

MH-17: Kerry Pressed for Evidence by Father of Sole American Citizen on Flight

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The father of Quinn Schansman, the only American citizen to die in the 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine, has asked Secretary of State John Kerry to release the U.S. data that Kerry cited in claiming precise knowledge of where the suspected anti-aircraft missile was fired.

One of the mysteries of the MH-17 case has become why the United States – after asserting that it possessed information implicating ethnic Russian rebels and the Russian government – has failed to make the data public or apparently even share it with Dutch investigators who are leading the inquiry into how the plane was shot down and who was responsible.

Quinn Schansman, who had dual U.S.-Dutch citizenship, boarded MH-17 along with 297 other people for a flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur on July 17, 2014. The 19-year-old was planning to join his family for a vacation in Malaysia.

In [a letter](#) to Kerry dated Jan. 5, 2016, Thomas J. Schansman, Quinn's father, noted Kerry's remarks at a press conference on Aug. 12, 2014, when the Secretary of State said about the Buk anti-aircraft missile suspected of downing the plane:

"We saw the take-off. We saw the trajectory. We saw the hit. We saw this aeroplane disappear from the radar screens. So there is really no mystery about where it came from and where these weapons have come from."



Image: Quinn Schansman, a dual U.S.-Dutch citizen killed aboard Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on July 17, 2014. (Photo from Facebook)

Yet, where the missile launch occurred has remained a mystery in the MH-17 investigation. Last October, when the Dutch Safety Board issued its final report on the crash, it could only place the launch site within a 320-square-kilometer area in eastern Ukraine, covering territory then controlled by both Ukrainian and rebel forces. (The safety board did not seek to identify which side fired the fateful missile).

Meanwhile, Almaz-Antey, the Russian arms manufacturer of the Buk systems, conducted its own experiments to determine the likely firing location and placed it in a much smaller area near the village of Zaroshchenskoye, about 20 kilometers west of the Dutch Safety Board's zone and in an area under Ukrainian government control.

In the days immediately after the shoot-down, Kerry and other senior U.S. officials pointed the finger of blame at ethnic Russian rebels who were resisting a military offensive by the U.S.-backed regime in Kiev. The Russian government was faulted for supposedly giving the rebels a powerful Buk anti-aircraft system capable of downing a civilian airliner flying at 33,000 feet.

But – in more than 18 months since the tragedy – the U.S. government has never made public its alleged evidence, while Russia has denied supplying the rebels a Buk system and the rebels have asserted that they did not possess functioning Buk missiles.

An Anguished Father

Thomas Schansman, who lives in The Netherlands, wrote to Kerry, noting that “celebrating Christmas and New Year without my son Quinn Schansman, was difficult for my family and myself” and then pressing the Secretary of State to release U.S. information about the case.

“It is my understanding, that neither the Dutch government nor the Dutch Safety Board [DSB] have officially received the radar information from the US that you referred to. It is not included in the [DSB] report and it is not in the public domain,”

Schansman wrote.

“On behalf of the bereaved parents and to assist in the pursuit of justice, I would like to request that the United States provides the DSB with the radar data you referred to at the press conference and all other available and relevant information (like satellite data and infrared satellite data) that is in your government’s possession.

“I would be most grateful if the United States either directly or through NATO would publicly hand over to the Dutch Safety Board radar and satellite data of the minutes before and after the crash. ... This would enable the DSB to reopen the investigation and include a chapter with this information, which is essential for a successful criminal prosecution. I count on the support of the government of the United States to find and prosecute those responsible for my son and your citizen’s death.”

Kerry has yet to reply although a U.S. consular official, Pamela J. Hack, sent Schansman [a letter](#) dated Jan. 14, expressing condolences for his son’s death and saying “We expect that you will receive a separate response ... from Washington.”

A Rush to Judgment

In the days after the shoot-down, Kerry took the lead in accusing the ethnic Russian rebels (and implicitly their supporters in Moscow) of shooting down MH-17. Just three days after the tragedy, Kerry made the rounds of the Sunday talk shows to leave little doubt that the rebels and Russians were at fault.

