



# NASTY Stew

It was a nasty safety stew made with many of the ingredients that have been in our cookbook for years — training, fatigue and cockpit discipline. Throw in some icing, and this concoction yielded tragic results just short of the runway in Buffalo, New York, U.S., on a winter night.

The crash of a Colgan Air Bombardier Q400 on Feb. 12, 2009, killed 50 people. The fatalities, and the issues involved, ensured that this accident would grab a good deal of attention. Changes likely will be coming as a result of this investigation, changes that in some cases are long overdue.

One of the more central and interesting aspects of this case was the sleep, or lack thereof, and the quality of the sleep that the two pilots were able to get in the crew rest lounge after long commutes to get to their departure point. The fatigue effect on pilots commuting thousands of miles from their home to their current domiciles has been under-discussed forever. In many ways, it has been a very old-school discussion of a type seldom heard in modern aviation safety circles: It doesn't cause a problem, so let's not talk about it.

Commuting, in fact, allows airlines to operate the way that they do, especially smaller carriers with a high work force turnover. If airlines didn't do it the way it's

been done for decades, turning a blind eye toward the practice and accommodating crewmembers in empty seats, they would be faced with a smaller pool of pilots from which to hire, restricted to those already living around the domicile or those willing to relocate. But the willingness to relocate is impacted by the fluid nature of many airlines' route systems that see many changes, even seasonal changes. Further, how many pilots can afford to move as often as airlines might desire, especially given the salaries pilots get at smaller airlines? Not that they mind the low pay, at least for a while, considering that the experience is a form of apprenticeship, paying their dues, scuffling to get by to start moving up the airline hierarchy.

This revolving door at smaller carriers is also part of the ingrained system. Hard-pressed airline human resources specialists are tasked with filling a continuous need for highly trained and well-experienced pilots to keep the schedules flying, and most pilots already employed are continually looking for that big payday that accompanies a move to the big carriers. Oddly enough, this accident, with its overtones of potential pilot inadequacy, comes during a time of airline retraction.

We at Flight Safety Foundation and others around the world a couple of years

ago became very concerned about the supply of sufficiently trained personnel. Since then, the global recession turned down the heat on the issue, but heat remains. The system needs a continuous flow of people to cope with personnel losses through retirements, failed medical exams and other reasons that cause pilots to leave the system.

And this kind of pressure on the labor force puts pressure on training systems and training costs. Again, regional airlines suffer from having far fewer full flight simulators per pilot than their larger brethren, a simulator often costing as much as the airplane it is simulating. This pressure squeezes the training footprint, so a captain may never experience a stickshaker or stickpusher in action until short final in an ice storm.

All of these issues, and more, are being brought to light as a result of the Buffalo accident. I, for one, look forward to the solutions being proposed. In the early going, they seem highly promising.

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

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