



ET-409 DISASTER

WALID
Noshie

How a marine treasure hunter helped find the ill-fated Ethiopian Airlines flight

as much as 380 kilograms in gold coins were on board the plane when it went down.

Some 40 years later, Walid Noshie, owner of the Scuba Station gear shop in Hamra and a seasoned underwater enthusiast, caught wind of the tale of the doomed LIA flight. This began a near decade-long quest to find the plane and recover the gold. He amassed considerable experience over that period, and is now considered an expert in underwater search and recovery.

Recently, Noshie's experience of searching for drowned planes became sadly all too relevant. Shortly after takeoff from Beirut on January 25 of this year, Ethiopian Airlines Flight ET-409 bound for Addis Ababa crashed into the Mediterranean, killing all 90 people on board. In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, Noshie became a consultant for the Lebanese government in locating the plane's black box recorders and recovering the victims' remains. EXECUTIVE recently sat down for an exclusive interview with Noshie.

E What's your connection to the 1957 airplane crash and the search for the gold? Why was there gold on the plane in the first place?

[Our search] started in 1999. We found a plane between Khaldeh

and Beirut at a depth of 1,500 meters [in 2006]. It was exactly the size of the C46 and we thought, "this is it." The plane turned out to be a Henkel German Nazi fighter from World War II. We had to start from scratch again.

The Arabs in general used to pay with the English gold pound. Back then in 1957 [the British were] not making those gold coins anymore, but the soldiers in the Arab countries were still getting paid in the gold coin and they wanted [them]. Who was counterfeiting those gold coins? Lebanon and Italy. So they were buying them from us and paying their soldiers — which would explain the gold on the LIA flight.

E What's your connection to the search for the Ethiopian plane that recently crashed?

When the plane crashed I received a call from Prime Minister [Saad] Hariri, because he knows I have the expertise in looking for underwater stuff. They needed someone to look for the plane [and he asked me to help].

I called Ocean Alert [which is owned by Odyssey Marine Exploration, Noshie's partners in the search for the LIA flight] and said, "Look we have a disaster here. Can you help?" They said, "OK we need

Shortly after takeoff from Beirut on October 3, 1957, a Curtiss-Commando C-46 airplane of the Lebanese International Airways (LIA), bound for Kuwait, caught fire. The pilot signaled to the control tower that the plane was in distress and that he was turning around to make an emergency landing, according to an account in *L'Orient-Le Jour* the next day. Minutes later the control tower received a final message: "Airplane uncontrollable; falling," and the flight disappeared into the Mediterranean.

Twenty-three passengers and crew reportedly lost their lives, and while remains and luggage were recovered, the plane itself was lost to the deep. Further reports alleged that

24 hours to be in Lebanon,” and, effectively, 24 hours later they were here. This is when they went to the army base and were given [an area to search].

Who was involved in the main search parties?

The main search parties were the USS Ramage, the Laboe (a UN German ship) and the Ocean Alert. [The army] gave each an area to search. The USS Ramage and the Laboe didn't have the Ocean Alert's equipment but they hoped to hear, possibly, the black box [with sonar].

Who was supervising the search?

At all times two officers from the navy and army were on board the Ocean Alert, observing the search operation. So all ships were under the control of the Lebanese Army and the investigators, and had to comply with the requested search area.

How did the search unfold?

