

American Airlines fined \$15,000 after worker was sucked into plane engine

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American Eagle, a subsidiary of American Airlines, is being fined a little more than \$15,000 after a fatal accident where a worker was sucked into an aircraft engine at Montgomery Regional Airport in Alabama. Courtney Edwards, 34, was a ground agent who worked for Piedmont Airlines. Piedmont Airlines is one of three subsidiary airlines of American Eagle that helps form the codeshare operation of American Eagle.

Edwards, a mother of three, died on New Year's Eve after she was so violently sucked into the engine of a newly arrived Embraer E175 regional jet that it "shook the entire aircraft." The 59 passengers and four members of the flight crew were not injured.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) issued a preliminary report noting that Edwards failed to comply with multiple instructions to stay back from the airplane before the engines were shut down.

Upon landing, the report states, the captain began to shut down the engines and then received a warning light that the plane's front cargo door was open. The co-pilot then warned ground workers that the engines were still on and to remain clear. "Immediately thereafter, he saw a warning light illuminate and the airplane shook violently followed by the immediate automatic shutdown of the number 1 engine." The report continued, "Unsure of what had occurred, he extinguished the emergency lights and shut off both batteries before leaving the flight deck to investigate."

The ground crew told investigators that they had two meetings about safety before the plane landed, and all workers knew the engines would remain on until ground power cables were connected since the airplane did not have auxiliary power on board. One worker reported that it was "discussed that the airplane should not be approached" until the airplane's rotating beacon light shut off, indicating that it was safe to approach.

The video pulled by the NTSB showed that "throughout the course of the accident, the airplane's upper rotating beacon light appeared to be illuminated."

The NTSB report cites the American Eagle Ground Operations Manual which instructs workers to not approach the front of a running jet engine and to keep a safe distance of at least 15 feet from what is termed the "ingestion zone." The manual states, "Jet engines spin with powerful speed and are extremely dangerous until spooled down. The area in front of the engine is called the ingestion zone. The ingestion zone for all aircraft types is 15 feet. You must never enter the ingestion zone until the engine has spooled down."

However, an Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) report conflicts with the preliminary findings of the NTSB, stating that the airline did not provide "a place of employment which were free from recognized hazards that were causing or likely to cause death of serious physical harm to employees that were exposed to ingestion and jet blast hazards." It is this finding that caused OSHA to issue Piedmont an initial penalty of \$15,625, which is the maximum under the law.

OSHA also cited Piedmont with the lack of effective training, the lack of effective communication, and unclear instructions from supervisors, all contributing factors in Edwards' "preventable" death.

Divonta Palmer, a former co-worker of Edwards, told WSFA news in Montgomery that he was devastated about her death. "I can't wrap my mind around how did this happen." Palmer described Edwards as a "joy to be around." "She would tell me that she was always dedicated and motivated to do the best job and put the best foot forward."

Official statistics are difficult to obtain about this kind of fatal accident. However, Boeing issued a report

in 2008 that said there had been 33 reported “ingestions” of personnel into engines on the 100 and 200 series of their 737 commercial liner, and four reports on their 300, 400, 500 and Next-Generation 737 series. This report, while old, shows that this type of incident is rare but not unheard of.

In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic ramped up and lockdowns caused air travel to slow to a trickle, the US government passed the CARES Act that gave billions of dollars in bailout money to the airlines based upon the false claim that the money would preserve workers’ jobs and pay. Despite this infusion of cash, airlines laid off thousands of workers.

The airline workers who remained on the job were forced to work despite a serious risk of infection. Inflation near 10 percent and soaring cost of living ate away at their already inadequate pay. As pandemic restrictions were loosened and then entirely abandoned, air travel demand rapidly increased and strained the skeleton crew of airline workers with grueling and chaotic schedules, overtime, and overwork resulting in fatigue.

Fatigue has been on the NTSB's “Most Wanted List of Transportation Safety Improvements” since 1990. In 2008, the NTSB declared that the FAA “has taken little if any action directly related to revising existing regulations and work scheduling practices.”

Without adequate fatigue regulations and with profit as the only concern, the airlines hire and schedule as they please, and use the window dressing of “fatigue mitigation” training to cover for the companies’ unsafe scheduling practices and to attempt to put the responsibility of mitigating fatigue onto workers themselves.

The Communications Workers of America (CWA) union, of which Edwards was a member, said in a statement that “it is likely that Piedmont will contest the decision, but CWA will continue to fight for Courtney Edwards, her family, and the safety of all airline workers, who should never fear for their lives on the job.” What exactly the union proposes to do fight, however, the CWA bureaucracy did not explain.

Piedmont has 15 business days to comply with or contest the fine which was issued on June 7. American Airlines, of which Piedmont is a subsidiary, produced revenues of \$12.2 billion in the first quarter of 2023 alone, and likely will not flinch while paying the paltry

\$15,625 fine that is effectively the price of a human life while doing airline business.



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