A Tired Pilot Is a Tired Pilot, Regardless of the Plane

The FAA’s fatigue rules should be the same for cargo jets as for passenger airlines. Otherwise, everyone is at risk.

By Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger and Jim Hall

News broke recently that two pilots reported falling asleep while operating a long-haul Airbus 330 flight to the U.K. full of passengers. For an unknown length of time, autopilot kept the aircraft flying. Before the Aug. 13 flight, the pilots had slept only five hours over the previous two nights. The event brings yet another reminder of the dangers posed by fatigued pilots.

The Federal Aviation Administration will soon address the issue, implementing long-overdue new fatigue standards for pilots. But those requirements won’t apply to cargo aircraft pilots, not even when they’re flying a Boeing 747 halfway around the world. By excluding cargo pilots from its new rules, the FAA is failing to adhere to its mission of making safety the first priority in aviation. If the FAA believes even one life lost in an accident is too many, shouldn’t that principle also apply to cargo pilots?

The new regulations revise hours-of-service rules that better reflect today’s knowledge of human fatigue. The rules set a 10-hour minimum rest period before flight duty, a two-hour increase from the previous standards. This gives pilots a chance to get eight hours of sleep before a duty period instead of the five or six hours they so often get now. A pilot will also only be allowed so much flight duty time in a 28-day period. Pilots and the National Transportation Safety Board have sought these changes for decades, but it took the apparently fatigue-induced regional airliner crash near Buffalo, N.Y., in 2009 to finally prompt Congress to require changes.

Cargo pilots need stringent regulation, as their jobs can be even more tiring than flying a passenger plane. A cargo pilot faces extreme demands—longer flights, more time zones crossed, and work scheduled overnight when they are least alert and perform worst.

Fatigue creeps up on pilots, slowly diminishing crucial mental capacity for decision-making. Reaction times slow down and situational awareness decreases as pilots tire. A 2013 survey by the British Airline Pilots Association showed that more than half of British pilots admitted to nodding off during flight, and that one in three said they awoke to find the other pilot asleep. The effects of fatigue resemble those of alcohol impairment, but they are much
less measurable. The FAA can, however, still impose standards to prevent pilots from reaching exhaustion.

On Aug. 14, a UPS cargo airliner crashed on approach to Birmingham, Ala. The two pilots lost their lives. Although still under NTSB investigation, this flight fits the profile of countless cargo operations, including flying overnight. The aircraft crashed into an open field, but it easily could have crashed into a nearby neighborhood, or into any number of communities near airports all over the country—just as the plane that crashed in Buffalo did.

Yet the FAA sees no need to impose fatigue prevention rules on cargo pilots. The agency has made the ridiculous claim that such a rule would prevent only one cargo airliner crash in 10 years and save a mere $31 million in damages. Does anyone believe that if a cargo 747 or Airbus crashed near a major airport the financial impact would be so low? UPS, for one, doesn't. The major cargo carrier holds insurance of $1.5 billion for a single aircraft accident.

The FAA's analysis understates or ignores factors such as passengers aboard cargo aircraft, which can number as high as 10; the value of cargo on the aircraft; or deaths, injuries and damage on the ground. In 1992, a 747 cargo jet crashed into an apartment building shortly after takeoff from Amsterdam, killing the four people aboard the plane and 43 on the ground. Whether there are packages or people behind the cockpit door, pilot fatigue exists just the same. And it threatens the lives of pilots and bystanders on the ground alike.

Similar shortsightedness led the FAA in the 1990s to exempt cargo operations from rules requiring collision avoidance systems (called TCAS) on planes. Since cargo and passenger airliners share the same airspace and use the same runways, the purported safety benefits didn't exist. The terrible midair collision over India in 1996, which killed 349 people, woke the FAA up to the danger. Following that tragedy and a near miss between a cargo airliner and Air Force One in 1997, the FAA required cargo airliners to be equipped with the same anticollision software.

Everyone—including, eventually, the FAA—agreed in the 1990s that regional passengers deserve the same level of safety as those on major airliners, and that all aircraft should have collision warning systems. Pilot fatigue standards merit the same equitable application. Let's not wait for another disaster to catch the FAA's rule-making error.

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