

ARE PLANES WE FLY MORE AT RISK?

Sources of information for special report

Staff Reports

During an eight-month investigation, The Observer interviewed dozens of mechanics, aviation safety experts and airline officials, examined thousands of pages of public documents, and analyzed seven federal databases.

Statements about accident trends are based on National Transportation Safety Board data for U.S. fatal air carrier accidents since 1994 in which the aircraft was substantially damaged or destroyed. Air carriers generally operate scheduled flights with planes seating 10 or more passengers.

Some accidents prior to 1998 involving scheduled air commuter flights were in-

cluded because they would be considered air carriers today.

Factors causing or contributing to accidents are based mainly on NTSB findings. Unlike the NTSB, The Observer counted the 1996 crash of TWA 800 as maintenance-related. Investigators concluded a wiring short-circuit likely sparked a fuel tank explosion. Deteriorated wiring was common on 747s of that vintage, and the plane was maintained in accordance with the prevailing practices, the NTSB found.

Now, however, a number of aviation safety experts - including NTSB member John Goglia - consider it a maintenance-related crash. They say better maintenance inspections might have caught prob-

lems with the wiring and prevented the accident. Following the accident, the Federal Aviation Administration concluded that prevailing maintenance practices didn't adequately address decayed wiring. The agency now requires more and better inspections of wiring.

The Observer also classified as maintenance-related the January crash of US Airways Flight 5481 in Charlotte and the August crash of Colgan Air Flight 9446 off Cape Cod. NTSB investigations of those crashes are pending. Preliminary findings show an incorrectly adjusted cable limited pilots' ability to control the tail-heavy Charlotte plane. They also show the plane was slightly overweight and out of

balance.

In the Colgan crash, sources also say maintenance likely was a factor.

The Observer analyzed FAA data on inspections of airlines and repair stations, done under the agency program known as Program Tracking and Reporting Subsystem. PTRS includes all information about FAA inspections of most airlines and contract repair stations, but only a portion of inspections of the nation's 10 largest air carriers.

The Observer looked at closed, completed maintenance inspections. An inspection was considered to have an unfavorable result if it led to an enforcement action or required an inspector to take fol-

low-up action.

Of almost 317,000 inspections examined from 2000 through the first half of 2003, about 4 percent recorded an unfavorable result. The General Accounting Office reported in 1998 that PTRS records understate the incidence of problems and violations.

The Observer also used data from the FAA's Enforcement Information System, a database of FAA actions against people and organizations in the aviation industry. The Observer examined closed enforcement actions related to maintenance going back to 1986. Actions can range from fines and certificate revocation to written notices.

Information on aviation repair stations and the certification of their mechanics came from repair station reports to the FAA.

Facts on airline spending on in-house and outside airline maintenance came from airline reports to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics. Airline departure figures also came from BTS and from Back Aviation Solutions.

An estimate of regional airline maintenance spending rates used a group of six airlines for which four years of reports were available on spending and departures. The regionals were Air Wisconsin, American Eagle, Executive, Horizon, Mesaba and Trans States airlines.

Informing The Passengers

The U.S. Department of Transportation requires that airlines make it clear what company flies planes that operate under the airline's name. US Airways, for instance, must inform passengers what company is flying US Airways Express flights. It does so in several places, including:

- On its online reservations system.
- On the computer reservations systems viewed by reservations agents.
- On the boarding pass.
- On the side of the airplane, along with the US Airways Express insignia.

SOURCE: US Airways

Who's Flying The Plane?

This chart shows the nine major airlines and partners that have agreements to fly under the major airline's colors with a related name, such as US Airways Express or Delta Connection. X designates an airline with the same ownership as the major airline.

ALASKA AIRLINES

- Horizon Airlines (x)

AMERICAN AIRLINES

- American Eagle (x)
- Chautauqua Airlines
- Corporate Airlines
- Executive Airlines (x)
- Trans States Airlines

AMERICA WEST AIRLINES

- Mesa Airlines

CONTINENTAL AIRLINES

- CommutAir
- ExpressJet
- Gulfstream International Airlines
- Sky West Airlines

DELTA AIR LINES

- Atlantic Coast Airlines
- Atlantic Southeast Airlines (x)
- Chautauqua Airlines
- Comair (x)
- SkyWest Airlines

NORTHWEST AIRLINES

- Mesaba Airlines
- Pinnacle Airlines

SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

- No regional affiliates

UNITED AIRLINES

- Air Wisconsin
- Atlantic Coast Airlines
- Mesa Airlines
- SkyWest Airlines

US AIRWAYS

- Air Midwest
- Allegheny Airlines (x)
- Chautauqua Airlines
- Colgan Air
- Mesa Airlines
- Piedmont Airlines (x)
- PSA Airlines (x)
- Shuttle America
- Trans States Airlines

SOURCE: Airlines

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