

Signals from secret US-Australian navy base may have caused Qantas jet dive

Powerful signals from a secret US-Australian navy base could have caused a Qantas plane to drop several hundred feet in mid air.

By Bonnie Malkin in Sydney

Last Updated: 11:38AM GMT 14 Nov 2008

An investigation into the incident by Australia's air safety agency said it was possible that the aircraft's flight computers had been affected by strong bursts of electromagnetic interference.

The Airbus, with 303 passengers and 10 crew, was cruising at 37,000 feet (11,200m) from Singapore to Perth on October 7 when it suddenly gained altitude, then plummeted more than 1,000 feet in little over a minute.

Passengers on board, including babies and children, were flung around the cabin and crashed against rooftop luggage compartments before the pilots regained control and made an emergency landing.

At least 13 passengers were seriously injured, with some airlifted to hospital in Perth, while another 60 were treated for minor bruises.

Kerryn Macaulay, the Australian Transport Safety Bureau's capability director, said signals from a navy base in Western Australian could have caused the incident.

"Possible external sources of electromagnetic interference are being explored and assessed, including from the Harold E. Holt very low frequency transmitter near Exmouth, Western Australia."

The aircraft was 124 miles away from the base when it nosedived.

The bureau are now trying to establish whether the base was transmitting at the time. The top-secret operation sends signals to U.S. and Australian navy ships, including nuclear submarines, in the Pacific and Indian oceans.

The station, on Australia's northwest coast, is the most powerful transmission station in the southern hemisphere and has been a frequent target of peace protests since it opened in 1963.

However, the agency has said it was more likely that the accident was caused by a problem with a piece of equipment that feeds flight information to the Qantas aircraft's main computer. It was also suggested that signals from laptops on board the plane could have caused the problem.

The air safety agency said it would begin detailed testing of the aircraft computers on Monday.

Qantas, the world's 10th largest airline by market value, has been hit by a number of incidents recently.

In one, Australian air safety investigators blamed an oxygen bottle for a mid-air explosion that blew a minivan-size hole in the side of Qantas jumbo jet on July 25, forcing the aircraft to make an emergency landing in the Philippines.

Last month another Qantas flight had to "piggyback" behind an Air New Zealand aircraft for almost the entire journey from Los Angeles to Sydney after radar systems failed and the pilot complained he was "flying blind".

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