



UNINTENDED Consequences

Cockpit failures that contributed to the crash of a Colgan Air Q400 near Buffalo, New York, U.S., early last year have moved the U.S. Congress to action. Whenever legislative bodies start writing aviation operating rules I get nervous, and this time my unease is fully justified. Generally, when that happens, bad comes out along with the good, and we hope that calm heads will rule the day. This time, however, the bad may prevail.

Members of Congress, alarmed by the Colgan captain's poor piloting skills, compounded by a relatively inexperienced first officer's response, are legislating a solution.

The initial bill, passed last year in the House of Representatives, would require both pilots in a Federal Aviation Regulations Part 121 operation to have air transport pilot (ATP) certificates, which means each will have at least 1,500 hours of flight time. When this was announced, I imagined crew-scheduling officials across the land, especially those working at regional airlines, clutching their chests, fighting for breath as they imagined how hard it would be to keep their airline flying anything close to a reasonable schedule with such an experience investment in each cockpit.

At first blush this seemed to be a boon to the sophisticated flight schools, the Mercedes/Cadillac-level folks like the University of North Dakota, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University or even my smaller alma mater further down the beach, Florida Tech, which could cash in on this sudden need for ATP tickets. But then the broader, longer-term picture began to take shape, and the outlook for these grade-A flight schools appeared fairly grim.

These schools do a lot of business pumping out well-educated pilots with a fresh commercial pilot license and around 250 hours, financed by student loans and/or parents' support, positioning these graduates to go directly into a Part 121 operation. Suddenly that track would be closed. Now, fledgling pilots could not afford to build their needed time in a classic aviation university and would have to hold down costs to acquire more time on their own while competing for the few commercial jobs that would help accumulate the needed experience, and the grade A schools would become much less valuable to prospective students.

The recently passed Senate bill reduced that needed flight time to 800 hours, and obviously shelved the ATP requirement, but as this is written the

House repassed its bill with the pilot-experience part changed only in giving FAA some wriggle room. The last chance for a good outcome for this mess is in the conference committee that will try to smooth out the differences between the two bills.

The growing worldwide shortage of trained aviation professionals, already set to accelerate as economies recover, will be severely strained if this part of the bill is adopted in the final version. Given that the House bill also requires non-U.S. repair stations working on U.S.-registered aircraft to have direct FAA inspections twice a year — an internationally contentious rule that has no foundation in reality — and that airlines get fresh government approval for their alliances every three years, it is clear that the House doesn't mind creating chaos in the aviation world so long as its motivation at least appears righteous.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.A. Donoghue".

J.A. Donoghue
Editor-in-Chief
AeroSafety World