

May 3, 2012

One well researched piece by [Chris Francescani of Reuters](#) has quelled the lynch mob atmosphere surrounding George Zimmerman in Sanford, FL. It is long but well worth your time.

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"Get a gun."

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Few of his closest neighbors knew he carried a gun - until two months ago.

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During the time Zimmerman was in hiding, his detractors defined him as a vigilante who had decided Martin was suspicious merely because he was black. After Zimmerman was finally arrested on a charge of second-degree murder more than six weeks after the shooting, prosecutors portrayed him as a violent and angry man who disregarded authority by pursuing the 17-year-old.

But a more nuanced portrait of Zimmerman has emerged from a Reuters investigation into Zimmerman's past and a series of incidents in the community in the months preceding the Martin shooting.

Based on extensive interviews with relatives, friends, neighbors, schoolmates and co-workers of Zimmerman in two states, law enforcement officials, and reviews of court documents and police

reports, the story sheds new light on the man at the center of one of the most controversial homicide cases in America.

The 28-year-old insurance-fraud investigator comes from a deeply Catholic background and was taught in his early years to do right by those less fortunate. He was raised in a racially integrated household and himself has black roots through an Afro-Peruvian great-grandfather - the father of the maternal grandmother who helped raise him.

A criminal justice student who aspired to become a judge, Zimmerman also concerned himself with the safety of his neighbors after a series of break-ins committed by young African-American men.

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The only American publication that did a reasonable job of reporting on George Zimmerman was the [Washington Post](#). Here's a piece they ran one month before the above item from Reuters.

...In Manassas, where Zimmerman lived in the 1980s and 1990s with his parents and two siblings, neighbors tended to define the family based on their spiritual profile. "Very Catholic . . . very religious," their neighbor Jim Rudzenski recalled Thursday. The children attended All Saints Catholic School on Stonewall Road through the eighth grade before going to Osbourn High School. George became an altar server and evening receptionist at All Saints Catholic Church. The Zimmermans "were known and respected in the community for their dedication and service," said Robert Cilinski, pastor of All Saints Catholic Church.

The father, Robert Zimmerman Sr., is a retired military man. He could be strict. And the children's grandmother, who lived with the family, also kept a watchful eye, said Kay Hall, who lived across the street from the Zimmermans in a neighborhood just west of Sudley Road for about 20 years. George and his siblings "didn't play with the neighborhood kids," Rudzenski said. "They had to stay home and play." It was always "Yes, ma'am," "No, ma'am," Hall said.

Zimmerman's life was not without difficulties. In 2001 — when he was 17 or 18 — he was the victim of a minor criminal assault, said Manassas police Sgt. Eddie Rivera. The city's computer records do not provide details of the crime.

In school, Zimmerman hinted at ambitions in the business world. He joined a Future Business Leaders of America club. And in his senior yearbook, he wrote: "I'm going to Florida to work with my godfather who just bought a \$1 million business."...

[Telegraph, UK](#) has more on the series we've had on the Air France jetliner that fell out of the sky over the Atlantic.

... Mercifully, data recordings and impact damage on debris confirm the Airbus was still more or less level when it hit the sea. Some of the passengers might have dozed throughout the descent; others may have attributed it to violent buffeting. Those in window seats would have seen only darkness. There is reason to hope that there was not too much panic on board, but this is small consolation.

It seems surprising that Airbus has conceived a system preventing one pilot from easily assessing the actions of the colleague beside him. And yet that is how their latest generations of aircraft are designed. The reason is that, for the vast majority of the time, side sticks are superb. "People are aware that they don't know what is being done on the other side stick, but most of the time the crews fly in full automation; they are not even touching the stick," says Captain King. "We hand-fly the aeroplane ever less now because automation is reliable and efficient, and because fatigue is an issue. [The side stick] is not an issue that comes up – very rarely does the other pilot's input cause you concern."

Boeing has always begged to differ, persisting with conventional controls on its fly-by-wire aircraft, including the new 787 Dreamliner, introduced into service this year. Boeing's cluttering and old-fashioned levers still have to be pushed and turned like the old mechanical ones, even though they only send electronic impulses to computers. They need to be held in place for a climb or a turn to be accomplished, which some pilots think is archaic and distracting. Some say Boeing is so conservative because most American pilots graduate from flying schools where column-steering is the norm, whereas European airlines train more crew from scratch, allowing a quicker transition to side stick control.

Whatever the cultural differences, there is a perceived safety issue, too. The American manufacturer was concerned about side sticks' lack of visual and physical feedback. Indeed, it is hard to believe AF447 would have fallen from the sky if it had been a Boeing. Had a traditional yoke been installed on Flight AF447, Robert would surely have realised that his junior colleague had the lever pulled back and mostly kept it there. When Dubois returned to the cockpit he would have seen that Bonin was pulling up the nose.

There is another clever gizmo on the Airbus intended to make life simpler for the pilots but that could confound them if they are distracted and overloaded. Computers can automatically adjust the engine thrust to maintain whatever speed is selected by the crew. This means pilots do not need to keep fine-tuning the throttles on the cockpit's centre console to control the power. But a curious feature of "autothrust" is that it bypasses the manual levers entirely – they simply do not move. This means pilots cannot sense the power setting by touching or glancing at the throttle levers. Instead, they have to check their computer screens. Again Boeing have adopted a different philosophy. They told the Telegraph: "We have heard again and again from airline pilots that the absence of motion with the Airbus flight deck is rather unsettling to them." In Boeing's system the manual handles move, even in automatic mode.

