

Co-pilot deliberately crashed plane into Alps

Associated Press

PARIS — Passengers with moments to live screamed in terror and the pilot frantically pounded on the locked cockpit door as a 27-year-old German co-pilot deliberately and wordlessly smashed an Airbus carrying 150 people into an Alpine mountainside.

The account Thursday of the final moments of Germanwings Flight 9525 prompted some airlines to immediately impose stricter cockpit rules — and raised haunting questions about the motive of the co-pilot, whose breathing never wavered as he destroyed the plane and the lives of those aboard.

“We have no idea of the reason,” Marseille Prosecutor Brice Robin said, revealing the chilling conclusions investigators reached after reconstructing the final minutes of the flight from the plane’s black box voice recorder. Co-pilot Andreas Lubitz’s intention was “to destroy this plane.”

French, German and U.S. officials said there was no indication of terrorism. The prosecutor did not elaborate on why investigators do not suspect a political motive; instead they’re focusing on the co-pilot’s “personal, family and professional environment” to try to determine why he did it.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose nation lost 75 people on the flight, said the conclusions brought the tragedy to a “new, simply incomprehensible dimension.” Devastated families of victims visited the crash scene Thursday, looking across a windy mountain meadow toward where their loved ones died.

The Airbus A320 was flying from Barcelona to Duesseldorf on Tuesday when it lost radio contact with air traffic controllers and began plunging from its cruising altitude of 38,000 feet, before slamming into the mountainside eight minutes later.

The prosecutor laid out in horrifying detail the final sounds heard in the cockpit extracted from the mangled voice recorder.

Lubitz, courteous in the first part of the trip, became “curt” when the captain began the mid-flight briefing on the planned landing, Robin said.

The pilot, who has not been identified, left the cockpit for an apparent bathroom break, and Lubitz took control of the jet.

He suddenly started a manual descent, and the pilot started knocking on the door.

There was no response. “It was absolute silence in the cockpit,” the prosecutor said — except for the steady breathing he said indicated Lubitz was not panicked, and acted in a calm, deliberate manner.

The A320 is designed with safeguards to allow emergency entry into the cockpit if a pilot inside is unresponsive. But the override code known to the crew does not go into effect if the person inside the cockpit specifically denies entry.

Instrument alarms went off, but no distress call ever went out from the cockpit, and the control tower’s pleas



AP Photo/French Interior Ministry, Francis Pellerier
In this undated photo provided by the French Interior Ministry, French emergency rescue services work at the site of the Germanwings jet that crashed on Tuesday near Seyne-les-Alpes, France.

Plane crashes blamed on pilots

WHEN	AIRLINE	WHERE	DETAILS	KILLED
Feb. 9, 1982	Japan Airlines	Japan	Blamed on the captain, who was later declared mentally unstable.	174
Aug. 21, 1994	Royal Air Maroc	Morocco	Pilot intentionally plunged the plane to commit suicide.	44
Dec. 19, 1997	SilkAir	Indonesia	U.S. investigators say the captain deliberately crashed the plane.	104
Oct. 31, 1999	EgyptAir	Atlantic Ocean	Co-pilot plunged the plane down, repeating the phrase, "I rely on God."	217
Nov. 29, 2013	Mozambique Airlines	Namibia	The captain is thought to have deliberately crashed the plane.	27

AP

for a response went unanswered.

Just before the plane hit the mountain, passengers’ cries of terror could be heard.

“The victims realized just at the last moment,” Robin said. “We can hear them screaming.”

Their families “are having a hard time believing it,” he said, after briefing some of them in Marseille.

Many victims’ relatives visited an Alpine clearing Thursday where French authorities set up a viewing tent for family members to look toward the site of the crash, so steep and treacherous that it can only be reached by a long journey on foot or rappelling from a helicopter.

Lubitz’s family was in France but was being kept separate from the other families, Robin said. German investigators searched his apartment and his parents’ home in Montabaur, Germany, where the curtains were drawn.

The prosecutor’s account prompted quick moves toward stricter cockpit rules — and calls for more.

Airlines in Europe are not required to have two people in the cockpit at all times, unlike the standard U.S. operating procedure, which was changed after the 9/11 attacks to require a flight attendant to take the spot of a briefly departing pilot.

Canada and Germany’s biggest airlines, including Lufthansa and Air Berlin, as well as low-cost European carriers easyJet and Norwegian Air Shuttle

announced new rules requiring two crew members to always be present.

Some experts said even two isn’t enough, and called for rules to require three.

“The flight deck is capable of accommodating three pilots and there shouldn’t ever be a situation where there is only one person in the cockpit,” said James Hall, a former chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, referring to the “jump seats” all airliners are equipped with.

Others questioned the wisdom of sealing off the cockpit at all.

“The kneejerk reaction to the events of 9/11 with the ill-thought reinforced cockpit door has had catastrophic consequences,” said Philip Baum, London-based editor of the trade magazine Aviation Security International.

Neither the prosecutor nor Lufthansa — the parent company of low-cost carrier Germanwings — indicated there was anything the pilot could have done to avoid the crash.

Lubitz joined Germanwings in September 2013, directly out of flight school, and had flown 630 hours. Spohr said the airline had no indication why he would have crashed the plane.

He underwent a regular security check on Jan. 27 and it found nothing untoward, and previous security checks in 2008 and 2010 also showed no issues, the local government in Duesseldorf said.