After mentioning information gleaned from “social media,” Kerry said on NBC’s “[Meet the Press](#)”:

“But even more importantly, we picked up the imagery of this launch. We know the trajectory. We know where it came from. We know the timing. And it was exactly at the time that this aircraft disappeared from the radar.”

Two days later, on July 22, 2014, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a “Government Assessment,” also citing “social media” seeming to implicate the rebels. Then, this white paper listed military equipment allegedly supplied by Russia to the rebels. But the list did not include a Buk missile battery or other high-powered anti-aircraft missiles.

The DNI also had U.S. intelligence analysts brief a few select mainstream reporters, but the analysts conveyed much less conviction than their superiors may have wished, indicating that there was still great uncertainty about who was responsible.

The Los Angeles Times [article](#) said:

“U.S. intelligence agencies have so far been unable to determine the nationalities or identities of the crew that launched the missile. U.S. officials said it was possible the SA-11 [the designation for a Russian-made anti-aircraft Buk missile] was launched by a defector from the Ukrainian military who was trained to use similar missile systems.”

The analysts’ uncertainty meshed somewhat with [what I had been told](#) by a source who had been briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts shortly after the shoot-down about what they had seen in high-resolution satellite photos, which they said showed what looked like Ukrainian military personnel manning the battery believed to have fired the missile.

The source who spoke to me several times after receiving additional briefings about advances in the investigation said that as the U.S. analysts gained more insights into the MH-17 shoot-down from technical and other sources, they came to believe the attack was carried out by a rogue element of the Ukrainian military with ties to a hard-line Ukrainian oligarch. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com’s [“Flight 17 Shoot-Down Scenario Shifts”](#) and [“The Danger of an MH-17 Cold Case.”](#)]

Creating a Pariah

But, officially, the U.S. government never retracted or refined its initial claims. It simply went silent, leaving in place the widespread belief that the ethnic Russian rebels were responsible for the atrocity and that the Russian government had been highly irresponsible in supplying a powerful Buk system to the rebels.

That Western conventional wisdom convinced the European Union to join the U.S. government in imposing economic sanctions on Russia and treating President Vladimir Putin as an international pariah.

As the U.S. government clammed up and hid the evidence that it claimed to possess, it became clear that U.S. intelligence agencies lacked evidence to support Kerry’s initial rush to judgment blaming the rebels and the Russians.

Despite intensive overhead surveillance of eastern Ukraine in summer 2014, U.S. and other Western intelligence services could find no proof that Russia had ever given a Buk system to the rebels or introduced one into the area. Satellite intelligence – reviewed both before and

after the shoot-down - only detected Ukrainian military Buk missile systems in the conflict zone.

One could infer this finding from the fact that the DNI on July 22, 2014, did not allege that Bucs were among the weapons systems that Russia had provided. If Russian-supplied Bucs had been spotted - and the batteries of four 16-foot-long missiles hauled around by trucks are hard to miss - their presence surely would have been noted.

But one doesn't need to infer this lack of evidence. It was spelled out in [a little-noticed Dutch intelligence report](#) from last October citing information from the Netherlands' Military Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD). Dutch intelligence, which as part of NATO would have access to sensitive overhead surveillance and other relevant data, reported that the only anti-aircraft weapons in eastern Ukraine - capable of bringing down MH-17 at 33,000 feet - belonged to the Ukrainian government.

MIVD made that assessment in the context of explaining why commercial aircraft continued to fly over the eastern Ukrainian battle zone in summer 2014. MIVD said that based on "state secret" information, it was known that Ukraine possessed some older but "powerful anti-aircraft systems" and "a number of these systems were located in the eastern part of the country."

But the intelligence agency added that the rebels lacked that capacity, having only short-range anti-aircraft missiles and a few inoperable Buk missiles that had been captured from a Ukrainian military base. "During the course of July, several reliable sources indicated that the systems that were at the military base were not operational," MIVD said. "Therefore, they could not be used by the Separatists."