All the indications are that the final crash report will confirm the initial findings and call for better training and procedures. With the exception of Air France, which has a vested interest in avoiding culpability, no one has publicly challenged the Airbus cockpit design. And while Air France has modified the pitots on its fleet, it has said nothing about side sticks.

It is extremely unlikely that there will ever be another disaster quite like AF447. Crews have already had the lessons drummed into them and routine refresher courses on simulators have been upgraded to replicate AF447 high-level stalls. Airbus has an excellent safety record, at least as good as Boeing, and the A330 is an extremely trustworthy aircraft. Flying is easily the least dangerous way to travel, far safer than a car. But while more of us take to the air each year, a single crash is enough to damage confidence.

Critics of side sticks may now argue that Airbus should return to the drawing board. A feature designed to make things better for pilots has unintentionally made it harder for them to monitor colleagues in stressful situations. Yet there is no sign that the inquiry will call for changes to the sticks and Airbus remains confident about the safety of its technology. It will resist what it regards as a retrograde step to return to faux-mechanical controls. The company is unable to speak openly during the investigation, but a source close to the manufacturer says: "The ergonomic systems were absolutely not contrived by engineers and imposed on the pilot community. They were developed by pilots from many airlines, working closely with the engineers. What's more, it has all been tested and certified by the European Aviation Safety Agency and regulators in the United States, and approved by lots of airlines."

As Captain King points out, a belief in automation and the elegantly simple side sticks in particular, is integral to the Airbus design philosophy: "You would have to build in artificial feedback – that would be a huge modification."

A defender of Airbus puts it thus: "When you drive you don't look at the pedals to judge your speed, you look at the speedometer. It's the same when flying: you don't look at the stick, you look at the instruments."

There is a problem with that analogy. Drivers manoeuvre by looking out of the window, physically steering and sensing pressure on the pedals. The speedometer is usually the only instrument a motorist needs to monitor. An airline pilot flying in zero visibility depends upon instruments for direction, pitch, altitude, angle of climb or descent, turn, yaw and thrust; and has to keep an eye on several dozen settings and lights. Flying a big airliner manually is a demanding task, especially if warnings are blaring and anxiety is growing.

Multimillion-euro lawsuits could follow any admission of liability and it is certainly preferable from Airbus's point of view that Air France should shoulder the blame for the night when AF447 plunged into the void.

However, no one would suggest that, when it comes to the aircraft we all rely on every day, commercial considerations should come anything but a distant second to safety.

Reuters

George Zimmerman: Prelude to a shooting

by Chris Francescani

April 25, 2012



Neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman leaves the Seminole County Jail after posting bail in Sanford, Florida, April 22, 2012.

SANFORD, Florida (Reuters) - A pit bull named Big Boi began menacing George and Shellie Zimmerman in the fall of 2009.

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"Let's talk about the elephant in the room. I'm black, OK?" the woman said, declining to be identified because she anticipated backlash due to her race. She leaned in to look a reporter directly in the eyes. "There were black boys robbing houses in this neighborhood," she said. "That's why George was suspicious of Trayvon Martin."

"MIXED" HOUSEHOLD

George Michael Zimmerman was born in 1983 to Robert and Gladys Zimmerman, the third of four children. Robert Zimmerman Sr. was a U.S. Army veteran who served in Vietnam in 1970, and was stationed at Fort Myer in Arlington, Virginia, in 1975 with Gladys Mesa's brother George. Zimmerman Sr. also served two tours in Korea, and spent the final 10 years of his 22-year military career in the Pentagon, working for the Department of Defense, a family member said.

In his final years in Virginia before retiring to Florida, Robert Zimmerman served as a magistrate in Fairfax County's 19th Judicial District.

Robert and Gladys met in January 1975, when George Mesa brought along his army buddy to his sister's birthday party. She was visiting from [Peru](#), on vacation from her job there as a physical education teacher. Robert was a Baptist, Gladys was Catholic. They soon married, in a Catholic ceremony in Alexandria, and moved to nearby Manassas.

Gladys came to lead a small but growing Catholic Hispanic enclave within the All Saints Catholic Church parish in the late 1970s, where she was involved in the church's outreach programs. Gladys would bring young George along with her on "home visits" to poor families, said a family friend, Teresa Post.

"It was part of their upbringing to know that there are people in need, people more in need than themselves," said Post, a Peruvian immigrant who lived with the Zimmermans for a time.

Post recalls evening prayers before dinner in the ethnically diverse Zimmerman household, which included siblings Robert Jr., Grace, and Dawn. "It wasn't only white or only Hispanic or only black - it was mixed," she said.

Zimmerman's maternal grandmother, Cristina, who had lived with the Zimmermans since 1978, worked as a babysitter for years during Zimmerman's childhood. For several years she cared for two African-American girls who ate their meals at the Zimmerman house and went back and forth to school each day with the Zimmerman children.

"They were part of the household for years, until they were old enough to be on their own," Post said.

Zimmerman served as an altar boy at All Saints from age 7 to 17, church members said.

"He wasn't the type where, you know, 'I'm being forced to do this,' and a dragging-his-feet Catholic," said Sandra Vega, who went to high school with George and his siblings. "He was an altar boy for years, and then worked in the rectory too. He has a really good heart."

