

Duck and Cover Up FAA's Scary Finding: Controllers Sometimes Conceal Close Calls

Unreported Incidents Suggest
Some Fear Punishment
For Operational Errors

“His Throat Was in His Belly . . .”

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NEW YORK An Air Canada jet was taking off at LaGuardia Airport on one runway, a USAirways plane was approaching to land on an intersecting runway. Fearing a collision, a tower controller radioed: USAir nine twenty, go around to make a second approach.

The USAirways jet pulled up, but then the co-pilot at the controls spotted the airborne Air Canada jet crossing right in front. Look there, the co-pilot shouted to the captain as he ducked his jet under the Air Canada plane. The jets missed by 20 feet, so close that the USAirways captain said in a subsequent report that he feared his tail would slice through the Air Canada plane passing overhead. Never-the-less, this near-collision April 3 last year wasn't reported by either the air-traffic controller or his supervisor to Federal Aviation Administration officials. It was only after the USAirways pilots complained to the National Transportation Safety Board that the seriousness of the event began to emerge.

This incident is one of several close calls in the past 18 months that point to a problem in the traffic-control system: Air controllers and their supervisors are sometimes failing to promptly disclose dangerous near collisions to FAA superiors.

Unsettling Lapses

Ronald Morgan, the FAA's chief of controllers, cited several recent reporting lapses in an internal memo to FAA managers Sept. 15 last year. Though Mr. Morgan ordered a crackdown, reporting failures have continued.

Prompt reporting is important. It enables FAA officials to save tape recordings of radio messages between controllers and pilots, of radar tracks of

airplanes and of controller's telephone calls to other towers or elsewhere. This material can be analyzed, mistakes pinpointed and training or procedures improved to prevent future midair or runway collisions.

Failures to report . . . diminish our ability to assure the quality of air-traffic services, Mr. Morgan said in his memo. In an interview at FAA headquarters in Washington, Mr. Morgan says the LaGuardia close call, when it finally came to light, prompted a remedial training program for 10,000 controllers in towers across the U.S. The program focused on alerting pilots to conflicting traffic.

Some close calls appear not to have been reported merely because of bureaucratic glitches. But other cases suggest coverups, in which controllers who made mistakes guiding airplanes have sought to avoid black marks that could damage their careers.

Bad Memory

Controllers have sometimes claimed they simply “forgot” to report a close call, even though it involved a near-collision. In some cases, pilots calling a tower to complain about a controller have been given numbers for phone lines that aren't hooked to recording equipment - as most are - leaving no trace of the conversation. In some FAA radar-control centers, computer data meant to flag controller errors have been fiddled with, reducing error alerts.

Coverups aren't confined to major airports. At the Appleton, Wis., airport May 25, the tower manager cleared a truck to service some lights at the end of the runway without telling the local controller, who cleared a plane for takeoff on the same runway. After the truck driver radioed a protest to the tower about the

plane that had just roared over his head, the tower radio tapes were mysteriously erased. The FAA has called in the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The Appleton tower is operated under FAA supervision by an independent contractor, Midwest Air Traffic Control Service Inc., which has fired the tower manager. "We found he had failed to report this incident appropriately, which we cannot tolerate," says Shane Cordes, executive vice president of Midwest.

Overall, a Small Number

To be sure, mistakes by the FAA's 15,000 controllers are relatively rare. So called operational errors - when controllers guide planes closer to each other than FAA standards permit - numbered 936 in the fiscal year ended in September, one error for every 200,000 takeoffs. That rate has held relatively steady since 1991 - assuming that the number of unreported incidents remains small. And an operational error can mean that one plane is merely trailing another by 2.8 miles instead of the standard three. Real close calls, when jets miss by only tens or hundreds of feet, and which controllers then try to cover up, are even rarer.

"We find six to eight cases a year of errors that controllers have tried to conceal," says David Canoles, who heads FAA investigations of controllers. He adds that the FAA takes vigorous disciplinary actions in such cases and that the agency recently suspended one controller for 14 days without pay.

In most cases, it is pilot reports that disclose errors that controllers haven't reported to FAA superiors. FAA controllers or supervisors are supposed to report operational errors to facility managers immediately, and the managers must notify FAA regional headquarters within three hours of the incident.

A controller may be reluctant to report 1 because for just one operational error, the controller is usually relieved of duties for 10 training, which can last as long as a few days. If a controller accumulates two or 3 in a 30-month period, he could be suspended without pay or fired, though that's rare. Often, an errant controller is transferred from a major airport to a smaller airstrip, where pay is lower, FAA officials say.

Some supervisors, too, are reluctant to investigate and report errors by controllers, with whom they work closely. "A supervisor finding errors isn't

making any friends in the facility, and higher error rates might bring regional headquarters, or even Washington, down on his neck," says a former FAA supervisor.

When the USAirways jet dipped under the Air Canada plane at LaGuardia, there was little in radio recordings indicating anything amiss. After the near-collision, when the local controller told the USAirways pilot to make a right turn, the pilot responded only: OK, right turn, if I can get my heart back." Nor were radar tracks of the planes precise enough to show a near collision.

But once on the ground, several USAirways passengers phoned FAA offices. And the pilot asked a second controller for a phone number to call the tower. He was given a number for an unrecorded telephone line.

What happened next is disputed. The tower supervisor who took the call said, "the pilot commended the local controller's handling of the situation," according to an Internal FAA memo. And after reviewing the inconclusive voice and radar tapes, local managers reported that it was only a "routine" go-around, the FAA memo adds.

