

Belly-landing airline pilot rejects 'hero' tag

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Plane carrying 230 lands without wheels

RAW VISION: A Boeing 767 from New York with 230 people on board makes an emergency landing at Warsaw's airport.

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The pilot who safely crash-landed a Boeing 767 on its belly at Warsaw's main airport rejected being labelled a hero as Poland's national carrier said flights from the capital may resume later today.

"Talk of heroes is an exaggeration," Tadeusz Wrona said at a press conference. "I'm convinced that any pilot would have done the same as I did."

Wrona tried to extend the landing gear numerous times after an on-board computer indicated a hydraulic fault. He had flown the same plane some 500 times and had "never had any difficulty" with the wheels, he said.



No heroes ... Captain Tadeusz Wrona (R) and co-pilot Jerzy Szwarc (L) who safely landed a LOT jet on its belly after the landing gear failed. Wrona says any pilot would have done the same. Photo: AFP

Warsaw's Chopin airport remained closed after the plane operated by Polskie Linie Lotnicze LOT SA landed on its fuselage yesterday on the main runway. None of the 231 passengers and crew on the flight from Newark, New Jersey, were injured.

Incidents of total landing gear failure involving modern airliners are extremely rare, given the number of backup systems that should kick in when a particular component fails, said Paul Hayes, director of safety at London-based aviation consultant Ascend Worldwide. At the most basic level, the gear doors should open so the wheels descend by gravity, he said.

"In 50 years or so of jet operations there have only ever been a handful of belly landings out of hundreds and hundreds of incidences of planes coming in suffering from one kind of gear problem or another," Hayes said. "Almost all of those have come about because the flight crew forgot to lower the wheels, which is clearly not the case here."

Pilot praise

A small fire erupted from an engine after the widebody plane skidded to a halt on the airport's main runway. It was extinguished in seconds as emergency personnel doused the jet and passengers were hustled through exits.

"When the plane landed, applause broke out and people cried out 'bravo,'" Tadeusz Karasinski, a passenger on the flight, told reporters in Warsaw

today. "And I gave my thanks to God and the pilot - he's a real hero."

Passengers remained calm and practiced emergency landing positions after being notified the flight would crash land some 35 minutes ahead of time, Karasinski said. "There was no hysteria," he added.

Captain Wrona said he slept badly last night as images from the day's flight kept running through his mind, even though he knew the crash-landing had succeeded.

"I was relieved when we landed and I knew we could start evacuating," he said today. "But I only felt full relief when the purser said there was nobody left on board."

Flights may resume later this evening if the plane can be removed from the runway, LOT Chief Executive Marcin Pirog said at today's press conference.

LOT is losing 12,000 passengers a day while Warsaw's airport is closed, Pirog said. Most financial costs from yesterday's events are covered by insurance, he added. The airport services about 400 flights and transports 25,000 passengers daily, airport spokesman Przemyslaw Przybylski said.

"The runway wasn't damaged at all by the crash landing," he said by phone today. "A few of the runway lamps were broken, but some of those have already been mended and the others, that are underneath the plane, can be put right in no time at all once the aircraft has been shifted."

Boeing sent two employees to the scene to provide technical aid, said Julie O'Donnell, a spokeswoman in Seattle, where the Chicago-based company has its commercial airplanes headquarters.

"We stand ready to assist in an investigation if invited by the authorities," O'Donnell said today in an e-mail.

The 767 had circled for an hour yesterday to burn off excess fuel while Polish Air Force F-16 jets provided visual confirmation that the wheels had failed to lower.

"This is all part of a pilot's training, but they knew the routine, the airport was ready and everybody walked away, which is how you measure the success of these things," said David Learmount, a former Royal Air Force pilot and safety editor at Flight International magazine. "It's a rare event. You could fly every day of your life and it wouldn't happen."

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