George grew up bilingual, and by age 10 he was often called to the Haydon Elementary School principal's office to act as a translator between administrators and immigrant parents. At 14 he became obsessed with becoming a Marine, a relative said, joining the after-school ROTC program at Grace E. Metz Middle School and polishing his boots by night. At 15, he worked three part-time jobs - in a Mexican restaurant, for the rectory, and washing cars - on nights and weekends, to save up for a car.

After graduating from Osbourn High School in 2001, Zimmerman moved to Lake Mary, Florida, a town neighboring Sanford. His parents purchased a retirement home there in 2002, in part to bring Cristina, who suffers from arthritis, to a warmer climate.

YOUNG INSURANCE AGENT

On his own at 18, George got a job at an insurance agency and began to take classes at night to earn a license to sell insurance. He grew friendly with a real estate agent named Lee Ann Benjamin, who shared office space in the building, and later her husband, John Donnelly, a Sanford attorney.

"George impressed me right off the bat as just a real go-getter," Donnelly said. "He was working days and taking all these classes at night, passing all the insurance classes, not just for home insurance, but auto insurance and everything. He wanted to open his own office - and he did."

In 2004, Zimmerman partnered with an African-American friend and opened up an Allstate insurance satellite office, Donnelly said.

Then came 2005, and a series of troubles. Zimmerman's business failed, he was arrested, and he broke off an engagement with a woman who filed a restraining order against him.

That July, Zimmerman was charged with resisting arrest, violence, and battery of an officer after shoving an undercover alcohol-control agent who was arresting an under-age friend of Zimmerman's at a bar. He avoided conviction by agreeing to participate in a pre-trial diversion program that included anger-management classes.

In August, Zimmerman's fiancée at the time, Veronica Zuazo, filed a civil motion for a restraining order alleging domestic violence. Zimmerman reciprocated with his own order on the same grounds, and both orders were granted. The relationship ended.

In 2007 he married Shellie Dean, a licensed cosmetologist, and in 2009 the couple rented a townhouse in the Retreat at Twin Lakes. Zimmerman had bounced from job to job for a couple of years, working at a car dealership and a mortgage company. At times, according to testimony from Shellie at a bond hearing for Zimmerman last week, the couple filed for unemployment benefits.

Zimmerman enrolled in Seminole State College in 2009, and in December 2011 he was permitted to participate in a school graduation ceremony, despite being a course credit shy of his associate's degree in criminal justice. Zimmerman was completing that course credit when the shooting occurred.

On March 22, nearly a month after the shooting and with the controversy by then swirling nationwide, the school issued a press release saying it was taking the "unusual, but necessary" step of withdrawing Zimmerman's enrollment, citing "the safety of our students on campus as well as for Mr. Zimmerman."

A NEIGHBORHOOD IN FEAR

By the summer of 2011, Twin Lakes was experiencing a rash of burglaries and break-ins. Previously a family-friendly, first-time homeowner community, it was devastated by the recession that hit the Florida housing market, and transient renters began to occupy some of the 263 town houses in the complex. Vandalism and occasional drug activity were reported, and home values plunged. One resident who bought his home in 2006 for \$250,000 said it was worth \$80,000 today.

At least eight burglaries were reported within Twin Lakes in the 14 months prior to the Trayvon Martin shooting, according to the Sanford Police Department. Yet in a series of interviews, Twin Lakes residents said dozens of reports of attempted break-ins and would-be burglars casing homes had created an atmosphere of growing fear in the neighborhood.

In several of the incidents, witnesses identified the suspects to police as young black men. Twin Lakes is about 50 percent white, with an African-American and Hispanic population of about 20 percent each, roughly similar to the surrounding city of Sanford, according to U.S. Census data.

One morning in July 2011, a black teenager walked up to Zimmerman's front porch and stole a bicycle, neighbors told Reuters. A police report was taken, though the bicycle was not recovered.

But it was the August incursion into the home of Olivia Bertalan that really troubled the neighborhood, particularly Zimmerman. Shellie was home most days, taking online courses towards certification as a registered nurse.

On August 3, Bertalan was at home with her infant son while her husband, Michael, was at work. She watched from a downstairs window, she said, as two black men repeatedly rang her doorbell and then entered through a sliding door at the back of the house. She ran upstairs, locked herself inside the boy's bedroom, and called a police dispatcher, whispering frantically.

"I said, 'What am I supposed to do? I hear them coming up the stairs!'" she told Reuters. Bertalan tried to soothe her crying child into silence and armed herself with a pair of rusty scissors.

Police arrived just as the burglars - who had been trying to disconnect the couple's television - fled out a back door. Shellie Zimmerman saw a black male teen running through her backyard and reported it to police.

After police left Bertalan, George Zimmerman arrived at the front door in a shirt and tie, she said. He gave her his contact numbers on an index card and invited her to visit his wife if she ever felt unsafe. He returned later and gave her a stronger lock to bolster the sliding door that had been forced open.

"He was so mellow and calm, very helpful and very, very sweet," she said last week. "We didn't really know George at first, but after the break-in we talked to him on a daily basis. People were freaked out. It wasn't just George calling police ... we were calling police at least once a week."

In September, a group of neighbors including Zimmerman approached the homeowners association with their concerns, she said. Zimmerman was asked to head up a new neighborhood watch. He agreed.

