

How worried should we be about drunk pilots unique

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The prospect of a pilot passed out drunk in the cockpit shortly before take off with 99 passengers on board — as police alleged happened last week on a flight from Calgary to Cancun — is about as scary a flight tale as any passenger would want, short of a crash or hijacking.

The case of the Sunwing Airlines pilot, charged with having care and control of an aircraft while impaired, attracted headlines around the world and freaked travellers out.

It followed a video in Indonesia of an apparently drunk pilot staggering through airport security, repeatedly dropping his belongings. Like the Calgary incident, he still made it to the cockpit until his slurred preflight announcements frightened passengers.

With airline passengers handing total trust to their pilot, the outrage and fear over these incidents is obvious, but how big a problem is pilot inebriation?

How unusual is the Sunwing shocker?

It is difficult to quantify precisely how many times there have been concerns over a pilot's sobriety before takeoff, but it certainly is rare for inebriation to be a factor in a crash.

In 2015, a Carson Air turboprop carrying freight from Vancouver to Prince George crashed in B.C.'s North Shore mountains, killing the pilot and co-pilot on board. A coroner's inquest found "significant level of alcohol" in the pilot's blood.

The cause of the crash, however, has not yet been determined by the Transportation Safety Board of Canada, which says the investigation is ongoing.

Since 1990, substance use in an aviation incident has been listed as a possible factor in only six concluded investigations — of about 920 conducted, according to TSB records. None involved large passenger airliners: three were privately operated planes, two were commercial helicopters and one was a small passenger plane.

In October 2011, an Air Tindi Cessna Caravan left Yellowknife with a pilot and three passengers and crashed into a peak near Great Slave Lake. The pilot and one passenger died and two other passengers seriously injured. Tests revealed cannabinoids in the pilot's system, the active ingredient in marijuana.

"The concentrations of cannabinoids were sufficient to have caused impairment in pilot performance and decision-making on the accident flight," the TSB report says.

In 2009, a Piper Cherokee carrying a pilot with three passengers crashed into a mountain near Buckland, QC. The pilot and front passenger died and two rear passengers were seriously injured.

Tests found cocaine in the pilot's bloodstream. The TSB says the pilot likely used the drug within three hours of the crash, perhaps even after take off. (Another investigation of a crash, an ultralight that killed two in Quebec in 1994, also found cocaine in the pilot's system but could not determine if it was a factor.)

Finally, in 2013, a helicopter in Fox Creek, AB, broke up in the air five minutes after dropping off a passenger. The pilot died. "The pilot was observed to be staggering and smelling of alcohol. On being questioned, the pilot uttered some derogatory

remarks,” says the TSB report. Tests revealed high alcohol levels in his blood.

The remaining incidents involved pilots using Prozac, a prescription anti-depressant, Lithium, used in treating manic depression, and an over-the-counter antihistamine.

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But the TSB doesn't investigate every incident. For instance, while the Calgary arrest was reported by Sunwing, it is not being investigated by the TSB.

“The decision was made that the safety mechanisms in place and employed by the airline worked,” said Jon Lee, western regional manager for the TSB. “How the crew worked together, how they observed a fellow crew member that was unable to do their work, how they communicated that as a team and acted on it showed that their system is working. The situation was dealt with.”

The rule of thumb on drinking and flying has been memorably reduced to “eight hours from bottle to throttle.”

That means a pilot shouldn't operate a plane within eight hours of their last alcoholic drink; but there is more to it than that.

Transport Canada adds a secondary regulation that no matter how much time has passed, pilots cannot fly “while under the influence of alcohol, or while using any drug that impairs the person's faculties.” That adds zero tolerance on alcohol impairment, a rule that applies to operators of all aircraft, from commercial jets to hot-air balloons.

The eight-hour rule applies in most countries. Still, incidents of pilots and booze make the news each year, usually when pilots are stopped before flying.

Last year, two Canadian pilots for an Air Transat flight to Toronto were charged in Glasgow airport with attempting to fly while intoxicated; a month later, two pilots for United Airlines were arrested for intoxication prior to flying 141 passengers from Scotland to Newark, NY.

“The global spread of psychoactive substances, their general availability, and the ever-increasing number of addictive users are becoming a growing threat to aviation safety in many states,” the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), a UN agency based in Montreal, says in material introducing its guidelines.

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The ICAO guide says pilots are not to perform a safety-critical function when under the influence of “any psychoactive substance that could impair performance.” It is considering a guideline on testing of flight crew members for “problematic substances” after an incident. Its guidelines are scheduled for an update this year.

Testing is one reason it is hard to know the full extent of problem. The TSB, for instance, can't compel a blood sample from a pilot during an investigation of an incident.

Headline incidents often bring questions of whether more can be done.

In India, officials carry out random breathalyzer tests on flight crews during pre-flight procedures; about a dozen each year fail.

In 2015, the Federal Aviation Administration in the United States did random alcohol tests on 12,480 pilots. Ten failed, according to CBS News.

Addison Schonland, a partner with AirInsight, a Baltimore-based aviation consultancy firm, dismisses the idea passengers need to be fearful of drunk pilots.

“It is an aberration. It makes the news because it’s not normal. It gets attention because it’s rare,” he said. There are about 9,000 flights on a typical day and only a handful of incidents a year make headlines.

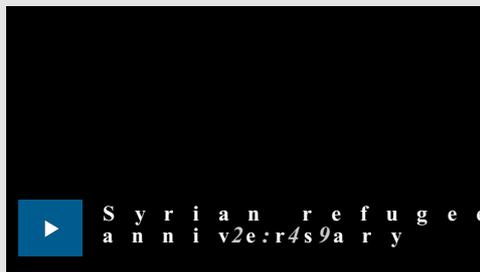
“The pilot profession is extremely good at self-policing,” said Schonland. Pilots don’t want a drunk colleague any more than passengers do, he said.

“The macabre joke about pilots is they get to every crash first,” he said. “And their last two words are usually ‘oh shit’ because they can see what’s coming.”

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