhouette of the whole --
24 of the whole wreckage, and everything. So, that was
25 more contained. Whereas other stuff that wasn't on

1 fire -- seats, rafts, you know, a couple -- that was --
2 was -- was actually more spread out around.

3 MR. WIEMEYER: Did you see anything that you
4 could -- that you specifically recognized? Or that you
5 could --

6 CAPT. PALMER: No.

7 MR. WIEMEYER: -- identify?

8 CAPT. PALMER: The helicopter crews, when we
9 were talking to them had said that they had seen the --
10 the tail was up and you could see the TWA fin, and
11 stuff. So, we had got that communication from them.

12 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Great. Okay. I'm
13 going to go off the record for just a second here.

14 (Whereupon, a brief recess was taken.)

15 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Lou?

16 MR. BURNS: Hi, I'm Lou Burns, with the ALPA.
17 What's your position within the airplane?

18 Where do you physically --

19 CAPT. PALMER: I -- you have the pilot and
20 co-pilot up front. The flight engineer is a little bit
21 behind him the middle. And then, I sit right to the
22 fourth -- like this and here's the flight engineer.

23 MR. BURNS: Okay.

24 CAPT. PALMER: I'm like, maybe -- geez --
25 two -- I'm not even a -- 18 inches from him; off his

1 4:00 o'clock position. And the radio operator's behind
2 him in the 6:00 o'clock position, a little bit more
3 back from me.

4 MR. BURNS: And when you -- you describe as
5 you -- in the turn at your 1:00 o'clock position you
6 saw a flash?

7 CAPT. PALMER: Right. That's when I got up
8 and went into the window. And it was over that way.

9 MR. BURNS: Yeah.

10 CAPT. PALMER: About 1:00 -- 1:00, 1:30. At
11 a southerly heading. About 1-8-9, 1-9-0. And then it
12 was over -- over this way. On a south -- due south
13 heading.

14 MR. BURNS: What did you see after the flash?
15 Did --

16 CAPT. PALMER: Basically, what you saw was --
17 when we were that far away at that point still -- like,
18 eight, nine miles away -- you saw the flash on the
19 ground. You saw --

20 MR. BURNS: Oh.

21 CAPT. PALMER: -- the fiery stuff on the
22 ground, then.

23 The guys in the front said -- well, they'll
24 tell you what they saw. They more conveyed that they
25 saw something actually come down. By the time I -- by

1 the time they said they saw something and then I got up
2 maybe two or three seconds later -- five seconds. The
3 only thing I had seen on the ground already at that
4 point was like -- like I say, it almost looked like --
5 I even commented on the light thing. I said, "That
6 looks like a boat that kind of, like, blew its stack,
7 or something." Like, you see like a fiery thing. You
8 know, being, like, eight, nine miles away at that
9 point.

10 MR. BURNS: Thank you, that's all I have.

11 MR. WIEMEYER: Al.

12 MR. CLEMENS: Al Clemens, with the FAA.

13 What altitude were you flying at when you
14 first noticed the --

15 CAPT. PALMER: 1,000 feet.

16 MR. CLEMENS: 1,000 feet. What was the
17 highest altitude the aircraft obtained during the
18 mission that you were on? How do you --

19 CAPT. PALMER: No greater than 1,500.

20 MR. CLEMENS: So, you basically
21 stayed 1,500 --

22 CAPT. PALMER: Right.

23 MR. CLEMENS: -- to --

24 CAPT. PALMER: I think to do the search
25 pattern and to do the maneuvers we were doing, we were

1 going to duck down and do it at 1,000 feet.

2 MR. CLEMENS: So, the time you left your base
3 until the time you spotted the incident --

4 CAPT. PALMER: We were basically
5 constantly --

6 MR. CLEMENS: A 1,000 --

7 CAPT. PALMER: -- between and 1,500 feet.

8 MR. CLEMENS: -- feet.

9 Did you happen to make a plot of the wreckage
10 when you were leaving the last time?

11 CAPT. PALMER: When you left on our -- when
12 we came back here --

13 MR. CLEMENS: When you came back --

14 CAPT. PALMER: -- about 11:00, 12:00 o'clock
15 at night?

16 MR. CLEMENS: Right. You came back about
17 11:00 or 12:00 o'clock at night.

18 CAPT. PALMER: As we were circulating over --
19 and I was updating just to see -- you know, to see what
20 the difference was between the self-contained
21 navigation system and the GPS. And they were pretty
22 much within a tenth, or two-tenths of each other.