"PLEASE CONTACT OUR CAPTAIN"

Police had advised Bertalan to get a dog. She and her husband decided to move out instead, and left two days before the shooting. Zimmerman took the advice.

"He'd already had a mutt that he walked around the neighborhood every night - man, he loved that dog - but after that home invasion he also got a Rottweiler," said Jorge Rodriguez, a friend and neighbor of the Zimmermans.

Around the same time, Zimmerman also gave Rodriguez and his wife, Audria, his contact information, so they could reach him day or night. Rodriguez showed the index card to Reuters.

In neat cursive was a list of George and Shellie's home number and cell phones, as well as their emails.

Less than two weeks later, another Twin Lakes home was burglarized, police reports show. Two weeks after that, a home under construction was vandalized.

The Retreat at Twin Lakes e-newsletter for February 2012 noted: "The Sanford PD has announced an increased patrol within our neighborhood ... during peak crime hours.

"If you've been a victim of a crime in the community, after calling police, please contact our captain, George Zimmerman."

EMMANUEL BURGESS - SETTING THE STAGE

On February 2, 2012, Zimmerman placed a call to Sanford police after spotting a young black man he recognized peering into the windows of a neighbor's empty home, according to several friends and neighbors.

"I don't know what he's doing. I don't want to approach him, personally," Zimmerman said in the call, which was recorded. The dispatcher advised him that a patrol car was on the way. By the time police arrived, according to the dispatch report, the suspect had fled.

On February 6, the home of another Twin Lakes resident, Tatiana Demeacis, was burglarized. Two roofers working directly across the street said they saw two African-American men lingering in the yard at the time of the break-in. A new laptop and some gold jewelry were stolen. One of the roofers called police the next day after spotting one of the suspects among a group of male teenagers, three black and one white, on bicycles.

Police found Demeacis's laptop in the backpack of 18-year-old Emmanuel Burgess, police reports show, and charged him with dealing in stolen property. Burgess was the same man Zimmerman had spotted on February 2.

Burgess had committed a series of burglaries on the other side of town in 2008 and 2009, pleaded guilty to several, and spent all of 2010 incarcerated in a juvenile facility, his attorney said. He is now in jail on parole violations.

Three days after Burgess was arrested, Zimmerman's grandmother was hospitalized for an infection, and the following week his father was also admitted for a heart condition. Zimmerman spent a number of those nights on a hospital room couch.

Ten days after his father was hospitalized, Zimmerman noticed another young man in the neighborhood, acting in a way he found familiar, so he made another call to police.

"We've had some break-ins in my neighborhood, and there's a real suspicious guy," Zimmerman said, as Trayvon Martin returned home from the store.

The last time Zimmerman had called police, to report Burgess, he followed protocol and waited for police to arrive. They were too late, and Burgess got away.

This time, Zimmerman was not so patient, and he disregarded police advice against pursuing Martin.

"These assholes," he muttered in an aside, "they always get away."

After the phone call ended, several minutes passed when the movements of Zimmerman and Martin remain a mystery.

Moments later, Martin lay dead with a bullet in his chest.

Washington Post

Who is George Zimmerman?

by Manuel Roig-Franzia, Tom Jackman and Darryl Fears

March 22, 2012

The shooter was once a Catholic altar boy — with a surname that could have been Jewish.

His father is white, neighbors say. His mother is Latina. And his family is eager to point out that some of his relatives are black.

There may be no box to check for George Zimmerman, no tidy way to categorize, define and sort the 28-year-old man whose pull of a trigger on a darkened Florida street is forcing America to once again confront its fraught relationship with race and identity. The victim, we know, was named Trayvon Martin, an [unarmed black teenager](#) in a hoodie. The rest becomes a matter for interpretation.

The drama in Florida takes on a kind of modern complexity. Its nuances show America for what it is steadily becoming, a realm in which identity is understood as something that cannot be summed up in a single word.

The images of Zimmerman — not just his face, but the words used to describe him — can confound and confuse. Why are they calling him white, wondered Paul Ebert, the Prince William County commonwealth's attorney who knew Zimmerman's mother, Gladys, from her days as an interpreter at the county courthouse. Zimmerman's mother, Ebert knew, was Peruvian, and he thought of her as Hispanic.

Looking at Zimmerman's photograph made Darren Soto, a Florida state legislator, think he might be Latino. But he just as easily might have been Italian or French, he thought. "It's all over the place in Florida," said Soto, who represents a statehouse district in Orlando, a 20-minute drive from the gated subdivision in Sanford where Martin died. "You have people with Anglo first and last names who speak perfect Spanish and are from Puerto Rico. And you've got a third- or fourth-generation Joey Gonzalez from Tampa who can't speak a word of Spanish."

The focus in Florida, where thousands gathered Thursday night in Sanford for an emotional rally, has primarily been on [complaints that Martin may have been targeted because of his race](#). The uproar led Thursday to the temporary resignation of Sanford Police Chief Bill Lee, who has

been accused by demonstrators of bungling the case and criticized for not arresting Zimmerman.

In Manassas, where Zimmerman lived in the 1980s and 1990s with his parents and two siblings, neighbors tended to define the family based on their spiritual profile. “Very Catholic . . . very religious,” their neighbor Jim Rudzenski recalled Thursday. The children attended All Saints Catholic School on Stonewall Road through the eighth grade before going to Osborn High School. George became an altar server and evening receptionist at All Saints Catholic Church. The Zimmermans “were known and respected in the community for their dedication and service,” said Robert Cilinski, pastor of All Saints Catholic Church.

