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'We've Been Hit by Air France,' Comair Crew Told Controllers

By Mary Schlangenstein and John Hughes - Apr 12, 2011

U.S. investigators will focus on pilot actions and air-traffic control instructions to determine why an Air France Airbus SAS A380 superjumbo jet clipped a Delta Air Lines Inc. (DAL) commuter plane at New York's Kennedy airport.

"Roll the emergency trucks," a pilot on the regional jet told controllers after the collision late yesterday, according to a recording on the website LiveATC.net. "We've been hit by Air France."

No one was hurt when a wing of Air France Flight 7 struck the tail of Delta's Comair Flight 6293, spinning the small plane around about 90 degrees. The accident occurred at a taxiway intersection after the regional jet landed and as the A380 prepared for takeoff, the Federal Aviation Administration said.

Authorities believe the Comair pilot, who was instructed to taxi to the ramp after landing, stopped partly in the ramp area and partly in the taxiway when struck, said a federal aviation official, who requested anonymity because the investigation is ongoing.

Anthony Black, a Delta spokesman, declined comment.

Airlines' Response

"This could be a simple problem of Comair not pulling up quite far enough, and other people not noticing," said William Voss, chief executive officer of the non-profit Flight Safety Foundation in Alexandria, Virginia, in an interview.

"Comair might not have stopped in an outrageous spot for every other airplane in the world," though the A380's wingspan may have erased any margin for error, Voss said.

The National Transportation Safety Board will examine the steps taken by the pilots and controllers' instructions, said Keith Holloway, a board spokesman. The FAA and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which operates John F. Kennedy International Airport, also are investigating.

Airbus's A380 has a wingspan of 262 feet (80 meters) and is the largest passenger jet made. It was

carrying 520 people when it hit the 107-foot-long Bombardier Inc. CRJ700, which flew 62 passengers and four crew members from Boston.

Because of the A380's size, controllers may have had difficulty seeing the Bombardier plane as the larger jet passed, while keeping the Air France pilot from seeing that the wing wouldn't clear the smaller aircraft, consultants said.

"It's really hard to miss an A380, but the other airplane could be totally not visible from the tower," said Richard Healing, a former NTSB member who is a senior partner at R Cubed Consulting in Washington. "They will certainly look at what the communications were, who was told to taxi and who was told to hold. They'll be looking at it from inside the airplanes and from traffic control."

NTSB Review

The NTSB asked to review voice and flight-data recorders from both aircraft, and also will study air-traffic control recordings and ground-movement radar, according to a statement. The collision happened at 8:25 p.m. New York time, the agency said.

Black said Delta, based in Atlanta, was supporting the inquiry without commenting on why the accident may have occurred. Brigitte Barrand, a spokeswoman for Paris-based Air France, said it was too early to speculate on a cause.

The A380's cockpit was "well beyond" the smaller jet when the collision occurred, said George Hamlin, president of Hamlin Transportation Consulting in Fairfax, Virginia, and a former Airbus executive.

"All the A380 had to do, if it's been cleared to use the taxiway, is stay on the center line," Hamlin said. "The crew would have been concentrating on looking ahead and not to the side."

Comair Damage

Comair Flight 6293, which landed about 8 p.m. New York time, suffered "damage to the tail," said Black, the Delta spokesman. "In terms of classifying that, I can't. Obviously, it's going to need some structural repair."

An Airbus engineering team is working with Air France to assess damage to the A380 and any needed repairs, according to an e-mail from Maryanne Greczyn, a spokeswoman for the planemaker in Herndon, Virginia.

An Air France A380 was involved in an accident on Oct. 30 while parked at Paris Charles de Gaulle airport when it was brushed by the wing of an Airbus A330. The airline is a unit of Air France-KLM (AF) Group.

"It would have been a very interesting ride for the passengers on the CRJ," said Paul Hayes, director of safety at London-based consultant Ascend. Though accidents while taxiing cause significant damage "once or twice a year," the size of the A380 produced a more "spectacular" outcome, he said.

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