Authorities Looking for Reasons in Northwest Flight Overshoot

It appears that cockpit design, pilot inattention, and faulty and poorly designed equipment all played a part in the events that transpired on Oct. 21, 2009 — and the investigation that followed — for Northwest Flight 188. The flight, which carried 144 passengers, was out of voice contact with controllers for 78 minutes, and overshot its destination by more than 100 miles before the crew resumed contact with the ground.

The plane, an Airbus A320, was assumed to be hijacked, and military fighters were on alert to be launched after communications were lost. Upon landing, the crew — Captain Timothy Cheney and First Officer Richard Cole — was interviewed by the FBI and Minneapolis airport police. Both men passed drug and alcohol tests.

While there was some speculation at first about what had happened — from a heated argument between the two men to both of them dozing off — they later admitted that they had been distracted in the cockpit when they both pulled out and used their laptop computers to review a new crew scheduling system. The pilots told investigators they were so engrossed in the conversation that they did not pay attention to the ground controllers and had lost "situational awareness."

The use of laptops is banned by Northwest Airlines policy, but federal flight officials at the time could not find a federal rule against it. The FAA later revoked the licenses of both pilots, citing violations of a number of Federal aviation regulations, including failing to comply with air traffic control instructions and clearances, and operating carelessly and recklessly.

Although investigators said the accounts of the pilots could be plausible, some remained less than totally convinced that the complete story behind the mishap has come to light. Unfortunately, the cockpit voice recorder on the Airbus A320 was only capable of recording 30 minutes at a time, which means that the time in question had been overwritten. Also, one of the pilot’s microphones had been out of order. The data recorder did capture information about the plane’s performance during the entire flight, but since the plane appears to have performed as designed, it’s unclear what light this data can shed on the situation.

Some are conjecturing that the design of the cockpit lends itself to distractions. The Airbus A320 has a side stick for aircraft control, rather than a center-mounted yoke. There is a pull-out tray directly in front of the pilots, upon which they appeared to have placed their laptops. This would effectively block their view of many of the cockpit’s instruments.

Sources:
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