The father, Robert Zimmerman Sr., is a retired military man. He could be strict. And the children’s grandmother, who lived with the family, also kept a watchful eye, said Kay Hall, who lived across the street from the Zimmermans in a neighborhood just west of Sudley Road for about 20 years. George and his siblings “didn’t play with the neighborhood kids,” Rudzenski said. “They had to stay home and play.” It was always “Yes, ma’am,” “No, ma’am,” Hall said.

Zimmerman’s life was not without difficulties. In 2001 — when he was 17 or 18 — he was the victim of a minor criminal assault, said Manassas police Sgt. Eddie Rivera. The city’s computer records do not provide details of the crime.

In school, Zimmerman hinted at ambitions in the business world. He joined a Future Business Leaders of America club. And in his senior yearbook, he wrote: “I’m going to Florida to work with my godfather who just bought a \$1 million business.”

In Florida, Zimmerman shifted his plans, enrolling in Seminole State College with hopes of becoming a law enforcement officer. He became the self-appointed protector of the streets around his home, although his neighborhood watch organization was not officially registered. He called the police department at least 46 times since 2004 to report everything from open garages to suspicious people. In 2005, according to police records obtained by the Orlando Sentinel and other news organizations, Zimmerman was twice accused of either criminal misconduct or violence. He had a concealed-weapon permit and had a black Kel-Tec semiautomatic handgun and a holster the night Martin died.

Zimmerman’s father has sought to emphasize his family’s diversity in hopes of saving his son from condemnation as a racist. While [images of protests](#) from across the country skitter past on television screens, the elder Zimmerman has tried to do what others have been doing, in various ways, for days: define his son. George is “a Spanish-speaking minority,” the father wrote in a letter delivered to the Orlando Sentinel. “He would be the last to discriminate for any reason whatsoever.” George, the father insisted, was more like the boy he killed than people thought. George was a minority — the other — too.

But the argument that the father is making feels hollow and self-serving to Michaela Angela Davis, an African American writer and activist who lives in New York. In her eyes, George Zimmerman’s Hispanic roots don’t give him cover.

“You being a minority doesn’t make you immune to racist beliefs,” she said in an interview Thursday. Davis sees a pervasive cultural imprint, reinforced by media and entertainment

imagery: the black man as a symbol of “violence, fear and deviant behavior.” A young man could be susceptible to the influence of that image whether his “mother is from Peru or Norway.”

Hispanics and black Americans have a shared history of discrimination in the United States. But they also have a shared history of tension — in neighborhoods, schools, even prisons. In Latin America, including Peru, Afro Latinos have frequently complained of a lack of political representation, economic disenfranchisement and the virtual absence of their image in popular culture, such as soap operas, an issue they attribute to racial exclusion.

Zimmerman’s legal fate could rest on examinations of possible motives that will be pieced together from clues, including snatches of audiotape, and from inquiries into whether he muttered a racial slur before the shooting.

Zimmerman’s family background doesn’t invite a racial motive, but it doesn’t discount one either, said Luis Martinez-Fernandez, a professor of Latin American and Caribbean history at the University of Central Florida. Hispanics are an ethnic group, but within that group there are different races. There are black Dominicans and Cubans, for instance.

“Who is Hispanic and who’s not is not as clear as other ethnic groups,” said Martinez-Fernandez. “There’s no such thing as a Hispanic race. It has to do with origin, culture and race. Some people argue that language should be a part. All this complicates identity.”

Hispanics make up the nation’s largest ethnic group at more than 13 percent of the population, while African Americans are the largest racial group, with more than 12 percent of the population. In the 2010 Census, more than half of people who identified as Hispanic said they were white, and only 3 percent said they were black.

“There’s a sense that one group has been harmed historically more than the other,” Martinez-Fernandez said. “There’s been a history of the dominant group in power pitting one group against the other. I think we have not fought together. There have been few instances of that.”

But there have been some signs in Florida that Hispanics and African Americans are forging a bond, said Soto, the state legislator. During ongoing redistricting debates in Florida, the two groups have “stuck together very solidly,” he said.

If not for a quirk of fate, Martin and Zimmerman might never have encountered each other, sparing the nation a painful episode. Several years ago, Zimmerman returned to his old neighborhood and showed up unannounced at the house across the street. He came back two more times to see George Hall, a retired Presbyterian minister. Zimmerman told him that he had plans. He wanted to move back to Virginia. He wanted to be a police officer, but he needed a letter of recommendation that Zimmerman could give to prospective employers.

“I told them he was a great guy,” Hall recalled. “We never did hear what happened with that.”

Telegraph, UK

[Air France Flight 447: 'Damn it, we're going to crash'](#)

With the report into the tragedy of Air France 447 due next month, Airbus's 'brilliant' aircraft design may have contributed to one of the world's worst aviation disasters and the deaths of all 228 onboard.

by Nick Ross, Neil Tweedie



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In the early hours of June 1 2009, Air France Flight 447 from Rio de Janeiro to Paris went missing, along with 216 passengers and 12 crew. The Airbus A330-200 disappeared mid-ocean, beyond radar coverage and in darkness. It took a shocked and bewildered Air France six hours to concede its loss and for several agonising days there was no trace. It was an utter mystery. No other airliner had vanished so completely in modern times. Even when wreckage was discovered the tragedy was no less perplexing. The aircraft had flown through a thunderstorm, but there was no distress signal, and the jet was state-of-the-art, a type that had never before been involved in a fatal accident. What had caused it to fall out of the sky?

