



ON THE DROP-OFF: Remotely operated vehicle footage from the seafloor between 90m and 120 m on the edge of the continental shelf reveals shape and life. Pictures: SUPPLIED

Is the Rietbok wreck still there? Revisiting the mystery of a lost airplane

Veteran pilot believes wreckage from 1967 crash can be located

JOHN HARVEY

There is a strong possibility that the main wreckage of the Rietbok, the doomed passenger plane that went down off Kayser's Beach on March 13 1967, can be found.

"Veteran commercial pilot Wouter Botes is '99%' certain this is the case, and recent scientific research in waters near what he believes to be the crash site suggests any wreck would be spotted fairly easily.

While Pretoria-based Botes, whose popular e-book *Flights to Nowhere* is being turned into a documentary series of the same name, does not dismiss the political intrigue around SAA Flight 406, he says the tragedy can be explained from an aviation point of view.

The plane plummeted into the sea on its approach to East London, killing all 25 people on board. What caused the air disaster remains a mystery and continues to trouble the surviving relatives of the victims.

The failure to recover bodies and the presence of two high-profile figures on board — JP Bruwer, at the time acting chair of the Broederbond who was having a change of heart about apartheid policies, and anti-apartheid activist Audrey Rosenthal — has fuelled speculation about a nefarious cover-up by the then government.

But Botes, who has researched some of SA's most mysterious air disasters for the past 12 years, believes there is a scientific explanation for the crash.

"Look at the aircraft type, look at the instrumentation of the era that was available for flights and aircraft to use, look at the case of bad weather," he told the Dispatch this week.

"The southern part of our coast from George up to the Transkei coast is one of the worst weather regions in the world. It is known for bad weather.

"If you don't have instrumentation to assist you, the kind we have now, then it's a different ball game. If that flight had to take place today, I doubt whether there would have been a tragedy. The chances are almost nil."

He said the speed of the Rietbok on approach would have been standard, roughly 120 knots.

"It probably hit the sea on the nose side. If you look at the debris, you will find that most of the debris that washed up on the shore is from the front of the aircraft," he said.

"A wing is designed so that if it hits the water, it's the same [response] as in the air. So if you go down with the wing, it tends to go up again.

"The nose would have broken off, so what you will most probably find on the ocean floor is the back part of the plane."

Very little of the wreckage has been found in the decades since the disaster.

Botes estimates that the main wreck lies about 22.5km off the beach.

"The sea currents in that area will have had a huge effect on the wreck. The biggest parts of the wreck that will be left should be lying in an area that we're familiar with.

"With the technology that we have now, the chances of us finding it are really good."

In recent months Botes has consulted Dr Tommy Borman, a manager at the South African Environmental Observation Network (Saeon), to learn more about the possibility of recovering the main wreckage.

Borman previously worked for sister organisation the SA Institute for Aquatic Biodiver-



BETTER TIMES: A photograph of the Rietbok taken prior to the crash of March 13 1967. Picture: SUPPLIED

sity (Saiab), which has at its disposal instruments to assess the Agulhas currents off the coast.

He explained that Saiab, through its African Coelacanth Ecosystem Programme, has been particularly interested in the biodiversity that occurs on the continental shelf edge in the waters where Botes believes the plane crashed.

"There are many canyons off the continental shelf," Borman said.

"They [researchers] took detailed symmetry to see what the sea floor looks like in that area.

They sent down a ROV [remotely operated underwater vehicle] and managed to get some really good imagery of the sea floor, from 90m to 150m. We have a good idea of what the sea floor looks like."

After being approached by Botes, Borman explained to him that if there was an aviation oil slick on the ocean for several days, it would mean the plane was still on the continental shelf.

"It wouldn't be over the edge. If it was over the edge, it would have been gone," he said.

"The middle shelf to the outer

shelf has got very little sediment because of the strength of the current. So it [wreck] won't be buried in any sediment.

"Looking at the footage from Saiab, I told him it won't be overgrown. It would be lying anywhere between 50m to 100m deep."

From what Borman had seen, the reefs were very structured and because there was little light, no algae would grow.

"The wreckage would be stuck in those reefs. It would not tumble along over time and disappear.

"The strength of the Agulhas current would have kept growth quite short. If it's there on the shelf, it should be relatively intact and not overgrown."

Oceanic research projects are expensive and the time frames researchers have are limited because of sea conditions, so without funding a specialised search for the Rietbok would not be possible.

But Borman has asked the Saiab team to "keep their eyes peeled" when they are working in the area.

Ryan Palmer, marine plat-

form manager at Saiab, confirmed that he had been in contact with Borman in this respect.

"I am planning some work near East London in April so there may be opportunity to have a look if you have a more precise location if it coincides with our study area.

"I won't be doing any mapping unfortunately, as that would allow us to cover a large area and possibly detect a wreck. But I will be doing ROV surveys which cover far less ground, but will produce footage and photographs," he said.

The official inquiry into the air disaster, headed by judge Cecil Margo, suggested the captain, Gordon Benjamin Lipawsky, might have suffered a heart attack, resulting in him losing control of the Vikings Viscount, and that his first officer, Brian Trenwith, was unable to regain control before the Rietbok crashed into the sea.

However, in his book *Final Postponement*, Margo pointed to structural failure as the reason for the crash.

Margo died in 2000.

Navy diver Malcolm Viviers in 1998 suggested the wreck had in fact been located soon after the crash and claimed that via a video monitor on the SAS Johannesburg he had seen the bodies of passengers still strapped in their seats in the plane.

In March 2019, the Dispatch spoke to independent forensic scientist Dr David Klatzow, who was approached about 15 years ago by some relatives of victims of the Rietbok disaster.

Klatzow said they had told him they had been called to the state mortuary to identify the bodies after the crash. However, when they arrived at the mortuary, no bodies were to be found.



FLYING DETECTIVE: Pilot Wouter Botes has researched unsolved mysteries, including air disasters, for the past 12 years. Picture: SUPPLIED

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