# The Alaska Airlines crash: signs point to a wider crisis in air safety

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**19 February 2000**

By now there is overwhelming evidence that the January 31 crash of Alaska Airlines Flight 261 that killed all 88 people aboard was the result of a catastrophic mechanical failure. As the two pilots struggled to keep the plane stable, they told mechanics on the ground that they could not control the horizontal stabilizer, the small wing on the tail that directs the plane's pitch. The flight data recorder recovered after the crash caught the sound of two loud noises from the rear of the plane, including one just before the plane plunged into the Pacific Ocean.

National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigators are focusing on damage to the jackscrew and a gimbal nut assembly that raises and lowers the horizontal stabilizer on the Boeing MD-83. When the two-foot-long screw was recovered from the sea it was wrapped in metal ribbon, apparently stripped off of the nut. Some analysts believe that the jackscrew may have torn through the badly worn nut, leaving the horizontal stabilizer jammed in a full nose-down position.

Many things have happened since the crash that indicate serious problems not only with this particular plane, but with Alaska Airlines in general, and, more broadly, the US airline industry as a whole. What emerges from these revelations is an alarming picture of the state of air safety.

In the days that followed the crash, three MD-80s aborted flights because of mechanical problems, including malfunctioning horizontal stabilizers in two planes, one operated by Alaska Airlines and the other by American Airlines. This prompted the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to order the immediate inspection of all MD-80s and similar aircraft, leading to the grounding of 8 out of 40 of Alaska Airlines' fleet of such planes, and another 19 by major US carriers such as Continental, American, Northwest, Delta and TWA. Mechanics had to replace the jackscrew and nut assemblies on 18 of these aircraft because of damage and wear.

Given the apparent scale of safety problems, what is remarkable is the paucity of information available to the flying public. The most staggering fact to emerge is that Alaska Airlines is under criminal investigation, dating from December 1998, for falsifying maintenance records on MD-80s jets. The airline is charged with certifying the completion of repair work that was, in fact, never carried out. It is also facing civil fines for these violations from the FAA.

These facts were never reported prior to the crash. No member of the general public who choose to fly on Alaska Airlines was aware that the airline was facing criminal sanctions for maintenance fraud. These revelations only emerged two weeks later, and even then were reported only on the inside pages of a handful of newspapers, and were never mentioned in the hours of commentary on the crash aired by the television networks. Indeed, news commentaries frequently repeated the statement that Alaska Air had a commendable safety record.

Yet the criminal probe of Alaska Airlines is a highly unusual development, eminently newsworthy in and of itself, and all the more so in the wake of the January 31 crash. Normally when the FAA finds evidence of maintenance violations, the most serious sanction the offending airline receives is a token fine. Criminal proceedings are almost unheard of.

But in December 1998 heavily armed FBI federal agents raided the company's Oakland, California maintenance hangar, the very facility where the MD-83 plane involved in the crash was serviced. They seized maintenance logs and other records from the hangar and from the company's Seattle headquarters. Another raid took place in November 1999. These actions stemmed from charges by a senior mechanic at the facility, John Liotine, that supervisors and mechanics were signing off on work that they were either unqualified to do, or had not performed, so that planes could be put back into service as soon as possible.

Much of the grand jury investigation has been cloaked in secrecy, but the FAA inquiry showed that Alaska Airlines allowed more than 840 flights by two MD-80 jetliners “in an unairworthy condition” between October 1998 and January 1999. Both planes were allowed to fly despite falsified maintenance checks that included work by an Alaska Airlines supervisor who was “not appropriately certified, properly trained or qualified to do so,” the FAA said in a summary report last year. At one point, a plane was released for passenger service but was pulled back after dire pleadings by some Alaska Airlines mechanics, according to company records and interviews with mechanics.

Liotine informed his supervisors and a corporate vice-president about these violations, but he was ignored. He then told the FAA. Afterwards Liotine, who was president of the Machinists' union local in Oakland at the time, was removed from office by the union and placed on paid administrative leave by the airline. Liotine claims that he and his family have since received anonymous threats.

The FAA inspector who investigated the allegations recommended an $8.7 million fine against Alaska Airlines, but he was overruled by FAA officials in Los Angeles, who reduced the proposed fine to $44,000. However, federal authorities decided to pursue criminal charges, an indication that the violations were conscious and “willful” and involved higher level officials at Alaska Airlines.

In February 1999 federal prosecutors met with Alaska Airlines officials and their attorneys. An FAA inspector who attended the meeting wrote in a memo that the airline appeared to be more concerned with building a legal defense than addressing safety issues. Alaska's concern for safety, he said, “was secondary to finding out what and who we had on them.”

These revelations are part of mounting evidence of more general deficiencies in air safety in the US, and a degree of laxity in enforcing safety standards on the part of the FAA that verges on outright collusion with the airline carriers and Boeing.

Not surprisingly, the mass media manage the news in such a way as to shield the corporate interests that are ultimately responsible for the erosion of safety in the air. The most critical, and often damning, facts emerge in drips and drabs, if at all. The huge monopolies that control the print and broadcast outlets take pains to prevent the public from seeing the broader

picture, and understanding the underlying conditions and forces that, in the end, produce tragedies such as the crash of Flight 261.