AP Photo/Voice Of Jihad Website via AP video, File

In this file image taken from video obtained from Voice Of Jihad Website, which has been authenticated based on its contents and other AP reporting, Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, sits in a vehicle guarded by the Taliban in eastern Afghanistan.

Bergdahl charged despite torture, escape attempts

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl says he was tortured repeatedly in the five years he was held captive by the Taliban: beaten with a copper cable, chained, held in a cage and threatened with execution after trying to escape.

Bergdahl described his captivity in a note his lawyer made public Thursday after sharing it with the Army in an attempt to avert a court martial.

The Army charged Bergdahl nevertheless on Wednesday, accusing him of desertion and misbehavior before the enemy for leaving his post in Afghanistan in June 2009.

Freed last year in exchange for five Taliban commanders held prisoner at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the 28-year-old soldier from Hailey, Idaho faces up to life in prison if convicted.

Bergdahl says he tried about a dozen times to escape, and that his captors’ response was brutal.

“In the beginning of my captivity, after my first two escape attempts, for about three months I was chained to a bed spread-eagle and blindfolded,” Bergdahl wrote.

“Around my ankles where the chains were, I developed open wounds. ... During these months some of the things they did was beat the bottoms of my feet and parts of my body with a copper cable.”

He also says he was beaten with a rubber hose, fists and the butt of an AK-47, so hard the rifle’s stock broke off. He was repeatedly threatened with execution, and “kept in constant isolation during the entire 5 years.”

Bergdahl next faces an Article 32 hearing before a high-ranking officer known as a “convening authority,” who will decide if the evidence merits a court martial.

Bergdahl’s lawyer Eugene Fidell said the sergeant has

already suffered more than enough.

“This is a hellish environment he was kept in for nearly 5 years, particularly after he did his duty in trying to escape,” Fidell, a former military lawyer now in private practice, told The Associated Press on Thursday. “There is no question in my mind that a convening authority would not be doing his or her duty without taking into account the circumstances under which Sgt. Berhdahl was held.”

Bergdahl’s two-page description of his captivity was attached to a letter Fidell sent March 2 to Gen. Mark Milley, who as commander of the U.S. Army Forces was responsible for deciding the criminal charges.

Bergdahl was captured shortly after leaving his post in June 2009 and held by the Haqqani network, an insurgent group tied to the Taliban that operates both in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Before disappearing, Bergdahl had expressed misgivings about the U.S. role in the war — as well as his own.

An Army investigation found that when Bergdahl walked off his post, his “specific intent was to bring what he thought were disturbing circumstances to the attention of the nearest general officer,” Fidell wrote.

Given his harsh captivity, the reason he left his unit and his attempts to escape while prisoner, “it would be unduly harsh to impose on him the stigma of a court-martial conviction or an Other Than Honorable discharge and to deny him veteran’s benefits,” the lawyer argued.

That argument apparently fell flat: The desertion charge carries up to five years in prison, while “misbehavior before the enemy” carries a life sentence; A conviction on either could strip him of his rank and earn him a dishonorable discharge.

BRIEFLY

Turmoil in Yemen escalates as Saudis bomb rebels

SANAA, Yemen (AP) — The turmoil in Yemen grew into a regional conflict Thursday, with Saudi Arabia and its allies bombing Shiite rebels allied with Iran, while Egyptian officials said a ground assault will follow the airstrikes.

Iran denounced the Saudi-led air campaign, saying it “considers this action a dangerous step,” and oil prices jumped in New York and London after the offensive.

The military action turned impoverished and chaotic Yemen into a new front in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Yemen’s U.S.-backed President Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who fled the country Wednesday as the rebels known as Houthis advanced on his stronghold in the southern port of Aden, reappeared Thursday. He arrived by plane in Saudi Arabia’s capital of Riyadh, Saudi state TV reported.

Starting before dawn, Saudi warplanes pounded an air base, military bases and anti-aircraft positions in the capital of Sanaa and flattened a number of homes near the airport, killing at least 18 civilians, including six children. Another round followed in the evening, again rocking the city.

Rebel leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi angrily accused the United States,

Saudi Arabia and Israel of launching a “criminal, unjust, brutal and sinful” campaign aimed at invading and occupying Yemen.

White House spokesman Eric Schultz told reporters on Air Force One en route to Alabama that President Barack Obama had authorized logistical and intelligence support for the strikes, but that the U.S. is not joining with direct military action.

U.S., Iran nuke talks near deadline

LAUSANNE, Switzerland (AP) — Nuclear negotiations between the United States and Iran entered a critical phase on Thursday with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry meeting his Iranian counterpart less than a week away from a deadline to secure the outline of a deal.

With the clock ticking,

significant gaps remain after nearly two years of negotiations between Iran and the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany.

The top diplomats from Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia are expected to join the talks if the U.S. and Iran are close to an agreement.

U.S. officials say the March 31 deadline is achievable but remains

uncertain. En route to Switzerland with Kerry on Wednesday, one official said the American side can see a path to get to an agreement by the end of March as the last round of talks produced more progress than many previous rounds. The official was not authorized to discuss the talks by name and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The Iranian side was more upbeat. Ali Akbar Salehi, Tehran’s top nuclear

official, told Iran’s IRNA news agency that the talks have already reached a “common understanding” on technical issues. The pressure is high. The seven nations have set themselves a March 31 deadline for the outline of a final accord they hope to seal by the end of June. Both President Barack Obama and Iran’s Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have spoken against what would be a third extension of the talks.



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