

New York Times magazine blames pilots for Boeing crashes

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The lead article of the September 22 print edition of the *New York Times Magazine*, titled “What Really Brought Down the Boeing 737 Max?” is a 14,000-word cover-up. It is an attempt to whitewash the profit-driven negligence of Boeing and complicity of the industry-dominated Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) that led to two crashes of Boeing 737 Max 8 aircraft and the deaths of 346 human beings.

The premise of the article, written by new writer-at-large William Langewiesche, is that the pilots of the two Max 8 flights—Lion Air Flight 610, which crashed last October in Indonesia, and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302, which crashed this past March—are primarily responsible for the lives lost, not Boeing or the FAA. Langewiesche writes that the pilots should have been able to “decipher a variant of a simple runaway trim” and “were the deciding factor here—not the MCAS, not the Max.”

This contradicts the preliminary report by Ethiopian Airlines, based on an analysis of the recovered flight recorder and cockpit recorder and other data, which exonerates the pilots and blames the crash on the failure of critical functions on the aircraft. According to press reports, the Indonesian government is about to release its study, attributing the Lion Air crash to design flaws in the Boeing Max and lack of oversight by the FAA.

The *Times* seeks to absolve the giant US airplane maker and defense contractor and the government regulators who are in its pocket by focusing on airlines in the “Third World” and their tendency to hire less experienced pilots. Langewiesche writes that these pilots’ only flying experience is “scripted, bounded by checklists and cockpit mandates and dependent on autopilots.” He compares them to pilots trained by the United States Navy, who are required to go through “rigorous classroom instruction” and then “fly at bank

angles without limits, including upside down.” Such military dog-fighting techniques should be a requirement for pilots flying civilian air routes, he argues.

Langewiesche echoes statements made early on by Boeing executives and comments by Representative Sam Graves (Republican of Missouri) to the House Aviation Committee in May. Graves declared that the catastrophic flight control failures that doomed the Max 8 aircraft “are easily countered by the pilot” by “flipping a couple of switches.” The Lion Air pilots supposedly did not resort to this “simple solution.”

Graves argued that the pilots should have known how to fix the problem, adding that “you do not need an idiot light to tell you what is going on.”

He made these statements despite acknowledging that Boeing had not put any information in the flight training manuals for its new 737 Max 8 concerning an automatic anti-stall system it had installed, called MCAS (for Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System) to compensate for a design problem associated with the mounting of a bigger engine on the old 737 body frame. In both crashes, MCAS was triggered shortly after takeoff due to a faulty angle-of-attack sensor, pushing the nose of the plane down and overriding attempts by the pilots to assume manual control.

The decision to adapt the old 737 model for the new 737 Max rather than design a new plane was driven by commercial and profit concerns, not the safety of the passengers and crew. Boeing was in a mad scramble to bring to market a new, more cost-effective short- and medium-haul workhorse aircraft in order to compete with its European-based rival, Airbus, which had introduced its own new-generation plane and was threatening to cut into Boeing’s market share,

particularly in the critical and expanding Chinese market.

And to make its plane more attractive to airlines and cheaper to bring on line, Boeing said the Max 8 required virtually no new training for pilots who had flown its previous 737 models. Hence its decision to omit the existence of MCAS from its training manuals.

Boeing itself knew that MCAS was a faulty system and was in the process of releasing a software patch when the Ethiopian Airlines crash occurred on March 10. It was doing so in response to analyses by its own engineers of the potential problems of the system made both before and after the Lion Air crash that had occurred five months before.

All of this—and other damning facts that have been revealed since the grounding of the 737 Max 8 aircraft last March—are ignored by the *Times*. These additional facts include:

- The Max 8 relied on a single angle-of-attack sensor, rather than two sensors, to feed data to MCAS, lacking the redundancy that is standard for critical functions.
- Cockpit warning lights alerting pilots of a faulty angle-of-attack sensor were optional features on the Max 8, not mandatory as they have been in the past.
- Pilot training for the new plane consisted of a single one-hour course on an iPad.
- The autopilot fails to disengage properly, as discovered in tests by the European Aviation Administration.
- The manually operated trim wheel, which is part of the solution Langewiesche claims was “simple,” is difficult to turn, and the pilots in the doomed aircraft were apparently unable to turn it and thereby correct for unwanted changes in airspeed.

The so-called “newspaper of record,” in reality the “newspaper of Wall Street,” has published an article written in behalf of Boeing and its major investors—one that could have been written by them as well.

It does not take a stretch of the imagination to link this with the fact that the Max 8 is Boeing’s biggest-selling aircraft, accounting for up to 40 percent of its recent profits, and that Boeing’s profit and stock price surge since the election of Trump has been the biggest driver of the overall stock market binge.

The presentation, content and tone of the article express the desire of the aerospace giant’s executives and Wall Street as a whole to shift the blame for the

disasters onto pilots who are dead and cannot defend themselves, and get the Max 8 back into the air as quickly as possible. The company has already reported a loss of \$1 billion and is in danger of losing more sales to Airbus.

These are not innocent oversights. Langewiesche himself is a pilot and is no doubt aware of comments by aviation safety expert “Sully” Sullenberger, who testified to Congress in June that the Max 8 was “fatally flawed” and that planes should never be designed with “inherent flaws that we intend pilots will have to compensate for and overcome.”



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