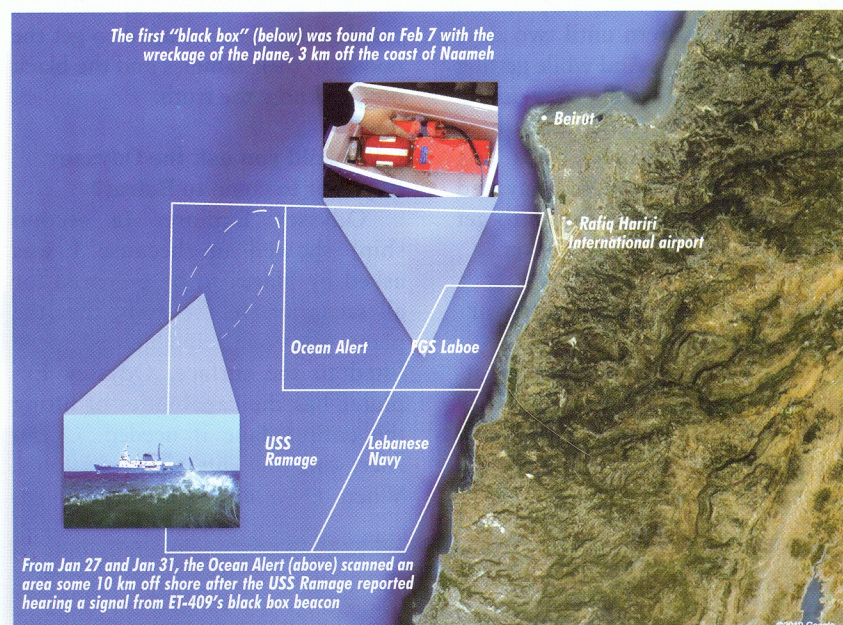
One night, after 48 hours or so, I received a call from the army saying that the USS Ramage had heard [a signal] in their area, approximately 10 kilometers out. Logically, it didn't make sense. The investigators said [the plane] fell near to shore, the witnesses at the tower said it fell near the shore. However, the Ramage said, “We heard the beacon 10 kilometers off Beirut.” So the only logical course of action from the army and investigators was to ask the Ocean Alert [which had the capabilities of scanning deep water areas] to direct its search to where USS Ramage heard that beacon.

Why was the Ocean Alert the only one that could scan that area?

Laboe and Ramage don't have the capability to scan the sea bed deeper than 100 meters, while the Ocean Alert is equipped to scan waters up to 2,000 meters deep. So the Ocean Alert complied with the orders of the army and the investigators, and went out 10 kilometers and started looking.

The hunt for ET-409

Searchers divided a 35 kilometer square area in which to look for the missing plane. The recorders were eventually found just 3 kilometers from the shore



The Ramage said it did not have an exact spot but rather a 35 square kilometer area where it had heard the beacon. The Ocean Alert started looking and after two days of search found [non geological] debris at 1,400 meters depth, which extended 1.6 kilometers across the bottom. We asked the Ramage to pass over the debris, [as we gave them that exact position] and see if they heard the beacon. They went over the debris and reconfirmed hearing the beacon.

While the Ocean Alert was out and ready to deploy its [remote operating vehicle] to check the debris at 1,400 meters, the French arrived with a device used to specifically hear the beacon of the airplane. They arrived on a [Lebanese] army ship and started listening in the area of the USS Ramage, exactly where we saw the debris, but did not hear anything.

At the same time, a body popped up to the surface in the search area of the Laboe [closer to shore]. So we decided to ask the Ocean Alert to go and investigate that area, with the approval of the army.

The French team came to the same area as well and this is when

they started hearing a beacon [in the Laboe's area]. The Ocean Alert joined forces with the Lebanese Navy and started looking but didn't find anything the first night. So they all came back to shore and had a meeting with the army and the French investigators. They re-pinned the exact position because the previous point they gave us was not exactly where they had heard the beacon.

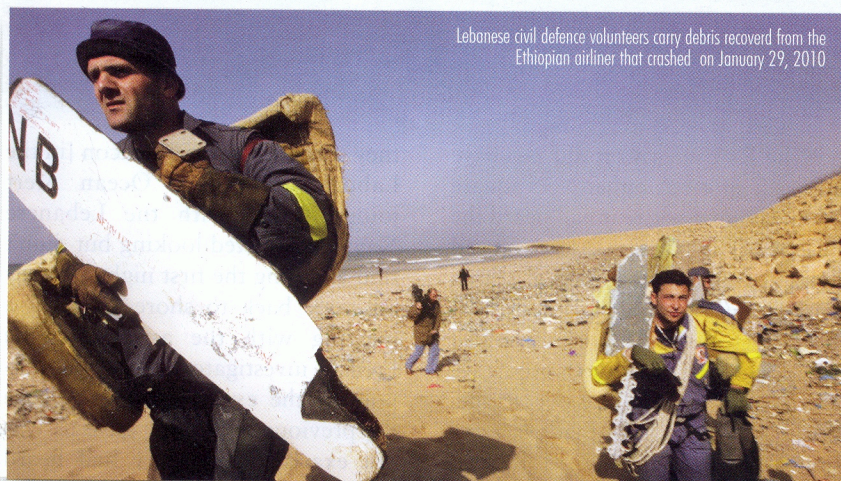
They rectified that position and with these new coordinates, we were pretty sure we were going to find the plane between that night and the next day. At 8 o'clock in the morning I made a phone call to the Prime Minister. I confirmed that the Ocean Alert had located the tail and some debris. It was 42 meters deep and the army immediately began diving, looking for bodies and the black box. They found the first black box on the next day. The Ocean Alert made a wider search and it showed that the whole plane was right there but it was in a thousand pieces.

