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SWISSAIR: Pilot tactics queried

Evidence from crash probe suggests jet may have been flyable despite fire

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Two years after Swissair 111 crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off Peggys Cove, N.S., evidence emerging from the investigation indicates the plane may still have been flyable despite an electrical fire but that pilots may have lost control in the dark.

Additionally, detailed simulations of the critical minutes after smoke was first detected in Flight 111's cockpit show that the pilots might have been able to land the big MD-11 at Halifax airport if they had understood how dire the situation was and had made an immediate emergency descent.

Instead, the pilots chose to turn away, believing the aircraft was too heavy to land unless fuel was dumped over the Atlantic. At the end, the pilots may have become disoriented when even their backup instruments failed as they struggled to keep the aircraft aloft while coping with smoke from a fire in the cockpit ceiling.

Vic Gerden, the Canadian investigator in charge of the still-unfinished, \$50-million probe into the crash that killed 229 people two years ago today, says he does not know about any landing simulations.

But he acknowledged that airlines all over the world revised their procedures after the Swissair disaster to make rapid landing an urgent priority. In an interview, Mr. Gerden – lead investigator for the Canadian Transportation Safety Board – also confirmed that his team has “found nothing that would clearly show (the aircraft) was unflyable.”

Wreckage recovered from the sea bottom indicates the plane's engines were working (although the pilots possibly shut one down as part of an engine-fire checklist) and that its flight controls were functioning as well at the time of impact.

Complete electrical failure is suspected – nothing was heard from Swissair 111 during its last 6 ½ minutes as it flew an irregular clockwise circle over Mahone Bay – but modern jetliners are designed to fly even if all three electrical systems fail.

“I think there was a loss of control at the end,” said Ken Adams, the senior safety officer for the Air Line Pilots Association and that organization's representative on the Canadian investigation. The ALPA is the pilots union representing more than 53,000 pilots at 50 U.S. and Canadian airlines.

Mr. Adams, a veteran pilot who flies MD-11s for Delta Airlines, said pilots have been fighting for years to get airlines and manufacturers to change their operating procedures to focus on the need for urgency in dealing with smoke in the cockpit.

“I think there was a general complacency in the industry (before the Swissair disaster),” he said.