The pilot, in an interview with an NTSB Investigator, contradicted this version. According to an NTSB report, the pilot said, "the supervisor told him the local controller had spilled a cup of coffee and was distracted cleaning it up - while the jets were on a collision course." The pilot said that the supervisor "admitted that the facility had mishandled the operation," and that the supervisor went on to commend the pilot, rather than the controller, for avoiding a collision, according to the FAA internal memo.

But because the controller had ordered the USAirways pilot to go around before the jet crossed the LaGuardia runway threshold - technically the cutoff point for such an order - the FAA recorded no operational error, and so there was no legal obligation to report the incident. Neither the controller nor the supervisor was disciplined.

This and similar incidents, however, spurred the FAA's Washington headquarters to seek improvement. Within days of the LaGuardia incident, the FAA amended its regulations to require reviews and reporting of even suspected close calls. "We must promptly address failures by controllers and

management personnel to report and investigate suspected incidents and take corrective actions,” Mr. Morgan wrote in his memo to FAA managers Sept. 15 last year.

Fiddling With the Data

Another problem cited in Mr. Morgan’s letter involves a “patch” to the computer programs that track airplanes. Designed to catch controller errors, the patch senses when planes get too close together and prints out an alert for FAA managers. Called the Operational Error Detection Patch, it has been dubbed “the snitch patch” by controllers.

Some FAA staffers, Mr. Morgan said in his internal memo, have been finding ways to defeat the patch, used at the FAA’s en route control centers that guide planes at high altitudes toward distant cities. One technique is to add leeway, in altitude or distance, to the records of the somewhat imprecise FAA radar tracks of planes. That can make the planes seem farther apart sometimes just far enough to eliminate a controller’s error.

“Facilities are improperly adding 1/5 mile to plots to invalidate Operational Error Detection Patch alerts,” Mr. Morgan said in his memo to the FAA managers. He added that FAA facilities are also improperly adding leeway of as much as 300 feet in altitude, even with no indication of such error in the aircraft transponders that signal altitudes.

One former controller explains how this works. “If you add 300 feet altitude to one plane and subtract 300 from another then poof! the planes aren’t too close, and there’s no error to report.”

In the wake of the Morgan memo, FAA regional headquarters briefed managers on how to investigate and report controller errors. But Dec. 2 last year, there was another reporting failure at LaGuardia.

That night, the tower’s local controller forgot he had cleared a Beechcraft to taxi onto the end of a runway and await takeoff clearance. He also had cleared a USAirways Boeing 737 to land on the same runway. The landing jet missed the waiting Beechcraft by 50 feet, according to an NTSB report. Looking up and seeing this, the controller later said, according to the NTSB, “his throat was in his belly.”

Still, the local controller failed to report it to superiors as required, the NTSB found.

Upon reaching Boston, the pilot of the Beechcraft called the LaGuardia tower on a recorded telephone line. “Hi, this is the captain from Three Foxtrot Lima,” the pilot said, giving his call sign. “Yeah, I was the controller,” the controller replied. “Wanna get on a line safer?” the pilot asked, apparently sympathetic to the controller. “Yeah,” the controller replied, and gave the pilot the number of a tower phone that wasn’t recorded.

Nothing on Tape

The subsequent phone conversation, because it was unrecorded, left no evidence to alert FAA superiors to the close call. Only a later phone call from the Beechcraft pilot’s charter company tipped off FAA managers. The controller was suspended without pay for two days for failing to report the close call.

There was a more spectacular breakdown in reporting at Los Angeles International on Jan. 3. A United Airlines Boeing 757 had been erroneously cleared to land moments after an American Trans Mr 757 had been told to wait on the same runway for takeoff clearance. Seeing the other jet waiting on the runway at the last moment, the United pilot pulled up, missing the American Trans Air plane by 200 feet.

The United jet went around for a second approach and this time landed safely. While taxiing to the gate, the United pilot radioed the controller. But his transmission was obscured by a microphone that suddenly started clicking on and off. According to an NTSB transcript of the radio recording, it went like this:

“The United thirty eight, can you tell us how the aircraft on the [microphone clicking] runway [clicking] when we [clicking] were cleared [clicking] to land [clicking]?”

The controller told the pilot to switch to a different frequency. The pilot complied, then tried to repeat his question.

“Can you explain [clicking] how the air [clicking] on the runway [clicking] when we’d... ah, we’d been [clicking].”

“I instructed you to go around,” the controller said.

“How was he on there, and we had been cleared to land?” the pilot persisted.

“Yeah, that was my fault, sir,” the controller conceded. “I had put him into position and, ah, waited too long to clear him so, but, ah, I did send you around.”

Despite the controller’s assertion that he ordered United to pull up and go around, NTSB investigators found no evidence of that on the tower tapes. And though it can’t be proved who was clicking the microphone, one federal investigator says he has no doubt it was the controller trying to cover up his error. The controller later told an NTSB investigator that he had forgotten about the plane waiting on the runway, and then had forgotten to notify supervisors about the close call. A subsequent complaint by the United pilot led to FAA and NTSB inquiries.

Moved to Long Beach

The FAA removed the controller from Los Angeles. He was reassigned to the Long Beach, Calif., control tower, a smaller airport with a less complex operation, an FAA spokesman says.

The controller didn’t respond to a request for comment. An FAA spokesman says the controller told agency investigators that he didn’t know the source of the microphone clicking, but that it could have been another aircraft on the same frequency, or caused by his stretching his microphone cord as he walked around the tower.

Though unreported controller errors may be relatively rare, one FAA quality assurance official says omitting even a few undercuts safety. “We’re looking for patterns that could alert us to a dangerous problem,” the FAA staffer says. “Without all the data, it’s harder to see those patterns and harder to improve safety.”

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