

Recalculating the Safety Equation

By Capt. Duane Woerth, ALPA President

A few months ago, I told you of the promising future for air travel as the Next-Generation Air Transportation System (NGATS) is implemented. If the U.S. government and airline industry build NGATS by 2020, the U.S. national air-space system capacity will triple.



This month, I want to discuss one of the central challenges we will face as airline traffic grows to fill that capacity. If traffic triples, we will need to slash the accident and incident rates by two-thirds just to keep the current frequency of accidents and incidents from increasing. Two-thirds! Slashing the very small current rate by that much will require more than three times the effort—truly a monumental challenge.

No one today can say how we are going to do that, but at our recent Air Safety Forum, I laid out two immediate steps that we all need to take—together as employees, regulators, legislators, and airline managements—to get a running start.

The first step is to banish the philosophy that fixing a problem isn't worth the cost until there's a smoking hole in the ground. Unfortunately, our industry has a long record of ignoring the warning signs until tragedy strikes.

One high-profile example is the traffic collision avoidance system. By the mid-1950s, ALPA was startled by the rate of midair collisions and called for rapid development of TCAS. But our call went unheeded even as spectacular disasters littered the ground. It took a series of fatal midair collisions to finally force the issue: first over San Diego, then over San Luis Obispo, and finally over Los Angeles.

At our Forum, I offered an example of a problem on which we can alter the old philosophy and work together for change: pilot fatigue. The NTSB has long recommended that the FAA modify its rules to address the safety concerns regarding fatigue. Over the decades, our pilot groups had to use negotiating capital to enact stronger protections in their contracts—essentially underwriting safety for their airlines.

The recent round of bankruptcies eviscerated pilots' contracts and eliminated the margins of safety that they had provided. Canadian regulations set no limit on the number of flying hours per day and permit extending the maximum flight duty day from 14 to 17 hours. That's simply too much.

The problem is real, and solutions exist. Airlines, regulators, and pilots must address this issue *now* and commit to change to make chronic, potentially dangerous fatigue a memory.

The second step to cutting the accident rate is for every



airline to fully commit to the Aviation Safety Action Program (ASAP) and the Flight Operational Quality Assurance (FOQA) program. Through ASAP, employees voluntarily report safety problems, and the program protects them from punitive action. FOQA programs routinely collect and analyze digital flight data gathered during operations, giving us critical precursors of risky trends long before they pose imminent danger.

ALPA has worked collaboratively with airlines and regu-

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lators to implement both programs. Airlines have found that they are a cost-effective means to detect and address emerging safety risks. These programs are the cornerstone of the Safety Management System (SMS) concept, which Transport Canada, the FAA, and ALPA actively encourage the airline community to adopt.

These programs must now go to the next level through data- and information-sharing efforts. Airlines need to understand the value of participating in the Voluntary Aviation Safety Information Sharing Process (VASIP), so that we can understand the risks that affect all airline operations.

Today, only 10 of the 40 ALPA-represented pilot groups have FOQA and ASAP; another 19 have ASAP alone; and 11 have neither—11 too many. It's time to implement *both* of these programs at every airline. I am putting everyone in the airline industry on notice: FOQA and ASAP are standard-issue, must-have items for airline safety. Accident prevention takes priority over employee punishment.

No matter where you fit into the ALPA structure—a junior first officer or senior captain, an elected representative or safety volunteer—you have a role to play to prepare for the future. Take action: file ASAP reports when appropriate; urge your management to adopt FOQA; push back when scheduling pushes you. Don't be a wallflower.

Only by taking concerted ALPA-wide action and leveraging the energy of tens of thousands of line pilots can we prepare for the opportunities and challenges of the coming decades.