

## Risks from Incapacitated Pilots and Pilots Who May Deliberately Crash Airplanes

Date: 11-28-2008 09:43 AM CET

Category: [Logistics & Transport](#)

Press release from: [AirSafe.com, LLC](#)

Agency: **Speedbrake Publishing**

Nov 27, 2008 – A January 2008 incident involving an Air Canada pilot who had to be removed from the cockpit after he became mentally incapacitated and unable to continue his flying duties sheds light on the risks passengers face from pilot-related actions.

AirSafe.com reviews the investigation into a January 2008 incident where an Air Canada pilot became mentally incapacitated and had to be removed from the cockpit. Once the first officer was removed, the captain was able to safely land the aircraft. The event caused some in the aviation community to question whether this kind of incident may have led to serious problems in the past. While a review of the available incident and accident record by AirSafe.com revealed no proven cases of a mentally incapacitated pilot deliberately causing death or serious injury to passengers, there have been several cases where such behavior was suspected, and one case where a pilot crashed an airliner on purpose.

On 19 November 2008, the Air Accident Investigation Unit of the Irish Department of Transport released their incident report on a 28 January 2008 event involving an Air Canada flight. The captain declared an emergency and diverted to Shannon, Ireland due to the incapacitation of a flight crew member.

The Air Canada 767 was on a scheduled flight from Toronto to London and carried 146 passengers and nine crew members. After the first officer became incapacitated, the captain declared an emergency and completed the flight with the assistance of a flight attendant who was also a licensed pilot.

According to the incident report, the first officer had arrived late for his flight, with the captain having already completed all preflight preparations before the first officer's arrival.

During the early phases of the flight, the first officer left the flight deck several times for short periods, and made it clear to the captain that he was tired.

At one point, the captain allowed the first officer to take a controlled rest break in cockpit. Over an hour later, as the aircraft was near the midpoint of its ocean leg, the first officer began to display unusual behavior, including rambling and disjointed conversation.

The first officer left the cockpit again, and after he returned he didn't follow proper cockpit reentry procedures, and also neglected to fasten his seat belt. It became apparent to the captain that the first officer was suffering from an unknown medical condition which impaired his ability to carry out his required duties on the flight deck. The captain summoned the lead flight attendant to get the first officer removed from the cockpit. The lead flight attendant removed the first officer with the help of other flight attendants. One of those flight attendants sustained a wrist injury during the removal.

After the removal of the first officer, the captain had the lead flight attendant check to see if there were any flight crew members among the passengers. None were on board, but one of the flight attendants held a commercial multiengine license, and she assisted the captain as the flight diverted to Shannon, Ireland.

The first officer was hospitalized in Ireland for 11 days before being transferred by air ambulance back to Canada for further treatment.

News reports about this incident focused on the more dramatic elements of the event, such as what the first officer said after being removed from the cockpit, or how and where the first officer was restrained in the cabin. However, this incident raised

more serious issues in the minds of many passengers, such as whether the mental state of a pilot should be a concern, or whether a mentally unstable flight crew member has ever caused serious injuries or deaths to airline passengers.

AirSafe.com not aware of any reliable, publicly available information about the number of pilots in the US or elsewhere who have been removed from flight status due to some kind of psychological or psychiatric issue.

The information is more clear when it comes to cases where an airliner crashed as a result of deliberate flight crew actions. Quite simply, there are no proven events where an airline pilot's deliberate actions or mental state led to the deaths of one or more passengers.

There has been at least one case of a pilot deliberately crashing an airliner.

On 11 October 1999, an Air Botswana pilot, who had been grounded for medical reasons, took off alone in an Air Botswana ATR42 airliner, and crashed it into two of the airline's other ATR42s on the ground. Fortunately, there was no one else in the other two aircraft. The pilot was the only person killed in this event.

There were two other crashes that many in the aviation community suspected were caused by pilot actions, but investigative authorities found no conclusive evidence that they were deliberately caused by one of the pilots. On 31 October 1999, an EgyptAir 767 en route from New York to Cairo, crashed in the Atlantic, killing all 217 on board. The NTSB concluded that the airplane's departure from normal cruise flight and subsequent impact with the Atlantic Ocean was a result of the first officer's flight control inputs, but could not determine a reason for the first officer's actions.

On 17 December 1997, a SilkAir 737, traveling between Jakarta and Singapore, crashed into a river, killing all 104 people on board. While there was ample evidence that the captain was under great personal stress, and indications that both the cockpit voice recorder and flight data recorder were turned off prior to the crash, there was no evidence that either pilot deliberately brought the aircraft down.

These past events, as well as the most recent event involving Air Canada, remind the public that while there's always a possibility that a pilot would deliberately put passengers or aircraft at risk, there have been no passenger deaths or serious injuries associated with incidents where such behavior was proven.

For more information on the Air Canada event, including the incident report from the Irish Air Accident Investigation Unit and a podcast about this event, visit [www.airsafe.com/events/airlines/aircan.htm](http://www.airsafe.com/events/airlines/aircan.htm).

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