

"Cover-up of Convenience—the Hidden Scandal of Lockerbie"

by John Ashton and Ian Ferguson, Mainstream Publishing, 2002,
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John Ashton's and Ian Ferguson's work on the circumstances surrounding the destruction on December 21, 1988, of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland is worthy of careful study. It raises serious doubts, not only regarding the recent conviction of the Abdelbaset Ali Mohamed al-Megrahi, now incarcerated in Barlinnie jail, Glasgow, but over the entire official presentation of events before and after the crash, from 1988 to the present day. They give indicators as to how the full facts regarding the atrocity which killed 270, perhaps 271, people might be uncovered and conclude with a series of searching questions which any genuinely independent inquiry into the Lockerbie disaster should direct toward various governments, intelligence services, and individuals.

Ashton and Ferguson have followed Lockerbie for years. Ashton worked as the deputy to the late British film maker Allan Francovich, whose film *The Maltese Double Cross*, examined various alternative scenarios that have been advanced as an explanation for the Lockerbie disaster, favouring that the bombing was a consequence of a CIA controlled drug running operation utilised to spy on Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian armed political groupings and factions.

Ferguson is a journalist, who has written many articles on Lockerbie, and along with Scottish lawyer Robert Black, architect of the Camp Zeist trial, maintains the www.thelockerbietrial.com website.

Writing in the immediate aftermath of the special Criminal Court verdict at Camp Zeist convicting al-Megrahi, Ashton and Ferguson have drawn together the fruits of long research and interviews with a large number of people involved in the disaster, including a number of current and former spies.

The authors do not proclaim that al-Megrahi is innocent. Rather, they review a large body of circumstantial evidence suggesting that responsibility for Lockerbie may lie primarily with the intelligence services of several Western governments, particularly the United States. They are highly critical of the role played by the media in parroting the twists and turns of the official line and note that no major British or US newspaper, radio, or TV channel has had the journalistic independence to undertake a sustained investigation of this most murky aspect of the disaster.

Ashton and Ferguson note that there were many general indications of a possible attack on an American flight in late 1988. After the 1988 American attack by the *USS Vincennes* on an Iranian Airbus, in which 255 pilgrims were murdered, Iranian broadcasts warned that the skies would "rain blood" in consequence. A Syrian backed Palestinian group with a history of attacks on passenger aircraft was known to be operating in Germany. Many staff at the US Embassy in Moscow altered flight plans to avoid Pan Am over the Christmas period.

More specifically, the authors suggest there may have been prior warnings of an attack on flight PA103. They imply that both the US ambassador to Lebanon, John McCarthy, and the South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha had their travel plans altered at the last minute in order to avoid PA103.

Others, including Charles McKee, a US Army Special Forces Major, and Matthew Gannon, the CIA's Beirut deputy station chief, uniquely amongst US officials, allegedly changed their plans at the last minute to fly on PA103. McKee had been leading a hostage rescue team in Beirut. One suggestion, and it is no more than that, is that these individuals were the target of a successful assassination attempt in which intelligence agencies themselves played a role.

According to the authors, from as little as two hours after the crash, US intelligence officers were at the southern Scottish site. Over the next days many more arrived. They were not looking for survivors or explanations as to the cause of the crash. They did not cooperate with local rescue services. Instead, they were searching for particular pieces of debris, luggage and particular corpses. Ashton and Ferguson cite finds of large quantities of cash, cannabis and heroin on the flight, as well as intelligence papers owned by McKee, whose luggage was removed and replaced. A report noting the location of hostages held in Beirut was apparently found on the ground. There were reports of helicopter-borne armed groups guarding and then removing a large box, and an unidentified body.

A police surgeon from Bradford, David Fieldhouse, insists that one body was moved, after it had been tagged and its location noted, while another disappeared entirely. Fieldhouse was subsequently victimised. Other concerns were raised by local police officers, some of which phoned Labour MP Tam Dalyell, who then began to take an active interest in the case.

