

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Airlines say recent air crashes not economy related

By Tom Fontaine
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Sunday, September 6, 2009

Commercial air travel has become safer since the crash of USAir Flight 427 in Beaver County, in part because of lessons learned from the Sept. 8, 1994, tragedy that killed 132 passengers and crew members, aviation experts say.

"A lot of things we do today evolved from that investigation," said Tom Haueter, who served as chief investigator of the crash for the National Transportation Safety Board. "It was a milestone event."

The Flight 427 investigation, the lengthiest in the board's history at 4 1/2 years, served as a blueprint for subsequent inquiries, Haueter said. It also prompted a \$1 billion redesign of the rudder control system in Boeing's 737 series, the most widely used commercial airliner in the world.

But as the number of fatal crashes has fallen domestically and worldwide, several of the nation's leading carriers have come under fire in recent years for failing to properly inspect or fix planes.

Nine fatal crashes worldwide killed 608 passengers this year, a higher death toll than that from 13 crashes in 2008, according to data from the London-based consulting firm Ascend.

One of those crashes killed 50 people near Buffalo, N.Y., in February. Continental Connection Flight 3407 was operated by regional carrier Colgan Air Inc.

The NTSB is investigating whether the pilots' long hours, low pay and long-distance commutes were a factor, according to The Associated Press. It appears the captain tried to nap before the flight in a crew room where bright lighting was meant to discourage extended sleep. The first officer commuted overnight from Seattle to Newark, where the flight originated.

The NTSB determined faulty rudder control brought down Flight 427 on a wooded hillside near Hopewell, Beaver County. Three years earlier, a faulty rudder brought down United Airlines Flight 585 in Colorado, which the NTSB finally determined only after the Flight 427 probe.

Since last year, the Federal Aviation Administration has chastised several carriers for lax inspection and maintenance programs, handing down millions of dollars in fines and grounding planes. The action resulted in mass cancellations and delays.

FAA spokeswoman Diane Spitaliere called such incidents "anomalies."

"By and large, there is a high level of compliance with our airworthiness directives," which demand corrective action, Spitaliere said. An audit last year showed airlines fully complied with FAA's directives about 99 percent of the time.

Spitaliere and others dismiss the idea that turbulent economic conditions could contribute to maintenance or inspection missteps.

"That would never, ever be the case," said David Castelveter, spokesman for the Air Transport Association, a trade group for the nation's major carriers.

"I don't know of any situation where a carrier has mixed economics with safety, and I don't believe you ever will see a situation where airlines mix economics with safety. Getting people to their destination safely is the highest priority; it always has been and always will be," Castelveter said.

Doing otherwise, Spitaliere said, would be "bad for business."

"When it comes to the economy, another thing people don't understand is, the economy forced a lot of older planes out of service," Spitaliere said. "As planes get older, they cost more to maintain and meet standards. So a lot of the older planes have been replaced with newer ones."

According to the consulting firm Ascend, the average age of aircraft operated by the nation's five major carriers and top three low-cost airlines — all of which serve Pittsburgh International Airport — ranges from 4 years (JetBlue Airways) to 16 years (American Airlines). Planes in the US Airways fleet, Pittsburgh's busiest carrier, average 12 years old.

Mike Boyd, an airline industry consultant from Colorado, doesn't put much weight on the ages of planes.

"A plane is only as old as its last major check. That's when they get rebuilt," he said.

Boyd believes the airline industry has "an incredible safety record."

"We're talking about levitating big pieces of metal that are operated by man and maintained by man. You're never going to have 100-percent, no-accident commercial aviation until you get humans out of cockpit," Boyd said.

The industry, particularly in the United States, has performed better over the 15 years since the Flight 427 crash.

"Despite what the man on the street might think, aviation is, based on measured accidents, safer than it was 15 years ago -- a lot safer," said Paul Hayes, director of air safety at Ascend.

Between 1992 and 1996 — two years before and two years after the Flight 427 crash — an average of nearly 27 fatal crashes occurred worldwide each year, according to Ascend data. Roughly three crashes a year happened in the United States, the data show.

But from 2004 through 2008, the average number of crashes worldwide dipped

to 14 a year; two happened in the United States.

And the number of fatal crashes fell as the number of flights globally more than doubled, Hayes said.

Tom Fontaine can be reached at tfontaine@tribweb.com or .

Images and text copyright © 2009 by The Tribune-Review Publishing Co.
Reproduction or reuse prohibited without written consent from Trib Total Media