

Fuselage rupture in Southwest jet exposes crisis in airline industry

James Brewer
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In a press release on Monday, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued an “emergency directive” mandating the grounding of 175 specific Boeing 737-300, 737-500 and 737-700 models and ordering inspections to be conducted. The order was in response to a “depressurization event” last Friday, which caused a near-disaster for Southwest Airlines Flight 812 after it departed Phoenix, Arizona.

With 118 passengers and crew aboard, the fuselage ripped open at an altitude of 34,400 feet (10,500 meters). The five-foot-long (about 2 meters) gash in the roof of the cabin caused immediate loss of cabin pressure and forced an emergency landing in Yuma, Arizona.

It was necessary to bring the aircraft rapidly down to 10,000 feet (3,000 meters) where the oxygen level was sufficient to breath. Many of the passengers fainted because they were unable to get their oxygen masks on quickly enough.

Aviation safety consultant John Gadzinski told Associated Press, “The higher you are, the less useful consciousness time you have.” He also said that at 34,400 feet the pilots would only have 10-20 seconds of “useful consciousness” to get their oxygen masks on or pass out, adding, “It’s a credit to the pilots that they responded so quickly.”

In 2005, a similar “depressurization event” caused a Helios Airways Boeing 737 to crash into a hillside near Athens, killing all 121 passengers and crew when the pilots lost consciousness.

Passengers on Southwest Flight 812 described the harrowing event to reporters. Don Nelson, seated just one row from the ruptured fuselage, said it took about four “noisy” minutes for the plane to descend to the level where breathing was possible. Christine Ziegler said, “People were dropping.” She watched as a nearby passenger and crew member fainted.

Debbie Downey was interviewed by CNN: “My

husband and I...could see the blue sky...the wiring, the cabling. It actually was terrifying...a lot of people were crying and holding hands” but had trouble hearing due to the noise of the rushing air. “It was very, very scary.”

Over the weekend, Southwest canceled about 600 flights and grounded 79 aircraft for emergency inspections. Three more of the planes were found to have subsurface cracks in the fuselage, which is what is suspected of causing the rupture in Flight 812.

Of its fleet of 540 planes, Southwest operates 170 of the 737-300s. These are the oldest aircraft in their fleet. The jetliner with the tear was 15 years old and had over 39,000 takeoff and landing cycles.

Company spokeswoman Linda Rutherford said, “Obviously we’re dealing with a skin issue, and we believe these 80 airplanes are covered by a set of [federal safety rules] that make them candidates to do this additional inspection that Boeing is devising for us.”

The planes that were grounded were 737-300s whose aluminum “skins” have not been replaced. Board member, Robert Sumwalt, of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), said that a service bulletin for all 737-300s with comparable flight cycle records as the afflicted craft was being developed by Boeing. The “lap joint,” a riveted joint that runs along the length of the aircraft, is what ruptured on the Phoenix flight.

Sumwalt said that the “lap joints” were previously not believed to be a fatigue problem and not normally subjected to extensive checks. “Up to this point, only visual inspections were required.”

As of Monday morning, Southwest said that 57 of the grounded jetliners were returned to service, and it expected to finish inspections on the rest of them by late Tuesday. This may be superseded by Monday’s FAA directive, which includes aircraft with more than 30,000 takeoff cycles. These are mainly but not only Southwest planes.

Another Southwest airliner, with 142 people aboard, was diverted and forced to make an emergency landing when a strong electrical burning odor filled the cabin on Sunday. This was also a Boeing 737, but a Southwest spokesperson claimed not to know whether it was the same model as the Arizona plane.

The Flight 812 incident raises serious concerns about the safety of the airline industry. The “lap joint” issue represents broader flaws in the system of maintenance, inspection and governmental oversight. The measures being taken by the FAA and Boeing are minimal and effectively face-saving procedures, to cover for years of deregulation and “self-regulation” of the airline industry.

Three years ago, FAA inspectors charged that Southwest allowed 117 of its airplanes to carry passengers despite the fact that the jets were “not airworthy.” In some cases the planes were allowed to fly for up to 30 months after the inspection deadlines had passed, the FAA said.

According to a March 2008 CNN report, the FAA said Southwest operated 46 Boeing 737s on nearly 60,000 flights between June 2006 and March 2007 while failing to comply with an FAA directive requiring repeated inspections of fuselage areas to detect fatigue cracking. The FAA also alleged that after Southwest discovered it had failed to comply, it continued to operate the same planes on an additional 1,451 flights in March 2007. The airline later found that six of the 46 planes had fatigue cracks, the FAA said.

The FAA fined Southwest \$10.2 million, later dropping it to \$7.5 million after negotiations with the company. CNN reported that two FAA whistleblowers testifying before a congressional body said, “FAA managers knew about the lapse in safety at Southwest, but decided to allow the airline to conduct the safety checks on a slower schedule because taking ‘aircraft out of service would have disrupted Southwest Airlines’ flight schedule.”

Dallas-based Southwest Airlines handles more domestic passengers than any other US carrier. Known throughout the industry as a “low-cost carrier,” its highly profitable business model is based on high levels of worker and aircraft productivity and lowering costs by reducing aircraft turnaround time at airport gates. According to company statistics, the airline operates more than 3,400 flights a day, as of March 2011, utilizing a fleet of 547 Boeing 737 aircraft.

Speaking on ABC Nightly News Monday evening, National Transportation Safety Board spokesman Robert Sumwalt claimed there was no safety concerns over how

often and quickly Southwest reused its airplanes.

The deregulation of the airline industry—carried out under the Carter administration in 1978—led to a wave of bankruptcies, mergers and union busting attacks against airline workers, beginning with Reagan’s smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike in 1981. Over the last three decades, the airlines have carried out a savage cost-cutting campaign, aided and abetted by the airline unions and sanctioned by Democratic and Republican administrations alike in the name of free market policies. This has included cutting employees and outsourcing maintenance to low cost contractors, which has inevitably undermined safety.

The near catastrophe at Southwest follows closely on the heels of an incident at Reagan International Airport in Washington, DC, where a single air traffic controller on duty apparently fell asleep, causing incoming aircraft to have no communication with the tower. The fact that there was only one controller overseeing flights into the nation’s capital underscored the disastrous situation in the air traffic control system. The demand for increased manning and better equipment in the control towers was one of the major issues in the 1981 PATCO strike.

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