We made an arrangement with the army that they would dive during the day and pick up bodies, while the

Ocean Alert took over at night, to scan and mark by [Global Positioning Satellite] the bodies they found. This was the pattern until two days ago [February 16]. And while getting bodies from the wreck, they found the remains of the second black box. This is how the second black box was found. The Lebanese army and the navy did an immense job to get all those bodies from the bottom.

What did the USS Ramage hear 10 km off Beirut?

It's hard to tell, however; whatever they heard was not the ET-409 beacon, since the plane was finally found less than 3 km away off the coast of Lebanon.



Lebanese civil defence volunteers carry debris recovered from the Ethiopian airliner that crashed on January 29, 2010

Don't bodies tend to float?

Bodies tend to float if they are in one piece, because you have gas in the intestines and in the lungs. However if the body is [not intact], it becomes a bulk of weight on the bottom. There is nothing to make it float. The plane was in so many pieces and the bodies were not intact either. The plane fell from 9,000 feet, to hit the ocean at a speed of 700 kilometers per hour, so you can imagine what kind of impact that would create. It's exactly like hitting concrete.

Mind you, when we started searching Hariri and Minister [of Public Works and Transportation MP Ghazi] Aridi gave strict, strict in-

structions that the two most important things for them were the bodies and the black box. That's all they cared about. They wanted to get the bodies to their families and the black box, to know the truth.

Why did you ask the Odyssey Explorer to come to Beirut?

Odyssey Explorer (a second ship) showed up because I was asked by Hariri to be prepared for all scenarios. In the event that the plane was found and needed to be lifted to the surface, Odyssey Explorer has the capabilities of lifting the entire plane if needed. Ocean Alert can only lift up to 50 kilos. When Odyssey Explorer arrived,

Ocean Alert returned to its previous work in the Mediterranean while Odyssey finished the job.

At the initial arrival of Ocean Alert to Beirut, a day after the crash, they intended to find the plane in two or three days because they thought that the crash positions that were given were pretty much exact, but this was not the case and it took all this time. Ocean Alert had no intention of getting paid; they were just serving Lebanon free of charge, on the request of Hariri and Aridi.

After one week of search, [Odyssey Marine Exploration] told me, "It's taking longer than expected and now that you are asking us

for our second ship, the Odyssey Explorer to come [from London] and help in the search and recovery, we will have to charge." It was agreed that Odyssey would start charging for its services only after February 1. All its services prior to that date were a gift to Lebanon.

Were you personally on board the ships while they were doing the search?

No. I was in Beirut communicating between the ship, the government, the army and the investigators. I needed my phone and the internet to work efficiently so that I could relay requests and orders between all parties, as well as writing daily reports regarding the search.

Where is Odyssey Marine Exploration based?

Tampa, Florida. This is what they did for Lebanon. In return, they get accused by some local news media that they were wasting time looking for the gold. The accusations that these ships were taking advantage to look for the C-46 are absurd. All search activities and movements of the ships were directed by the investigation team and the army while directly supervised by the Lebanese Navy.

Do you have any plans to request that the Odyssey and Ocean Alert come back out to look for gold?

Absolutely, when they are done with the search and recovery of the Ethiopian plane, and only when we get the legal permit for the search from the Lebanese Government. This has nothing to do with helping [look for the Ethiopian plane].

Where do you think the plane with the gold might be located?

It's hard to say. Just look at how long it took to find the ET-409 flight. The C-46 was lost over 50 years ago. We know it's somewhere out there, we just need to find it. 