The official report by French accident investigators is due in a month and seems likely to echo provisional verdicts suggesting human error. There is no doubt that at least one of AF447's pilots made a fatal and sustained mistake, and the airline must bear responsibility for the actions of its crew. It will be a grievous blow for Air France, perhaps more damaging than the Concorde disaster of July 2000.

But there is another, worrying implication that the Telegraph can disclose for the first time: that the errors committed by the pilot doing the flying were not corrected by his more experienced colleagues because they did not know he was behaving in a manner bound to induce a stall.

And the reason for that fatal lack of awareness lies partly in the design of the control stick – the “side stick” – used in all Airbus cockpits.

Anything to do with Airbus is important. The company has sold 11,500 aircraft to date, with 7,000 in the air. It commands half the world market in big airliners, the other half belonging to its great American rival, Boeing.

The mystery of AF447 has taken three years to resolve, involving immensely costly mid-Atlantic searches covering 17,000 square kilometres of often uncharted sea bed to depths of 4,700 metres. So remote was the place the airliner went down, in equatorial waters between Brazil and Africa, that it was five days before debris and the first bodies were recovered. Finally, almost two years later, robot submarines located the aircraft’s flight recorders, a near-miraculous feat that revitalised the biggest crash inquiry since Lockerbie.

Prior to the recovery of the recorders, the cause of the disaster could only be inferred from a few salvaged pieces of wreckage and technical data beamed automatically from the aircraft to the airline’s maintenance centre in France. It appeared to be a failure of the plane’s pitot (pronounced pea-toe) tubes – small, forward-facing ducts that use airflow to measure airspeed. On entering the storm these had apparently frozen over, blanking airspeed indicators and causing the autopilot to disengage. From then on the crew failed to maintain sufficient speed, resulting in a stall which, over almost four minutes, sent 228 people plummeting to their deaths.

But why? Normally an A330 can fly itself, overriding unsafe commands. Even if systems fail there is standard procedure to fall back on: if you set engine thrust to 85 per cent and pitch the nose five degrees above the horizontal, the aircraft will more or less fly level. How was it that three pilots trained by a safe and prestigious airline could so disastrously lose control? Either there was something wrong with the plane, or with the crew. Airbus and Air France, both with much to lose, were soon pointing accusing fingers at each other.

In July last year the French air crash investigation organisation, the Bureau d’Enquêtes et d’Analyses (BEA), published its third interim report. For Air France the conclusion was crushing: the crew had ignored repeated stall alerts and kept trying to climb, instead of levelling off or descending to pick up speed. The A330 had become so slow that it simply ceased to fly. Its reputation on the line, Air France came as close as it dared to repudiating the finding. The pilots, said the airline, had “showed unfailing professional attitude, remaining committed to their task to the very end”.

But the airline’s case seemed thin. All indications suggested the aircraft had functioned just as it was designed. The black box recordings showed that the plane was responsive to the point of impact. The case against the pilots looked even worse when a transcript of the voice recorder was leaked. It confirmed that one of the pilots had pulled the stick back and kept it there for almost the entirety of the emergency. With its nose pointed too far upwards, it was little wonder that the Airbus had eventually lost momentum and stalled. But this analysis begs the question: even if one pilot got things badly wrong, why did his two colleagues fail to spot the problem? The transcript of increasingly panicky conversations in the cockpit suggests they did, but too late.

AF447 was four hours into its 11-hour overnight journey when it was overwhelmed by disaster. Many passengers, including five Britons, would have been trying to grab some sleep, only half

aware of the turbulence buffeting the A330. There were eight children onboard, including Alexander BJORoy, an 11-year-old boarder at Bristol's Clifton College. Also travelling was Christine Badre Schnabl and her five-year-old son, Philippe. She and her husband had purposely chosen separate flights to Paris, possibly because of their shared fear of air crashes. He had taken off earlier with the couple's three-year-old daughter.

Two hours in, Marc Dubois, the veteran captain, was heading for a routine break. His deputy, David Robert, a seasoned flier with 6,500 flying hours under his belt, was perfectly capable of coping with the tropical thunderstorm AF447 was flying towards. Pierre-Cédric Bonin was at the controls and, though the most junior pilot, he had clocked up a respectable 2,900 hours on commercial jets.

As the airliner entered the worst of the weather, Bonin told the cabin crew to prepare for turbulence. Eight minutes later, everyone on board would be dead. Bonin himself seems to have been spooked, calling attention to a metallic smell and an eerie glow in the cockpit. Robert reassured him that it was St Elmo's fire, an electrical fluorescence not uncommon in equatorial thunderstorms. A few moments later the outside air temperature plummeted, the pitot tubes iced up and an alarm sounded briefly to warn that the autopilot had disengaged. From this moment, Bonin's behaviour is strange. The flight recorder indicates that, without saying anything, he pulled back on the stick and, seemingly against all reason, kept the nose up, causing a synthesised voice to warn, "Stall! Stall!" in English as the airspeed began to drop dangerously. Robert took 20 or 30 seconds to figure out what was happening before ordering Bonin to descend. "It says we're going up. It says we're going up, so descend." Seconds later Robert again called out, "Descend!" and for a few moments the plane recovered momentum and the stall warning ceased. But Robert was now anxious enough to call for the captain to return to the cockpit. Meanwhile, Bonin's instinct was again to pull back on the control stick. He left it there despite the stall warning that blared out some 75 times. Instead of moving the stick forward to pick up speed, he continued to climb at almost the maximum rate. If he had simply set the control to neutral or re-engaged the autopilot, all would have been well.

