

HOW TO STOP MICHAEL VICK?

Falcons quarterback returns from injury to make his first start of the season against Panthers tonight **SPORTS, 1F**



FOOTBALL STATE CHAMPS

- Independence streak alive, 54-7 ▶
- Boiling Springs Crest wins 40-0
- Bandys loses to Reidsville, 68-12
- South Point rolls NE Guilford 27-10

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The Charlotte Observer

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A FOUR-PART SPECIAL REPORT

ARE PLANES WE FLY MORE AT RISK?

Trends in maintenance, inspections, cost-cutting pose threat, experts say

BY AMES ALEXANDER, TED REED AND TED MELLNIK
Staff Writers

Airlines are spending less to maintain their planes. Mechanics are checking them less often. And federal oversight is stretched thin as regulators struggle to keep up with the growing use of outsourced service work and repairs.

The safety of one of the world's most reliable aviation systems is at stake.

Faulty maintenance contributed to three of the past five fatal airline accidents, including the January crash of Flight 5481 in Charlotte that killed all 21 aboard. It likely played a role in a fourth crash, now under investigation, sources say.

John Goglia, a member of the five-person National Transportation Safety Board, which investigates crashes, said cost-cutting has hurt maintenance. He says the industry needs to focus on improving it, or expect more disasters.

"To fix a problem, you've got to admit you have a problem and identify it. We haven't gotten to admitting the problem yet," warns Goglia. "Unless we start dealing with these issues sooner rather than later, we're going to pay the price and that could mean more deaths."

Airlines have invested millions to fix other serious problems. Better technology, design and training have dramatically reduced crashes caused by pilot error and weather.

Faulty maintenance, an equally preventable problem, has never gotten the attention it deserves, experts say.

Now, as other causes have declined, when there is a crash it's more likely to be related to maintenance.

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.

The investigation found that since 1994, maintenance problems have contributed to 42 percent of fatal airline accidents in the United States, excluding the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. That's up from 16 percent the previous decade.

During the past decade, 466 people died in eight U.S. accidents linked to maintenance problems. The decade before, seven maintenance-related

SEE AIR SAFETY | 8A

Fatal Crashes And Safety

8-9A | 8 fatal accidents where maintenance was a factor in past decade.

9A | How flying is safer.



VICTIMS OF FLIGHT 5481

Capt. Katie Leslie (top, in uniform) and First Officer Jonathan Gibbs (standing by a Beech 1900D) were among the 21 who died Jan 8. 10A

L. MUELLER - STAFF PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

To ill-fated crew, it was just another day

By ELIZABETH LELAND | STAFF WRITER

PART ONE OF FOUR

On the morning of Jan. 8, 2003, Katie Leslie squeezed into the cockpit of a commuter airplane and slipped into the captain's seat.

Three short flights, and she would be home again.

A light wind blew from the southwest and a scattering of clouds lingered above, one of those beautiful winter days in Charlotte that start out in the chilly 30s but warm up to sweaters and blue skies.

It was a day that seemed made for flying.

Leslie's co-pilot, Jonathan Gibbs, was already in the cockpit, checking instruments.

"... Full house back there?" he asked.

"... Looks like there's 19."

She groaned. He laughed.

They both dreamed of flying big jets, but this was to be just another day in a 19-seater, paying their dues, logging in the hours that would win them seniority. She was 25; he was 27. As they checked instruments, they chatted, and the cockpit recorder taped what they said.

"How'd you sleep last night?" he asked.

"OK."

The day before, they had flown six hours together on six flights and didn't get home until 9:30.

"... I had one of those aviation nights," Gibbs told her. "I was just like flying all night long."

SEE FLIGHT | 10A

8 DEATHS REPORTED

Snow piles up on East Coast

Region's 1st big storm of season spoils travel, sports events, shopping

BY ROGER PETTERSON
Associated Press

The Northeast region's first big storm of the season piled up a foot of blowing snow, grounding airline flights and postponing college entrance exams and football games Saturday.

At least eight deaths were blamed on the storm, and police urged people to just stay home.

"There will be other weekends to Christmas shop - this isn't the one," said Rhode Island State Police Sgt. Scott Hemingway.

Snow fell at a rate of about an inch an hour at Binghamton, N.Y. Meteorologists warned that as much as 2 feet of snow was possible by today in parts of Massachusetts and Vermont, and the National Weather Service issued blizzard warnings for much of Maine. Parts of northern New Jersey had 15 inches of snow by early evening, and a foot was measured in parts of western Maryland, Connecticut and the New York City area.

"What we're seeing now is the
SEE STORM | 6A

ARTHUR GRIFFIN

Leaving the school board, but keeping his ideals

Foe of resegregation was a controversial figure in 17 years with CMS

BY CELESTE SMITH
Staff Writer

What's next for Arthur Griffin? Griffin muses on that question between interruptions in the busy uptown law office where he is a paralegal.

A cell phone rings, the intercom buzzes. His desk is cluttered with phone messages and files. A deadline looms for drafting a legal brief.

"You all forget I came to this thing with a job," Griffin says.

"This thing" is the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board, which Griffin, 55, will leave Tuesday after 17 years.

Griffin, the board's chairperson from 1997 to 2002, became a political lightning rod by vocally promoting the district's long-running school desegregation plan and pushing for better opportunities for black students.

As an African American who attended segregated Charlotte
SEE GRIFFIN | 7A

Weather

CHILLY: High: 49. Low: 24. Mostly sunny all day. Clear and cold tonight. Full forecast, 12B

Index

Arts.....1H
Books.....6-7H
Business.....1E

Classified.....1C
Contact Us.....2A
Crossword.....7H

Editorial.....2D
Horoscope.....5G
Living.....1G

Local & State ..1B
Movies.....5H
News2Use2A

Obituaries.....10B
Perspective.....1D
Travel.....1I

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