

Horizon Air worker dead after stealing airplane, crashing near Tacoma, Washington

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Richard Russell, a ground crew worker for Horizon Air, was found dead Friday after taking an airplane from a maintenance area at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport and going on an hour-long joyride before crashing onto a largely unpopulated island in the Puget Sound near Tacoma, Washington. The tragic circumstances surrounding Russell's death have called renewed attention to the working conditions experienced by ground crew workers at Horizon and throughout the airline industry.

Russell, known as "Beebo" to friends and coworkers, stole one of Horizon's fleet of 76-seat Bombardier Dash 8 Q400 twin turboprop airplanes from a northern section of the airport after his shift ended Friday evening, using a tow vehicle to point the plane in the direction of the runway.

Just after 7:30 p.m. Friday evening, Russell took off in the plane from Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, located 11 miles south of Seattle, and began flying south over the Puget Sound, performing aerobatic maneuvers and speaking intermittently with air traffic controllers.

In an audio recording of his communications Russell described himself as a "broken guy," expressing a desire for this to be "the end" and apologizing to his family for disappointing them, while repeatedly stating his desire not to harm anyone.

"I've got a lot of people that care about me, and it's going to disappoint them to hear I did this. I would like to apologize to each and every one of them. Just a broken guy, got a few screws loose, I guess. Never really knew it until now," Russell says in the recording.

Asked to explain what drove him to steal the plane, Russell told air traffic controllers, "*Minimum wage*, we'll *chalk it up* to that. Maybe that will grease some gears a little bit with the higher-ups."

Two North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) F-15 fighter jets were scrambled from Oregon to tail Russell and, likely, to shoot the airplane down if the opportunity presented itself. In the recordings, air traffic controllers first urge Russell to land at Joint Base Lewis-McCord, a large military base in the area, which Russell refuses, fearing that "those guys would rough me up if I tried landing there ... they've probably got anti-aircraft."

Later, they urge Russell on several occasions to fly out over open water, where his downing would pose less risk of harming others, saying: "If you could, you just want to keep that plane right over the water, maybe keep the aircraft nice and low."

About an hour after takeoff, Russell's plane crashed onto heavily forested Ketron Island, located at the southern end of the Puget Sound between Tacoma and the state capitol, Olympia, creating a forest fire that was quickly extinguished by responding fire crews.

Russell, 29, leaves behind his wife of about seven years, Hannah. He had worked for Horizon Air since 2015, when he moved with his wife to Sumner, Washington from Coos Bay, Oregon, where they had operated a bakery for three years, to be closer to family.

The couple often traveled and Russell used the benefits from his Horizon job to fly to Alaska, where he spent most of his childhood after moving from Florida at age 7, to visit his family. According to a blog he maintained, Russell had been pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in social sciences and hoped to move up to a management position at Horizon or join the military or law enforcement.

Ground services workers at Horizon are responsible for guiding aircraft to the appropriate gate, handling baggage, tidying the passenger compartment and other tasks. In addition to handling luggage, Russell worked

on a “tow team,” a two-person crew responsible for moving planes on the tarmac. One member of the team operates a vehicle known as a “tow tug” that pulls the plane into position, while the other communicates with the air traffic control tower from the cockpit and can apply the plane’s brakes in the event of an emergency.

Tow teams are given training in the operation of some of the plane’s other systems, including auxiliary power, radios and hydraulics. However, it is unclear where Russell learned to fly an airplane and carry out such perilous maneuvers.

A former ground crew supervisor who worked with Russell told *The Seattle Times*: “He was a quiet guy. It seemed like he was well liked by the other workers. I feel really bad for Richard and his family. I hope they can make it through this.”

Horizon Air is a subsidiary of Alaska Air Group, which also includes Virgin America, that specializes in short passenger flights to small and medium-size airports around the Pacific Northwest and western United States with its fleet of Bombardier Q400 airplanes. Alaska and its subsidiaries have been the subject of multiple lawsuits over worker pay and conditions.

Faced with chronic understaffing, Alaska Horizon ground crew workers are forced to work long hours at a relentless pace in order to meet the airline’s “20-minute guarantee” to have all checked luggage on the baggage claim carousel within 20 minutes of arrival at the gate. A 2017 investigation by *The Seattle Times* found that ground service workers are often paid less than the city of SeaTac’s minimum wage of approximately \$15 per hour, which Alaska Air fought a bitter campaign to defeat during the City Council’s 2013 deliberations on its so-called “living wage” measure.

While the mainstream media has unanimously dismissed the economic context behind Friday’s tragedy, including dismissing Russell’s remark about minimum wage, they have mounted a hysterical campaign over the supposed “insider threat” posed by airline workers. All evidence, however, points to Russell’s actions as an act of desperation motivated by the low wages, stress, depression and alienation that are all too familiar to workers in the transportation, shipping, service and other industries around in the United States and internationally. As a coworker told

King 5 News, “He was going to show them that they pushed a good guy to his limits.”



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