

Navy divers head to site of crashed jet

By Pat Milton
The Associated Press

NEWPORT, R.I. — With a break in the weather, a Navy salvage ship was finally freed Thursday to take its divers on a 10-hour trip through high waves to the grim crash site of EgyptAir Flight 990.

Investigators were hoping to dodge foul weather long enough Friday to search for the plane's "black boxes," which they hope hold the secret to the cause of the crash off the coast of Nantucket, Mass.

The Navy was relying on seas to calm just enough to drop a giant underwater robot — the Deep Drone — into the Atlantic, where it can be lowered 270 feet to the ocean floor to retrieve wreckage and bodies. Divers aboard the USS Grapple will try to make the treacherous journey as well.

The black boxes — the flight data recorder and the cockpit voice recorder — are considered keys to figuring out why Flight 990 plummeted into the ocean on Sunday, killing all 217 on board.

Without them, the National Transportation Safety Board was investigating all possibilities, learning what it could from radar data and cargo manifests.

NTSB Chairman James Hall said nothing hazardous was apparently in the cargo holds.

He also said there were not two armed guards on the plane, despite

a policy of the airline to sometimes have them aboard. And he added that 30 Egyptian military personnel were required to go through metal detectors before boarding the plane in New York.

The NTSB said it has already begun studying the possibility of human error in the crash.

A special team of investigators will continue to look into the backgrounds of the flight crew, including how they spent the last days before they climbed into the cockpit.

If the seas permit, the Grapple will likely finish its journey to the crash site early Friday morning. Navy officials warned that the ship might be forced to turn around if the sea swells are too strong.

The forecast calls for rough seas from late Friday until Sunday.

Navy Rear Adm. William G. Sutton said he would not risk using divers if the seas were too rough Friday.

"My number one concern here ... is the safety of these young men and women who are going to be out on scene conducting this incredibly dangerous event," he said. "We do not want to increase this tragedy any more than it already is."

A second ship, the Mohawk, a Navy vessel equipped with special sonar and remote operated robots, was also sent out to sea late Thursday.

Rough seas and high winds have kept divers away from the crash site since Tuesday.

Large pieces of wreckage would likely stay put some 250 feet below water despite the storms, the safety board has said. But smaller pieces of debris and human remains could travel anywhere up to several miles underwater, said Eric Takakjian, a private salvage diver not connected with the search.

"A heavy surge will definitely move things around," Takakjian said. "It's going to make things even harder."

Also Thursday: — Some progress was reported in the state medical examiner's office, where investigators began the painstaking process of identifying the remains retrieved so far. Families have been providing dental records and details that would help distinguish their loved ones, including birth marks or jewelry.

— Jamie Finch, an NTSB spokesman, said investigators planned this weekend to allow victims' relatives to view some of the wreckage that had been brought ashore.

— FBI investigators were analyzing what the crew of a lobster boat heard — and perhaps as important, what they apparently did not see — on the morning of the crash.

Lobsterman Christopher D. Lutyens said he was on the 75-foot

boat the "Hedy Brenna" when he and two of his crew members heard a noise he now believes was Flight 990 hitting the water. He said he thinks he was about 5 1/2 miles east-northeast of the initial debris field, but didn't know a plane was down when he heard the sound.

"I just heard a loud crash that sounded different than anything I've ever heard before," he said in an interview at his Jamestown home. He initially wrote off the noise, which he said lasted about three seconds, as a roar of thunder.

Lutyens said he saw nothing in the sky — no explosion or fireballs.

What that means remains unclear. Ed Crawley, head of the Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said it doesn't rule out a fire or explosion.

— A small memorial service was held for the more than a dozen Coptic Christians, members of an Egyptian Christian denomination, who were on the flight. The Rev. Marcus Girgis told mourners not to worry if the bodies of their loved ones are not found intact.

"The soul never dies. It will unite again with the body regardless what condition the body is in," he said, as some eight relatives and friends wept.

A memorial service for all faiths was scheduled for Sunday.


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