



# Distraction

Core aviation safety interests are being threatened by what probably should be considered an oddball yet unsafe event that has little to do with the risks that threaten lives every day.

That's one way of looking at the immediately infamous overflight of the destination airport by a pair of pilots in the United States who claimed to be so engrossed in fiddling with a new crew-scheduling program on their laptops that they apparently forgot they were flying an airliner.

Coming just a couple of weeks after a family in Colorado, U.S., claimed that their young son had crawled into and released a homemade helium balloon, the flight of the errant Northwest Airlines A320 initially sounded like almost as much of a hoax as the balloon fiasco is now said to have been, but sadly, it was not.

Alarms rang 'round the world when the overflight story was reported, with all sorts of urgent questioning of the role of automation in the cockpit today and the effectiveness of U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) oversight of the industry. One gadfly who makes it her business to scare the American public witless every time an airplane hiccups, and apparently in the unaccustomed position of trying to sound reasonable,

actually said the flight was not in danger of a midair collision — which was largely true thanks to the air traffic control system — because the on-board collision avoidance system would automatically steer the airplane around any potential danger — which, the last time I checked, it will not.

Further, when the level of automation used to allow this overflight was little more than a track-holding autopilot, we find ourselves being threatened, if press reports are to be believed, by 50-year-old technology.

While those claims are simply silly, the truly scary aspect of the event's aftermath was the two-step response to the pilots' action, or lack thereof.

First, because the cockpit voice recorder offered no independent information about what was actually going on in the cockpit, the pilots were interviewed by the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board to get the story straight. When their laptop saga came out, the FAA issued an emergency revocation of the pilots' licenses. Since these guys clearly weren't going to be flying in the foreseeable future, the only possible emergency that favored revocation over suspension involved the threat to the FAA's public credibility.

Second, the pilots' union got involved, pointing out that the revocation was a premature action. This reasonable position was then followed by the logic-bending statement that since the basis for the revocation was information the pilots gave up voluntarily, then all pilots might reconsider participating in any program involving voluntary participation, such as aviation safety action programs (ASAP). This is somewhat like me setting my own garage on fire because my teenage son got a speeding ticket.

Everyone involved with this issue needs to take several deep breaths and step away from the heat. Punishment of the offending pilots seems justified, but it should be done in an orderly manner. However, regardless of how the FAA behaves, inflicting collateral damage on safety reporting systems would seem to be the last thing any safety-oriented organization would want to do, or should do.

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

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