Ashton and Ferguson detail the main alternative theory—that the bombing was carried out by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PLFP-GC). This was also largely the official position until 1991. Ahmed Jibril formed the PFLP-GC in 1968, when he broke away from the PFLP. The authors assert, on the basis of discussions with a number of spies, that the PFLP-GC were recruited by the Iraqi, Iranian, or Syrian governments to attack a US plane. When considering the motivation for such a terror operation, whether on the part of the PFLP-GC or any of their possible sponsors, the book is at its weakest. It gives very little insight into the politics of these governments or of the PFLP-GC, other than to make such observations as support for the PFLP-GC allowing the regime of Hafez Al Assad in Syria to appear to be supporting the Palestinian struggle against Israel.

The authors instead draw attention to the bombing by the PFLP-GC 18 years earlier, in 1970, of two aircraft destined for Israel—one survived with a two foot hole in the fuselage, the other, Swissair 330 to Zurich crashed killing 147 people—and another bombing 16 years earlier, in 1972. The PFLP-GC in 1988 certainly appears to have had a European operation based in Nuess in the Ruhr, Germany, intent on attacking US and Israeli targets. The group eventually blew up some railway lines used by US troop trains, planned an attack on an Israeli sports team, and became the target of a huge surveillance operation by German state security, the BKA. Their operation was hopelessly compromised. Raids by the BKA eventually discovered timers, guns, along with various electrical goods altered to contain explosives. Two PFLP-GC members were eventually jailed in 1991 for the train attacks.

Astonishingly, however, bomb-maker Marwan Khreesat was released on a legal technicality and left Germany. According to Ashton and Ferguson, Khreesat, who built the bombs used in the attacks during the 1970s, had by this time become a Jordanian spy in the PFLP-GC. Jordanian intelligence apparently has a close relationship with the Israeli Mossad and the CIA. Khreesat is still living in Amman, the Jordanian capital, under protection.

Ashton and Ferguson note an interview with Khreesat by the FBI, which was cited at the Camp Zeist trial but never reported in the world's press, in which Khreesat alleges that one of his bombs went missing after the BKA raid. On this basis, the authors speculate as to whether the CIA had, with the cooperation of other intelligence agencies, played a more active role in allowing the destruction of the plane. They restate the suggestion that this might have been to prevent exposure of the CIA's drug running operations from the Bekaa Valley, or for other reasons associated with US policy in the Middle East, particularly the aftermath of the Iran-Contra machinations. They suggest that a CIA approved suitcase, loaded with heroin from the Bekaa Valley, might have been swapped for one loaded instead with a bomb intended to kill McKee.

McKee and others had reportedly developed serious reservations about the drug-running operation; it having recently endangered their own lives through an aborted hostage rescue operation. The authors note that PA103 was brought down shortly after the election of ex-CIA chief George Bush, father of the current US president, when exposure of CIA drug running would have been highly embarrassing.

Those who have made allegations of possible CIA involvement include an ex-Mossad spy, Juval Aviv, hired by Pan Am to investigate the destruction of its aircraft, an erratic ex-US spy Lester Coleman, who at one point sought political asylum in Sweden, William Chasey, a Washington DC lobbyist, and *Time* journalist Roy Rowan.

Ashton and Ferguson trace the development of the official position of blaming Libya for the bombing. Bush called Margaret Thatcher in early 1989 asking for the inquiry to be "toned down", at a time when Syria and the PFLP-GC were favoured suspects. Just over two years later, on November 14, 1991, simultaneous indictments were brought by the Scottish Crown Office and the US State Department against Libyan airline staff al-Megrahi and Lhamen Fhimah. Days later, Bush announced that Syria, which had acquiesced in the 1991 US attack on Iraq, had taken a "bum rap". The State Department put out a fact sheet to justify the change of position, claiming that previous pointers to the PFLP-GC and Syria had been cunning ruses by the Libyan government. UK Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd said that no other countries besides Libya were targets for investigation. Four days later, the last Western hostages, including the Archbishop of Canterbury's special envoy, Terry Waite, were released from Beirut.

