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Flight 93 remains yield no evidence

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By Tom Gibb, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

United Airlines Flight 93's crash into rural Somerset County decimated all human remains so badly that investigators can't say if any of the 44 people aboard were killed before the aircraft went down, the FBI has told the county coroner.

That leaves it up to the jet's cockpit voice recorder to offer support for widely held assumptions that the four hijackers began killing passengers before or during a fight for control of the jetliner. For now, federal investigators holding that recorder, one of two pieces commonly dubbed the black box, are staying mum.

Investigators who recovered remains from the Shanksville-area crash site brought possible stab wounds and lacerations to the attention of FBI pathologists, Somerset County Coroner Wallace Miller said yesterday. But the FBI has responded that "the catastrophic nature of the crash and fragmentation" left them unable to draw conclusions, Miller said.

The coroner's assessment came yesterday as he confirmed that the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory has used DNA samples to match recovered remains with the last of 40 crew members and passengers aboard the hijacked jetliner 14 weeks ago when it slammed into a recovered strip mine at around 500 mph.

Miller has kept control of the crash site, under watch by security guards hired by United Airlines, expecting a possible final search for remains in the spring.

Remains of passengers and crew identified so far should be released in February to families or for burial, entombment or cremation in the Somerset County area, depending on families' preferences, Miller said. Unidentified remains, yielding no DNA information, will be "treated properly," probably interred or entombed in the county, according to the coroner.

This is where hijackers and victims get different treatment.


Death certificates for the 40 victims list their deaths as homicides. The hijackers' death certificates, not released yet, call their deaths suicides.

The four hijackers' remains will stay in FBI custody in case they prove important to the evolving investigation.

Investigators segregated remains which yielded DNA samples that did not match DNA profiles of the 40 passengers and crew. Those, by process of elimination, are the hijackers, and their remains are being grouped by common DNA.

The air pirates have been identified as Ziad Jarrah, Ahmed Al Haznawi, Saeed Al Ghamdi and Ahmed Al Nami -- but not so positively identified that officials will list the names in official records.

"The death certificates will list each as 'John Doe,' " Miller said.

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