

US National Transportation Safety Board exposes further safety compromises on Boeing 737 Max aircraft

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The US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) released its preliminary findings on the in-flight blowout of a fuselage door plug on Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 on January 5, revealing that four bolts designed to stop such a blowout were not installed on the aircraft.

At the time, the aircraft was at an altitude of 16,000 feet, which caused the plane to immediately depressurize and oxygen masks to drop. The *Seattle Times* reported that a 15-year-old high school student who was sitting in the window seat directly ahead of the blowout might have been thrown out of the plane along with part of the fuselage if not for the swift action of his mother, who secured him immediately even as clothing and a seat headrest were sucked out.

In addition, a lawsuit by several of the passengers aboard the flight alleges that many heard a “whistling” coming from near where the blowout occurred before it happened. Initial reports show that none of the plane’s sensors reported any errors and the flight proceeded despite those concerns.

After the blowout, the flight immediately dropped to 10,000 feet and the pilots successfully returned to Portland International Airport, landing without further incident. Of the 177 passengers and crew, eight suffered minor injuries.

The findings show that the bolts were removed at Boeing’s facility in Renton, Washington, after it was transported there last August for final assembly. During this process, employees from Spirit AeroSystems, one of Boeing’s suppliers, noted five damaged rivets which needed to be replaced. In order to do so, they had to remove a door plug, known as an MED plug, and the four bolts ensuring the plug stayed in place.

Photo documentation after repairing the rivets and replacing the MED plug shows that the bolts were not reinstalled after the rivets were repaired. The report notes that those directly involved in working on the plane have not yet been interviewed by the NTSB and that the agency’s investigation is ongoing.

The documentation and photographs released by the NTSB are a devastating exposure of the continued disregard for safety by Boeing. The aerospace manufacturer is most notorious for the deaths of 346 men, women and children over the course of two crashes in October 2018 and March 2019, caused by the faulty Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS). Numerous investigations in multiple countries revealed that Boeing knew the system was inherently flawed and dangerous, yet pressed ahead with installing it on its new 737 Max aircraft in order to compete for market share with its European rival, Airbus.

The numerous problems with 737 Max aircraft are a continuation of the pursuit of profits over lives most exemplified by the 2018 and 2019 crashes. It is only sheer luck that the most recent fuselage blowout did not occur at a higher altitude, where the decompression would have been much more violent. It would have been highly likely that the aforementioned teenager, and perhaps many others, would have lost their lives that day.

Responding to the NTSB report, Boeing CEO David Calhoun said that “Whatever final conclusions are reached, Boeing is accountable for what happened. An event like this must not happen on an airplane that leaves our factory.”

This statement not merely cynical, but extraordinarily

sinister. Before 2020, Calhoun was a member of Boeing's board of directors and sold \$9.5 million worth of stocks in the month before the second 737 Max crash. He rose to CEO after the former chief executive, Dennis Muilenburg (who made more than \$80 million during his tenure), was unable to bring Boeing's stock back up after the quagmire of the second crash.

After Calhoun oversaw the reinstatement of the 737 Max, he shed crocodile tears proclaiming, "We will never forget the lives lost in the two tragic accidents that led to the decision to suspend operations." One must wonder how short Calhoun thinks our memories are.

In reality, Calhoun's main task is restoring Boeing's stock value, which is down more than 7 percent from what it was a month ago. Other corporations can smell blood in the water, with Tim Clark, the president of Emirates airline, one Boeing's biggest customers, commenting, "this is the last chance saloon."

The fuselage blowout is not even the only manufacturing-related safety issue that has come up on Boeing Max 737 aircraft in the past several weeks. The deliveries of about 50 planes are currently delayed because of improperly drilled window holes. In a letter to Boeing's employees, Stan Deal, the head of the company's commercial airplanes division, wrote that "While this potential condition is not an immediate safety issue and all 737s can continue operating safely, we currently believe we will have to perform rework on about 50 undelivered planes."

Deal is fooling no one. If missing bolts can cause part of a plane to come undone, so can improperly drilled holes. Planes are complex machines that must withstand sharp pressure differences between the inside and outside of the aircraft. Even a slight misalignment can cause airflow between the inside and outside, which can erupt dramatically, and dangerously, as it likely did on January 5.

Nor is Michael Whitaker, the head of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), who testified on Tuesday before the House Of Representatives Subcommittee on Aviation, when he stated that the FAA will "take appropriate and necessary action" to improve airline safety. The FAA has been a long-standing ally of the airline corporations in working to cut safety regulations.

One particular procedure highlights this relationship. Starting in 2005, the FAA began to grant "in-house oversight" for new planes in production and approval of major repairs and alterations. As such, more and more engineers doing inspections began to report to Boeing rather than the FAA, ultimately culminating in a Organization Designation Authorization (ODA) in 2011, when Boeing was granted essentially full authority to audit its own safety practices.

The ODA played a key role in covering up the problems in the 737 Max that led to the two crashes, and no doubt played a similar role in allowing for a situation to exist where part of a plane explodes outwards while in flight.

Whitaker himself is another example of how the FAA is intimately tied to the airlines and manufacturers it is supposed to oversee. Whitaker's resume includes acting as a lawyer for Trans World Airlines, director, vice president and senior vice president for United Airlines, Group CEO of InterGlobe Enterprises and COO for a subsidiary of Hyundai. And now he is nominally expected to regulate the corporations which he helped run.



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