The authors thereafter recount the official line that the bomb, equipped with an MST-13 timer from MeBo of Zurich, was loaded in a Samsonite suitcase packed with clothes, which was inserted by Libyan agents onto flight KM180 from Luqa airport in Malta, transferred at Frankfurt to a

feeder flight for PA103, and then shuttled to Heathrow, where it was loaded on the fated Boeing 747. This was the case presented in the Camp Zeist trial.

Ashton and Ferguson carefully summarise the numerous problematic aspects of all the prosecution evidence at the trial; the dubious visual identification of al-Megrahi by Maltese shop owner Tony Gauci; the contradictory and bizarre ramblings of CIA spy Abdul Majid Giacka, the so-called "star witness" at Luqa airport whose evidence collapsed in court; the contested luggage records at Frankfurt airport; and the claim by MeBo owner Edwin Bollier that he had been approached by the CIA and encouraged to frame Libya, and that the CIA had had an MST-13 type timer in their possession before 1988.

At Camp Zeist, the trial was in danger of disintegrating. By November 2000 few observers, including the book's authors, expected anything other than an acquittal, or a not proven verdict which is available under Scottish law. But the verdict delivered on January 2001, which admitted that the prosecution case was full of holes and based on circumstantial inferences, nevertheless found al-Megrahi guilty, while his only alleged accomplice Fhimah, was acquitted.

Ashton and Ferguson by no means completely exonerate Libya or al-Megrahi. They note that his refusal to account for his activities on 20 December 1988 and his visit to Malta using a false passport cannot be dismissed. Trial evidence suggests that al-Megrahi indeed worked for Libyan intelligence and he has, so far, offered no explanation as to why he chose not to take the stand to defend himself. Many aspects of the whole business remain to be uncovered.

What the authors do is to cite 25 questions to which any genuinely independent inquiry must seek answers. These include:

- * the circumstances of the warnings given prior to the disaster.
- * the circumstances of the booking changes for Pik Botha's entourage, and McKee and Gannon.
- * the drug and cash finds at Lockerbie.
- * the possibility of an extra body, the circumstances under which bodies were moved, and the circumstances of wrong police evidence given against David Fieldhouse at the 1989 Fatal Accident Inquiry.
- * why Transport Secretary Paul Channon was able to announce that arrests were imminent and why Margaret Thatcher blocked a full judicial enquiry?
- * the relationship of the British MI6 to the Iran Contra deals and why was the Foreign office official in charge of liaising with the US on Iran-Contra, Andrew Green, was put in charge of the Lockerbie investigation.
- * the role of the CIA and MI6 in hostage deals made after the exposure of Iran Contra in 1986 and 1991.
- * why Juval Aviv and others were never interviewed by the investigation authorities about the bombing. What were the circumstances of legal cases brought against Aviv and others?
- * why did it take a year for the MeBo circuit board to be discovered, what were the circumstances of its discovery, and what were the connections between MeBo's Edwin Bollier and the CIA?
- * why did the CIA and the Scottish Lord Advocate seek to block access to CIA cables that were helpful to the defence?

Under conditions where the US government is refusing to investigate its own intelligence failures leading up to the September 11 terror attacks, any exposure of a possible CIA role in aircraft terrorism clearly assumes great significance. Earlier this year, al-Megrahi's appeal against his conviction was thrown out, despite defence evidence that made a strong circumstantial case for the bomb having been loaded at Heathrow airport in London.

Following Tam Dalyell's question in parliament, on March 26, there is a suggestion that police evidence relating to Lockerbie is being destroyed, and that yet another suitcase owned by another Special Forces member, Joseph Patrick Murphy, was at one point early in the investigation thought

to contain the bomb.

Without making wild or unsustainable accusations, and despite serious political limitations, Ashton and Ferguson have provided an essential reference for anyone seeking to understand why a Boeing 747 should explode in mid-air killing hundreds of ordinary air travellers, and yet, more than 13 years later, there is still no generally accepted explanation of why it happened and who was responsible.



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