

One passenger dead after engine explodes during Southwest Airlines flight

Alec Andersen
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A Southwest Airlines flight from New York City to Dallas was forced to make an emergency landing Tuesday in Philadelphia after one of its engines exploded mid-flight, sending shrapnel into the body of the plane and fatally wounding a passenger.

Flight 1380 from New York's La Guardia airport was traveling at an altitude of over 31,000 feet with 149 people on board when the left engine failed just 20 minutes after takeoff. The explosion launched shrapnel into the passenger compartment of the fuselage and shattered a window in row 17, causing the cabin to depressurize.

Jennifer Riordan, a Wells Fargo executive and mother of two from Albuquerque, New Mexico, was badly injured by shrapnel before her upper body was sucked out of the plane when the cabin depressurized. Passengers pulled her back into the aircraft and attempted to stop the bleeding and resuscitate her while the pilots made an emergency landing. Upon landing, Riordan was immediately rushed to a nearby hospital, where she was pronounced dead. Seven other passengers were also treated for minor injuries.

The plane involved was a Boeing 737-700 powered by twin CFM engines. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is investigating the cause of the engine failure, but the head of the agency, Robert Sumwalt, told reporters Tuesday evening that investigators had discovered that a fan blade was missing from the engine. The blade appears to have separated from the engine hub, where evidence of metal fatigue was also found. A ring designed to contain debris in the event of engine failure was apparently ineffective.

"We're taking this very seriously. This should not happen," Sumwalt said, adding that he had spoken with Southwest Airlines CEO Gary Kelly, who assured him

that the airline would undertake enhanced inspections of its fleet. Other airlines have issued press releases stating that they will also undertake their own safety inspections.

The incident Tuesday represents the first passenger death due to an in-flight accident since 2009, when a Continental Express airliner crashed near Buffalo, New York, killing 49 passengers and one person on the ground.

However, there have been several similar incidents over recent years that just as easily could have caused fatalities.

A 2015 British Airways flight preparing to take off from Las Vegas experienced uncontained engine failure, shooting shrapnel into the Boeing 777's wing and fuselage. The pilot was able to abort takeoff at the last moment, preventing a potentially catastrophic crash that would likely have resulted had the plane made it airborne.

In that case, it was later reported that a version of the GE engine involved had been subject to a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Airworthiness Directive four years prior over a manufacturing flaw with the potential to cause the engine to disintegrate and send shrapnel into vulnerable parts of the plane, though the engine in question was manufactured earlier than those subject to the directive. Fortunately, nobody was seriously harmed in the incident.

In August 2016, a Southwest Airlines flight from New Orleans to Orlando experienced engine failure and was forced to make an emergency landing in Pensacola, Florida. An NTSB investigation subsequently found that an engine fan had separated from the engine hub midflight, and that there was substantial evidence of metal fatigue in the area. Shrapnel from the engine penetrated the fuselage, leaving a five by 16-inch hole

in the plane's exterior. Though the similarities with the present case are striking, the passenger compartment remained intact and there were no injuries.

Last October, an American Airlines flight destined for Miami was about to take off from Chicago's O'Hare Airport when one of its engines failed and caught fire. The pilot was able to abort takeoff but 20 people were injured as smoke filled the cabin and passengers scrambled to exit. Pieces from the engine were blasted up to a half-mile away from the site, crashing through the roof of a UPS store.

Ultimate responsibility for such incidents lies in the subordination of passenger safety to the drive of the airlines for ever greater profits. In fact, major airlines have raked in record profits over the last few years. As the number of people who travel by air continues to grow each year and airlines scramble to grow their profits to ever greater heights, such incidents will only become more common.

These deaths and injuries at the hands of the corporate airlines and their subservient regulatory bodies are entirely preventable. The only means of ensuring adequate safety and access to air travel is to bring the airlines under the democratic control of the working class as a public utility, along with all other transportation infrastructure.



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