

After flight MH370 is found, what happens next?

21 March 2014, by Geoffrey Dell



An RAAF pilot steers his AP-3C Orion over the Southern Indian Ocean during the search for MH370. AAP/Department of Defence, Sergeant Hamish Paterson.

Once any wreckage is found, then begins the slow process of trying to find out how Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 ended up where it did.

Authorities are [still searching](#) for signs of any objects seen about 2,500km off the coast of Western Australia that may be wreckage from the the flight.

Two objects – one 24 metres in size, the other smaller at five metres – were identified in Australian satellite images. It shows that satellite imagery may be helpful in such a wide area searches, despite the [earlier images](#) of debris from a Chinese satellite which proved to be false.

If any wreckage is found by RAAF search aircraft and confirmed to be from flight MH370 it will be a major breakthrough in the hunt for an aircraft which has been missing since it left Kuala Lumpur on Saturday 8 March on its regular flight to Beijing with 239 [passengers and crew on board](#).

The hunt for clues

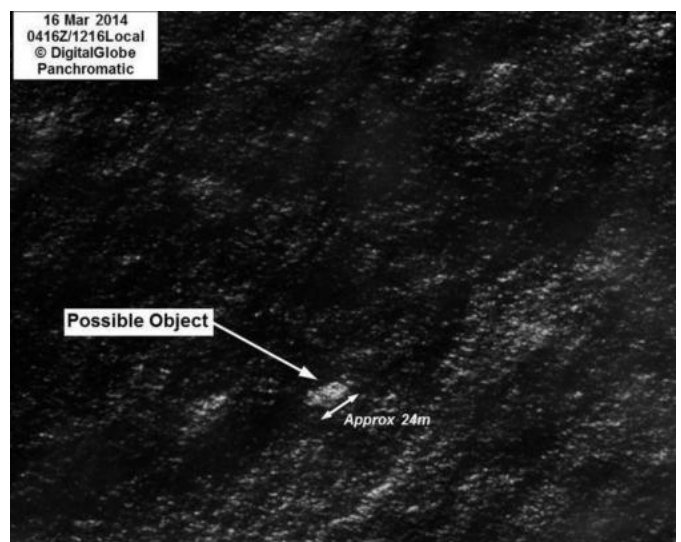
What happens next, if the wreckage is found to have been from MH370, is that search planners will try to extrapolate its journey backwards in time.

Based on best estimates of ocean currents in the area, they will try to estimate where the wreckage might have begun to drift and possible tracks the aircraft may have flown to get to the southern Indian Ocean after radar contact was lost.

If the debris is from flight MH370 the flight recorder beacons should be transmitting, so narrowing the search to the southern Indian Ocean may improve the potential to detect one of those signals.

Whose investigation?

If the debris is found by search aircraft and closer examination proves it to be from the flight, who gets tasked with its recovery might come down to who can get assets out there in a reasonable time frame.



Satellite imagery shows the largest 24 metre size object that may be possible debris from the missing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370. Credit: AAP IMAGE/AMSA

The responsibility for any investigation of the wreckage will still be vested in Malaysia as the country where the aircraft was registered. It is, after all, a Malaysian Airlines aircraft and their passengers and crew. I would expect other countries such as Australia will continue to provide assistance.

It will still be very difficult and time consuming to recover the wreckage once it is located. The depth of water alone will have a significant influence on the recovery options available, the difficulty involved and the time it will take.

The search for the flight recorders will be investigators highest priority. The digital flight data recorder will provide clear evidence of what the aircraft was doing from the time it departed Kuala Lumpur.

Thousands of recorded parameters will give a very accurate picture of the flight, speeds, altitudes, headings, the configuration of hundreds of key aircraft components – a continuous image of what the aircraft actually did.

The cockpit voice recorder should also shed light on what conversations and other noises occurred in the cockpit leading up to and after the [last words](#): "All right, good night."

The crash site

Investigators will also want to obtain photographs of the wreckage on the sea floor among their first attempts to gather useful information to shed light on just what happened to MH370. Photos of wreckage on the sea floor were also useful in the case of [Air France flight 447](#).

Whether or not there will be any human remains located or whether any bodies may be recovered will also depend on a whole lot of factors, such as the extent to which the aircraft broke up and the time the bodies have spent in the water.

Questions, questions, questions

There are still so many questions about the flight that need to be answered and so very little hard evidence available upon which to begin to form answers with any degree of surety.

A spokesperson for the [airline said](#) the Aircraft Communications Addressing and Reporting System ([ACARS](#)) was disabled just before the aircraft reached the East coast of peninsular Malaysia. Shortly afterwards, near the border between Malaysian and Vietnamese air traffic control, the aircraft's transponder was switched off.

If this is true, there's really no plausible reason why flight crew would take such action in normal [flight](#) operations.

How wide is the search?

Since the aircraft disappeared, the search area has gradually widened, from the original area off the coast of Vietnam, to include an area off Western Australia.

The delay in finding anything means wreckage could have drifted quite a bit. The main investigation into potential causes will not really begin until the wreckage and recorders can be found and recovered otherwise we may never know what happened.

In the wake of the MH370 tragedy, questions will be asked about the need for keeping track of passenger [aircraft](#). Already some are questioning how a modern airliner can be [allowed to disappear](#) given today's technology.

Yet thousands are being completed safely every day and only one has seemingly disappeared. So any intervention to try to reduce the probability of a repeat disappearance will have to meet an extremely demanding cost benefit equation indeed.

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