

Thursday September 13 7:19 PM ET

Flight Data Recorder Found at Pa. Crash Site

By David Morgan
SHANKSVILLE, Pa. (Reuters) –

A search crew found the flight data recorder on Thursday from the hijacked United Airlines plane that crashed in Pennsylvania after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, raising hopes of important new clues to what happened aboard the Boeing 757.

The so-called black box, which was quickly transported to the National Transportation Safety Board in Washington for analysis, could shed light on what happened aboard San Francisco-bound Flight 93 before it crashed on Tuesday near a wooded area 80 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. All 45 people on board the flight lost their lives.

FBI agent Bill Crowley could not say whether the data recorder was in working order. The device, discovered in the crash-impact crater at about 4:20 p.m., is designed to monitor and record the operations of in-flight systems. The voice recorder, which investigators hope will reveal conversations and events that occurred in the plane's cockpit, was still missing. "We're trying to determine what happened, and this development that just occurred is going to help a lot. I think it will answer a lot of questions," Crowley said.

Meanwhile, search crews began moving human remains from the debris field to a makeshift morgue set up in a nearby armory. "Every piece of tissue that's there will be given a unique number and put into the computer," said Dennis Dirkmaat, a forensic anthropologist from Mercyhurst College in Erie, Pennsylvania. He was reluctant to say whether DNA analysis, dental records and fingerprints would identify everyone on board the flight, and noted that identifying the remains of the hijackers would depend on the availability of usable records. Families of the victims were expected to begin arriving soon in western Pennsylvania.

Flight 93, which crashed soon after three other jetliners slammed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, was the only hijacked plane not to hit a U.S. landmark. That fact has brought intense speculation about what brought the plane down.

Several passengers managed to telephone people on the ground to report the hijacking. Accounts described three hijackers claiming to have a bomb and a plan by passengers to overpower them. There were also reports that one man heard an explosion. "If they are going to take the plane down, then we are going to have to do something," I know we're all going to die. There's three of us who are going to do something about it." Deena Burnett of San Ramon, California, quoted her husband as saying during a cellular phone conversation moments before the crash.

Burnett was one of 38 passengers and seven crew members aboard hijacked United Airlines Flight 93, and he was not the only person to relay information to a loved one. In first-class seat 4D, public relations executive Mark Bingham used an airplane phone to call his mother. "Mom, this is Mark Bingham," he said, so rattled that he included his last name. "Three guys have taken over the plane, and they say they have a bomb." Back in coach, Jeremy Glick phoned his wife Lyzbeth to say, "Three Arab-looking men with red headbands" had taken over the cockpit. Flight 93 was the last of the hijacked planes to meet its fate. All three passengers knew about the attacks on the World Trade Center. Did they do what we think they did? Did three strangers on a flight in distress band together to fight their captors and ditch the Boeing 757 before it could harm untold thousands?

Investigators have recovered Flight 93's black boxes, and they may tell us something definitive. But those closest to Burnett, Bingham and Glick say they don't need confirmation. "You'd have to know Mark," says Bingham's aunt Kathy Hoglan. "I'm sure he and the others did something to stop this." "He knew that stopping them was going to end all of their lives," says Jeremy Glick's brother-in-law Douglas Hurwitt. "But that was my brother-in-law. He was a take-charge guy." Deena Burnett says, "I know without a doubt

that the plane was bound for some landmark and that they saved many, many more lives than were lost on that plane." Other relatives of people on Flight 93 have spoken up too and assigned their loved ones a heroic narrative. Those of the captain, Jason Dahl, say he would never have allowed hijackers to take control of his plane without a fight. But there is something about the similarities of these three passengers that makes the portrait of them as confederates perfectly imaginable. All three were large, athletic, decisive types. They were nimble, successful, charismatic, self-elected leaders — the kind that have a knack for finding one another.

We'd like to think they did it. We may never know. Yet Glick's last words to his wife Lyzbeth, like Burnett's vow of action to his wife, make us want to believe they prevailed, taking Flight 93 down in a Pennsylvania coalfield far from any metropolis. "We're going to rush the hijackers," said Glick. Then he put down the phone.

The Pennsylvania state police said debris from the crash had shown up about 8 miles away near a residential area where local media quoted some residents as seeing flaming debris from the sky. State Police Major Lyle Szupinka said debris found in the residential area was small enough to have been carried by air currents after impact.