

Guns on planes

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

It is a horrifying scenario: A gun goes off inside a crowded jetliner in flight, piercing the aircraft's skin or a window, rapidly depressurizing the cabin and possibly leading to catastrophe for all aboard.

A government spokesman said on Monday that US Airways Flight 1536 from Denver to Charlotte, N.C., on Saturday, with 124 passengers and five crew members, was never in such danger when a .40-caliber semiautomatic pistol belonging to the pilot went off in an "accidental discharge" as the Airbus A319 was on approach into Charlotte. Thankfully, the plane landed without further incident and no injuries, but with a bullet hole visible just below the cockpit window.

The same government spokesman said on Tuesday that the pilot may have mishandled the firearm, noting that it is "an extremely safe and reliable weapon" that is "not going to discharge on its own."

Airline and government officials are saying little else, pending completion of an investigation.

But the questions surrounding this incident are many, and troubling. Chief among them: If the pilot did in fact mishandle the weapon, what on earth was he doing handling it in the first place while also trying to land the plane?

This was the first reported incident of discharge of a weapon issued under a federal program allowing pilots to carry a firearm. Pilots who wish to participate must take a psychological test and a week of training.

The program was a highly controversial provision tucked into major air-safety legislation enacted in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The key regulatory agency at the time opposed the program, in part because of the potential for accidents, but it was vigorously sought by pilots. In the end, Congress overrode the agency's opposition.

One troubling incident does not demand the end of the program. But it does demand a full public accounting and, if necessary, program changes and heads to roll.

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