A minute after the autopilot disconnected, Bonin muttered something odd: "I'm in TOGA, huh?" TOGA stands for Take Off, Go Around. Bonin was apparently so disorientated that he believed he was operating at low altitude, in a similar situation to a pilot having to abort a landing approach before circling for a second attempt. Standard procedure on abandoning a landing is to set engines to full power and tilt the aircraft upwards at 15 degrees. But Flight AF447 was not a few hundred feet above a runway. Within a minute it had soared to 38,000 feet in air so thin that it could climb no more. As forward thrust was lost, downward momentum was gathering. Instead of the wings slicing neatly through the air, their increasing angle of attack meant they were in effect damming it. In the next 40 seconds AF447 fell 3,000 feet, losing more and more speed as the angle of attack increased to 40 degrees. The wings were now like bulldozer blades against the sky. Bonin failed to grasp this fact, and though angle of attack readings are sent to onboard computers, there are no displays in modern jets to convey this critical information to the crews. One of the provisional recommendations of the BEA inquiry has been to challenge this absence.

Bonin's insistent efforts to climb soon deprived even the computers of the vital angle-of-attack information. An A330's angle of attack is measured by a fin projecting from the fuselage. When forward speed fell to 60 knots there was insufficient airflow to make the mechanism work. The computers, which are programmed not to feed pilots misleading information, could no longer

make sense of the data they were receiving and blanked out some of the instruments. Also, the stall warnings ceased. It was up to the pilots to do some old-fashioned flying.

With no knowledge of airspeed or angle of attack, the safest thing at high altitude is to descend gently to avoid a stall. This is what David urged Bonin to do, but something bewildering happened when Bonin put the nose down. As the aircraft picked up speed, the input data became valid again and the computers could now make sense of things. Once again they began to shout: "Stall, stall, stall." Tragically, as Bonin did the right thing to pick up speed, the aircraft seemed to tell him he was making matters worse. If he had continued to descend the warnings would eventually have ceased. But, panicked by the renewed stall alerts, he chose to resume his fatal climb.

Yet if Bonin was now beyond his knowledge and experience, the key to understanding the crash is Robert's failure to grasp the mistake being made by his colleague. It is here that Airbus's cockpit design may be at fault.

Like all other aircraft in the modern Airbus range the A330 is controlled by side sticks beside pilots' seats, which resemble those on computer game consoles. These side sticks are not connected to the aircraft control surfaces by levers and pulleys, as in older aircraft. Instead commands are fed to computers, which in turn send signals to the engines and hydraulics. This so-called fly-by-wire technology has huge advantages. Doing away with mechanical connections saves weight, and therefore fuel. There are fewer moving components to go wrong, the slender electronic wiring and computers all have multiple back-ups, and the onboard processors take much of the workload off pilots. Better still, they are programmed to compensate for human error.

The side sticks are also wonderfully clever. Once a command is given, say a 10-degree left turn, the pilot can let the stick go and concentrate on other issues while the 10-degree turn is perfectly maintained. According to Stephen King of the British Airline Pilots' Association, it's an admired and popular design. "Most Airbus pilots I know love it because of the reliable automation that allows you to manage situations and not be so fatigued by the mechanics of flying."

But the fact that the second pilot's stick stays in neutral whatever the input to the other is not a good thing. As King concedes: "It's not immediately apparent to one pilot what the other may be doing with the control stick, unless he makes a big effort to look across to the other side of the flight deck, which is not easy. In any case, the side stick is held back for only a few seconds, so you have to see the action being taken."

Thus it was that even when Bonin had the A330's nose pointed upward during the fatal stall, his colleagues failed to comprehend what was going on. It seems clear from the transcripts that Robert assumed the plane was flying level or even descending. Robert himself was panicking: "We still have the engines! What the hell is happening? I don't understand what's happening." Ninety seconds after the emergency began the captain was back in the cockpit demanding: "What the hell are you doing?" To which both pilots responded: "We've lost control of the plane!"

Dubois took the seat behind his colleagues and for a while was as perplexed as they were. It was pitch black outside, warning lights were flashing and some of the screens were blank. The men in front partially blocked his view and evidently he did not take much notice of a horizon

indicator, which must have shown the plane was still being held nose up. The Airbus was soon falling through the night at 11,000 feet per minute, twice as fast as its forward travel. Only 45 seconds before impact Bonin blurted out that he had been trying to climb throughout the emergency, giving his colleagues the first indication of what had been going wrong. There is one final, dramatic exchange:

02:13:40 (Robert) “Climb... climb... climb... climb...”

02:13:40 (Bonin) “But I’ve had the stick back the whole time!”

02:13:42 (Dubois) “No, no, no... Don’t climb... no, no.”

02:13:43 (Robert) “Descend... Give me the controls... Give me the controls!”

Robert takes control and finally lowers the nose, but at that moment a new hazard warning sounds, telling them the surface of the sea is fast approaching. Robert realises the ghastly truth – that he hasn’t enough height to dive to pick up speed. The flight is doomed.

