

Allegiant Air execs at controls of flight that landed with low fuel

Richard N. Velotta, Las Vegas Review-Journal | JUL 29, 2015



An Allegiant airplane takes off from McCarran International Airport on Sunday, July 26 2015. (James Tensuan/Las Vegas Review-Journal) Follow James Tensuan on Twitter

Two Allegiant Air executives, the vice president of operations and the director of flight safety, were at the controls of the flight that made an [emergency landing last week because it was nearly out of fuel](#).

Greg Baden, Allegiant's vice president of operations, and Michael Wuerger, director of flight safety, government affairs and quality assurance, were flying Allegiant's Flight 426 from McCarran International Airport to the Fargo, N.D., Hector International Airport on July 23.

A representative of Allegiant confirmed that Baden and Wuerger were flying the plane, adding it is not uncommon for members of operations management to take flights to maintain their pilot status.

Allegiant said it is cooperating with the Federal Aviation Administration in an investigation of the emergency landing, which was complicated by the closure of the Fargo airport for a practice session of the Navy's Blue Angels precision flight team, which was preparing for an air show.

Flight 426, with 144 passengers and six crew members on board, left Las Vegas an hour behind schedule and couldn't reach Fargo before closure of the airspace.

While a transcript of the conversation between the Allegiant cockpit and Fargo's air traffic control center indicated the twin-engine MD-80 jet was dangerously low on fuel as it approached Fargo, Allegiant officials say the plane had 42 minutes of fuel remaining when it arrived at 1:02 p.m., Central Daylight Time.

Exchange with tower

The exchange between the plane and the tower, posted Tuesday on the LifeATC.net website, indicated that airline officials were trying to contact the tower by phone to get clearance to land, but were unsuccessful, leading to further conversation once the plane was within range of the Fargo tower. A portion of the conversation:

Flight 426: "Our company has been trying to call and we're down circling Fargo. We don't have enough fuel to go anywhere else. Our guys are trying to get in touch with the tower manager to coordinate our landing or I'm going to have to declare an emergency and come in and land."

Fargo tower: "There'll be a window opening in about 20 minutes for a landing."

Flight 426: "Yeah, I don't have 20 minutes."

Fargo tower: "Roger, unless there is an emergency, there's Grand Forks Airport which is 70 miles to the north."

Flight 426: "Yeah, listen we're at bingo fuel here in about three to four minutes. I've got to come in and land."

("Bingo fuel" is a military slang term meaning "running on empty.")

Fargo tower: "You'll have to declare an emergency for that and we would coordinate to get you in."

The controller then told the pilots they should have known the airport was going to be closed before they left Las Vegas. Notices about the Fargo airspace closing were first posted in December and the FAA issued an advisory for pilots 72 hours before the closure. Pilots are required to review such notices before flying.

The cockpit responded, "OK, yeah. We'll follow up on that."

Allegiant said the pilot made the decision to declare an emergency, allowing the flight to land immediately at Fargo rather than continuing attempts to coordinate a landing, which would have caused the aircraft to begin burning its reserve fuel.

Tower asks Navy planes to move

The tower asked the Navy flight team to move out of the way of the arriving Allegiant plane.

"It is unsafe for pilots to land aircraft with minimum fuel reserves, which would have been the situation had our pilot waited 20 minutes to land," an Allegiant spokesman said in an email. "In order to avoid any risk to the safety of the passengers and crew, our pilot wanted to land the

plane with more than sufficient fuel available and declared an emergency in order to land as quickly as possible."

Federal regulations require airlines to have enough fuel to get to their destination airport, a pre-designated diversion airport plus an additional 45 minutes of flying time.

An Allegiant pilot who requested anonymity said Baden has been an advocate for the airline's flights operating with minimal fuel reserves to enable the aircraft to be lighter and more efficient.

Pilots can request additional fuel for flights in preparation for diversions due to bad weather or other unexpected conditions. But pilots say acquiring additional fuel often results in an argument with dispatchers and delays, and they instead take off with less fuel than they initially wanted.

The pilot said the two executives flew Flight 426 because the airline is short of qualified pilots.

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