Ukrainian Motives

In other words, it is fair to say - based on the affirmative comments from the Dutch MIVD and the omissions from the U.S. "Government Assessment" - that the Western powers had no evidence that the ethnic Russian rebels or their Russian allies had operational Buk missiles in eastern Ukraine, but the Ukrainian government did have several batteries of such missiles.

It also would have made sense that Ukraine would be moving additional anti-aircraft systems close to the border because of a feared Russian invasion as the Ukrainian military pressed its "anti-terrorism operation" against ethnic Russians fighters, who were resisting the U.S.-backed coup of Feb. 22, 2014, which had ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich, whose political base was in the east.

According to the Dutch Safety Board [report](#), a Ukrainian warplane had been shot down by a suspected air-to-air missile (presumably from a Russian fighter) on July 16, 2014, meaning that Ukrainian defenses were probably on high alert. The Russian military also claimed that Ukraine had activated a radar system that is used to guide Buk missiles.

I was told by the intelligence source that U.S. analysts looked seriously at the possibility that the intended target was President Putin's official plane returning from a state visit to South America. His aircraft and MH-17 had similar red-white-and-blue markings, but Putin took a more northerly route and arrived safely in Moscow.

Other possible scenarios were that a poorly trained and undisciplined Ukrainian squad

mistook MH-17 for a Russian plane that had penetrated Ukrainian airspace or that the attack was willful provocation designed to be blamed on the Russians.

Whoever the culprits and whatever their motive, one point that should not have remained in doubt was where the missile launch occurred. Kerry said repeatedly in the days after the tragedy that U.S. intelligence had detected the launch and knew where it came from.

So, why did the Dutch Safety Board have to scratch its head about the missile coming from somewhere in a 320-square-kilometer area, with the Russian manufacturer placing the launch site about 20 kilometers further west? With the firing location a key point in dispute, why would the U.S. government withhold from a NATO ally (and investigators into a major airline disaster) the launch point for the missile?

Presumably, if the Obama administration had solid evidence showing that the launch came from rebel territory, which was Kerry's insinuation, U.S. officials would have been only too happy to provide the data. That data also could be the only precise radar evidence available. Ukraine claimed that its principal radar systems were down at the time of the attack, and the Russians — while they asserted that their radar screens showed another plane closing on MH-17 — did not save the raw data.

Thomas Schansman noted in his letter to Kerry:

“the DSB [Dutch Safety Board] stated that it did not receive the (raw) primary radar data from any State. The UN Security Council Resolution 2166 explicit[ly] requested Member States to provide any requested assistance and cooperate fully with the investigation. The (raw) primary radar data is crucial for determining cause, and for identifying and prosecuting those responsible for this heinous act.”

Conventional Wisdom

Despite the strange evidentiary gaps and the U.S. failure to present the proof that it claims to possess, the West's “conventional wisdom” remains that either the ethnic Russian rebels or the Russians themselves shot down MH-17 and have sought to cover up their guilt. Some of this certainty comes from the simpleminded game of repeating that Buk missiles are “Russian-made,” which is true but irrelevant to the issue of who fired the missiles, since the Ukrainian military possesses Russian-made Bucs.

Despite the lack of U.S. cooperation in the investigation — and the failure of Western intelligence to detect Russians or ethnic Russian rebels with a Buk battery in eastern Ukraine — the Dutch criminal prosecutors who are working closely with the Ukrainian government say they are taking seriously allegations by bloggers at a British Web site called Bellingcat who have identified Russian soldiers assigned to a Buk missile battery as prime suspects in the shoot-down.

So, the possibility remains that this Dutch-led investigation — in coordination with the Ukrainian government — will indict some Russian soldiers even as the U.S. government withholds its data that could resolve such key questions as where the fateful missile was fired.

An indictment of Russian soldiers would make for more useful anti-Putin propaganda and

would be sure to produce another chorus of denunciations against Moscow from the mainstream Western media. But such a development might do little to resolve the mystery of who really shot down MH-17, killing Quinn Schansman and 297 other people aboard MH-17.

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