02:14:23 (Robert) “Damn it, we’re going to crash... This can’t be happening!”

02:14:25 (Bonin) “But what’s going on?”

The captain, now acutely aware of the aircraft’s pitch, has the final word:

02:14:27 (Dubois) “Ten degrees of pitch...”

There the recording ends.

Mercifully, data recordings and impact damage on debris confirm the Airbus was still more or less level when it hit the sea. Some of the passengers might have dozed throughout the descent; others may have attributed it to violent buffeting. Those in window seats would have seen only darkness. There is reason to hope that there was not too much panic on board, but this is small consolation.

It seems surprising that Airbus has conceived a system preventing one pilot from easily assessing the actions of the colleague beside him. And yet that is how their latest generations of aircraft are designed. The reason is that, for the vast majority of the time, side sticks are superb. “People are aware that they don’t know what is being done on the other side stick, but most of the time the crews fly in full automation; they are not even touching the stick,” says Captain King. “We hand-fly the aeroplane ever less now because automation is reliable and efficient, and because fatigue is an issue. [The side stick] is not an issue that comes up – very rarely does the other pilot’s input cause you concern.”

Boeing has always begged to differ, persisting with conventional controls on its fly-by-wire aircraft, including the new 787 Dreamliner, introduced into service this year. Boeing’s cluttering and old-fashioned levers still have to be pushed and turned like the old mechanical ones, even though they only send electronic impulses to computers. They need to be held in place for a climb or a turn to be accomplished, which some pilots think is archaic and distracting. Some say Boeing is so conservative because most American pilots graduate from flying schools where

column-steering is the norm, whereas European airlines train more crew from scratch, allowing a quicker transition to side stick control.

Whatever the cultural differences, there is a perceived safety issue, too. The American manufacturer was concerned about side sticks' lack of visual and physical feedback. Indeed, it is hard to believe AF447 would have fallen from the sky if it had been a Boeing. Had a traditional yoke been installed on Flight AF447, Robert would surely have realised that his junior colleague had the lever pulled back and mostly kept it there. When Dubois returned to the cockpit he would have seen that Bonin was pulling up the nose.

There is another clever gizmo on the Airbus intended to make life simpler for the pilots but that could confound them if they are distracted and overloaded. Computers can automatically adjust the engine thrust to maintain whatever speed is selected by the crew. This means pilots do not need to keep fine-tuning the throttles on the cockpit's centre console to control the power. But a curious feature of "autothrust" is that it bypasses the manual levers entirely – they simply do not move. This means pilots cannot sense the power setting by touching or glancing at the throttle levers. Instead, they have to check their computer screens. Again Boeing have adopted a different philosophy. They told the Telegraph: "We have heard again and again from airline pilots that the absence of motion with the Airbus flight deck is rather unsettling to them." In Boeing's system the manual handles move, even in automatic mode.

All the indications are that the final crash report will confirm the initial findings and call for better training and procedures. With the exception of Air France, which has a vested interest in avoiding culpability, no one has publicly challenged the Airbus cockpit design. And while Air France has modified the pitots on its fleet, it has said nothing about side sticks.

It is extremely unlikely that there will ever be another disaster quite like AF447. Crews have already had the lessons drummed into them and routine refresher courses on simulators have been upgraded to replicate AF447 high-level stalls. Airbus has an excellent safety record, at least as good as Boeing, and the A330 is an extremely trustworthy aircraft. Flying is easily the least dangerous way to travel, far safer than a car. But while more of us take to the air each year, a single crash is enough to damage confidence.

Critics of side sticks may now argue that Airbus should return to the drawing board. A feature designed to make things better for pilots has unintentionally made it harder for them to monitor colleagues in stressful situations. Yet there is no sign that the inquiry will call for changes to the sticks and Airbus remains confident about the safety of its technology. It will resist what it regards as a retrograde step to return to faux-mechanical controls. The company is unable to speak openly during the investigation, but a source close to the manufacturer says: "The ergonomic systems were absolutely not contrived by engineers and imposed on the pilot community. They were developed by pilots from many airlines, working closely with the engineers. What's more, it has all been tested and certified by the European Aviation Safety Agency and regulators in the United States, and approved by lots of airlines."

As Captain King points out, a belief in automation and the elegantly simple side sticks in particular, is integral to the Airbus design philosophy: "You would have to build in artificial feedback – that would be a huge modification."

A defender of Airbus puts it thus: “When you drive you don’t look at the pedals to judge your speed, you look at the speedometer. It’s the same when flying: you don’t look at the stick, you look at the instruments.”

There is a problem with that analogy. Drivers manoeuvre by looking out of the window, physically steering and sensing pressure on the pedals. The speedometer is usually the only instrument a motorist needs to monitor. An airline pilot flying in zero visibility depends upon instruments for direction, pitch, altitude, angle of climb or descent, turn, yaw and thrust; and has to keep an eye on several dozen settings and lights. Flying a big airliner manually is a demanding task, especially if warnings are blaring and anxiety is growing.

Multimillion-euro lawsuits could follow any admission of liability and it is certainly preferable from Airbus’s point of view that Air France should shoulder the blame for the night when AF447 plunged into the void.

However, no one would suggest that, when it comes to the aircraft we all rely on every day, commercial considerations should come anything but a distant second to safety.





FOURWEIRD



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WELL,
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THEN...
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GUESS
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