One fact that has emerged: the NTSB has revealed that in September 1997, more than two years before the Alaska Airlines MD-83 crashed into the Pacific, mechanics at the Oakland facility discovered that the gimbal nut on the ill-fated plane was badly worn and in need of replacement. But instead of replacing the part, the airline ordered new tests on the nut and decided it was good enough to keep in use. So that very plane was sent out with the worn equipment which is now believed to have caused the disaster. The same plane underwent a heavy maintenance check at the Oakland hangar on January 13, 1999, and may have even been serviced there since.

Alaska Airlines has been praised for having one of the best safety records in the US. If this is the practice of a "safe" company, what is the state of the rest of the airline industry?

The Flight 261 disaster was not an isolated incident. Over the past five years there have been a number of crashes in the US that had nothing to do with bad weather or difficult take-off or landing conditions. Among those that fell out of the sky during routine flights were ValuJet Flight 592 and TWA Flight 800 in 1996, Swissair Flight 111 in 1998 and EgyptAir 990 last October. Hundreds of passengers and airline workers died in these disasters.

There was a new tragedy this week, on Wednesday, February 16, when a DC-8 cargo plane, operated by Emery Worldwide, crashed in a ball of fire shortly after takeoff in California, killing all three members of the flight crew. The pilots attempted an emergency landing after telling the control tower that their cargo had shifted and there was a severe problem with the balance of the aircraft.

What dangers are revealed in these tragedies?

Are we witnessing the deadly results of structural failures caused by metal fatigue and accumulated wear and tear, particularly in older fleets? Is there a proliferation of defective parts because of cost-cutting and subcontracting to low-cost companies? Are the airlines taking advantage of lax safety standards and their cozy relationship with the FAA to carry out spotty maintenance? What price is being paid by pilot and crew fatigue, the outcome of corporate cost-cutting that results in longer hours and mounting workloads?

Such dangers have been exacerbated over the last two decades by the deregulation of the airline industry. The gutting of government restraints on the operation of the capitalist market has engendered an atmosphere of ruthless competition. Commercial viability demands continual cost-cutting and downsizing. To satisfy the big investors and creditors on Wall Street, who are driven by the most immediate and short-term considerations, companies must find ways to reduce expenditures and bolster the bottom line. The mania for reducing to the vanishing point all activities that do not directly generate profit—reflected, for example, in shorter turnarounds at the terminal—inevitably leads to cutting corners when it comes to maintenance and safety.

It is no accident that deregulation ushered in a period of union-busting, wage-cutting and attacks on the working conditions of pilots, flight attendants, mechanics and ground crew. Moreover, the Reagan administration's destruction of the air traffic controllers union, PATCO, in 1981 left a legacy of problems in the air traffic control system that is yet to be fully overcome.

There has been an explosive growth of low-cost start-up companies, such as ValuJet Airlines, now called AirTran. These are often run by people with little or no expertise in aeronautics. More than one such airline has been launched on little more than a wing and a prayer—buying old planes, subcontracting out maintenance and other functions, and relying on financial stakes provided by creditors looking to make a fast profit.

While massive sums have been expended on fare wars, buyouts and takeovers, far less has been allocated for investment in the infrastructure of the industry, as can be seen with the antiquated equipment used in many of the busiest air traffic control towers.

The public has been told that the capitalist market is the best guarantor not only of quality and affordable air travel, but also safety. But the facts, and tragedies such as the crash of Flight 261, hardly bear this out.

This is not to say airline executives are oblivious to safety. The moral character and motives of individual corporate officers are, at most, secondary issues. These individuals are, moreover, well aware that accidents are bad for business.

But there is an inherent and objective conflict between the principle of transportation for profit and a maximum, rationally planned and coordinated effort to guarantee the safety and essential needs of the flying public. As long as air transportation is subordinated to the drive for profit, executives will continue to cut corners, postpone investment in safer equipment and take unnecessary chances. The relentless pressure from big investors on Wall Street to cut costs and increase profit margins ensures that executives who fail to sufficiently enhance "shareholder value" will be removed.

What could be done if the already existing tools of computerized and satellite communications, the Internet, more advanced forms of automation, better methods of pilot training, and more rational and humane work schedules were employed to lessen the dangers of malfunctions and crashes? What if these efforts were coordinated not only on a national, but rather on a global scale? Under the present order of things, the demands of the market and the profit needs of privately owned and controlled companies cut across the rational and coordinated use of technology and science.

The real issue is eliminating this conflict. This can only be done if air transportation is organized on an entirely different principle: as a publicly-owned and operated utility under the democratic control of the working population to serve the needs of society as a whole, not the narrow interests of a handful of wealthy owners and investors. Air travel could then be organized to provide safe, comfortable and affordable transportation for millions of passengers, and a decent standard of living for the hundreds of thousands of workers who make that travel possible.

At the beginning of the last century public ownership of the railroads was something widely advocated, not only by socialists, but by many who considered themselves progressives, as a necessary and logical step. Certainly at the beginning of the twenty-first century it is high time for this step to be taken in relation to air travel, which has become an indispensable part of modern life.