23 I was updating the SCNS on the position just
24 so the front co-pilot and pilot could get a position;
25 you know, in case they wanted to read out displays

1 there, I'll do a GPS integration.

2 When we left the plane I had --

3 (Pause)

4 CAPT. PALMER: I might've said it was, like,
5 off the same radio and VME off Kabresky. That was
6 about it. I was off by just a coordinate, though.

7 MR. CLEMENS: But that would be in the
8 records. So that if there was any drift of the
9 wreckage it would be shown?

10 CAPT. PALMER: Yeah, it would show it. Yeah.
11 But, basically, when people were saying that they saw
12 stuff here, they saw stuff here, they saw stuff here,
13 north and south of it -- I kind of stuck with the same
14 just because as soon as anybody got within a half a
15 mile of where they -- where they wanted to go, they
16 knew they were there. So, getting it to -- like, to
17 right to the tenth of a degree, I didn't feel at that
18 point it was really that imperative, 'cause people were
19 saying they were here; then another helicopter said he
20 saw something here; then the wreckage was here.

21 So, it was, like -- as long as it was, like,
22 within a tenth -- 'cause you knew when you were on-
23 scene that this was it. So -- so --

24 MR. CLEMENS: You said you recognized rafts
25 as part of the debris that you were looking at?

1 CAPT. PALMER: Yeah, 'cause we had popped
2 down a little bit more. And we had -- you know, there
3 were -- you could see, like, rafts and stuff like that.
4 Like, inflated rafts. Anything that was bigger.
5 Anything that was small we were still up high, 'cause
6 the helicopters were down at -- you know, like --
7 maybe, like, 100, 150 feet -- whatever. We didn't go
8 down that low, though.

9 MR. CLEMENS: But you think the rafts were
10 inflated?

11 CAPT. PALMER: Yeah. Right. Uh-uh.

12 And the helicopters were from main end to
13 west end. You know, they -- they saw the inflated
14 rafts but, of course, nobody was on them. You know,
15 'cause we -- I think our aircraft might've -- might've
16 prompted -- of course, we were trying to gather
17 informations for our radio operator to get stuff back.
18 Did you see anybody in them? Were there any live
19 personnel? And the message back to -- from the
20 helicopter to us was, you know, there was no live
21 per -- you know, there were no live people.

22 MR. CLEMENS: And did you see the flash in
23 the air? Or only the --

24 CAPT. PALMER: I actually --

25 MR. CLEMENS: -- the one --

1 CAPT. PALMER: -- saw it when it was actually
2 on the ground.

3 MR. CLEMENS: And not in the air at all?

4 CAPT. PALMER: No.

5 MR. CLEMENS: Thank you. That's all I have.

6 MR. WIEMEYER: Scott?

7 MR. METCALF: This is Scott Metcalf, FBI. No
8 questions.

9 MR. STACEY: Charlie, I'm Terry Stacey, a 747
10 pilot with TWA. Did -- do you have any idea of the
11 approximate length and width of the football field
12 debris you described?

13 CAPT. PALMER: Oh, man.

14 (Pause)

15 CAPT. PALMER: Hmm. Let's see. A thousand
16 feet rough -- pretty well.

17 (Pause)

18 CAPT. PALMER: I'd say maybe three, 400
19 yards.

20 MR. STACEY: Okay. You --

21 CAPT. PALMER: And that was a fat -- it was
22 just like that (demonstrates with hands). It was
23 almost, like, an oblong-thing kind of a thing.

24 MR. STACEY: Okay. When you went back the
25 second time around midnight, or so --

1 CAPT. PALMER: Yeah. I think we left about
2 1:00, 1:30. Then we landed back here about 3:30.

3 MR. STACEY: Was the -- what was the change
4 in the debris at that time? Was it still burning?

5 CAPT. PALMER: It was definitely still
6 burning. Was -- was it as intense?

7 (Pause)

8 CAPT. PALMER: I don't think it was as
9 intense at that point. But it was still burning at
10 that point.

11 MR. STACEY: Was it active debris on -- it
12 was debris on the water, you think, with the fuel,
13 obviously? Or was it just the fuel?

14 CAPT. PALMER: Hmm. It might've been just
15 the fuel -- yeah. It could, maybe.

16 MR. STACEY: And --

17 CAPT. PALMER: 'Cause when we were doing our
18 maneuvers at that point to lighting up and -- then --
19 then we had to stay pretty high for the flares to do
20 their things, you know, just keep it -- and then they
21 basically -- and then they just go out. So, we were up
22 pretty high at that point.

23 So, we -- we never did any low -- any low
24 kind of stuff; 'cause at that point there were so many
25 people on-scene that there was no sense in us getting

1 down at that point. So, we just basically stayed
2 pretty high.

3 MR. STACEY: Okay. You were interviewed, you
4 indicated, when you came back --

5 CAPT. PALMER: On the first time.

6 MR. STACEY: On the first time --

7 CAPT. PALMER: Right.

8 MR. STACEY: By, you believe, the NTSB?

9 CAPT. PALMER: Geez, oh. I tell you. Yeah,
10 I guess it was the NTSB was out here.

11 MR. STACEY: Were you interviewed --

12 CAPT. PALMER: We did --

13 MR. STACEY: -- subsequent --

14 CAPT. PALMER: -- it as a group. We did it
15 as a group.

16 MR. STACEY: Okay. But --

17 CAPT. PALMER: Our whole crew was there.

18 MR. STACEY: Okay.

19 CAPT. PALMER: We didn't do any separate.

20 MR. STACEY: But were you interviewed
21 subsequent to that?

22 CAPT. PALMER: No. No. No.

23 MR. STACEY: No further questions, then.

24 MR. WIEMEYER: I have a couple of follow-ups,
25 Charlie.

1 When -- were you designated as the on-scene
2 commander?

3 CAPT. PALMER: No.

4 MR. WIEMEYER: At any time during it did you
5 have any conversations over the radio with the Coast
6 Guard, in that --

7 CAPT. PALMER: No.

8 MR. WIEMEYER: -- regard?

9 CAPT. PALMER: I was conveying information
10 that they -- that somebody else requested to the radio
11 operator who would do it -- or the on-scene commander
12 would -- you know, like, our -- our aircraft commander
13 basically was then -- was conveying information that I
14 was giving him. You know, position; you know, stuff
15 like that.

16 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. When I say, were you
17 the on-scene commander I --

18 CAPT. PALMER: Oh. You mean on --

19 MR. WIEMEYER: -- don't -- in the --

20 CAPT. PALMER: -- the airplane?

21 MR. WIEMEYER: Yeah. Your -- your airplane.

22 CAPT. PALMER: I don't know how that's red-
23 spired as far as -- did we kind of assume that at the
24 beginning? And then, when we left, of course, then, of
25 course, we kind of gave it up. So, I think we were

1 kind of like there as -- as we were first on-scene we
2 were kind of like the OCS to begin with. Because the
3 helicopters were doing their thing, and we were
4 actually circ -- you know, circulating around relaying
5 messages and stuff.

6 I think we kind of came -- like, became like
7 the pseudo-OSC.

8 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Did you -- do you
9 recall any conversations with the Coast Guard? Over
10 the radio?

11 CAPT. PALMER: No. There were -- there was
12 some. But now at this point I -- it would be tough to
13 recall. And there --

14 MR. WIEMEYER: Oh.

15 CAPT. PALMER: -- but there was some.

16 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. I don't have anything
17 else.

18 Does anybody else have a follow-up?

19 (No response.)

20 MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. I'm going to go off the
21 record then. Thank you very much for helping us out
22 here.

23 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded [no
24 time noted.] .)

25