Ten years after Comair crash

Andrew Wolfson, Courier-Journal | August 26, 2016

Ten years after Comair Flight 5191 took off from the wrong runway at Lexington’s Blue Grass Airport and crashed, killing 49 people, the Federal Aviation Administration still hasn’t mandated one of the key safety reforms recommended after the disaster: That airlines install moving map displays in the cockpit of every aircraft or an automatic system that alerts pilots when they are attempting to take off on a runway other than the one intended.

Deborah Hersman, the former chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, which made the recommendation, said in an interview this week that if the Comair crew had gotten such an alert, “It would have saved 49 lives.”

“This is a tragedy that didn’t need to happen,” she said.

The recommendation was one of 11 made after the crash and the only one that has not been adopted.

“Consumers have an expectation that someone is looking out for their safety,” said Hersman, now president and CEO of the National Safety Council. She said she is frustrated that the FAA had not mandated the equipment.

FAA spokesman Les Dorr said in an email that the FAA has "promoted" use of moving map displays for U.S. airlines and has streamlined the process for installing the technology in cockpits. But he said the cost of retrofitting the commercial fleet would be significant and that the research on them has not been conclusive.
"Meanwhile, the FAA has put in place many other safety enhancements that reduce the risk of runway incursions and takeoffs from incorrect runways," the statement says.

Records show that after first claiming the technology was not “mature,” the agency then said it required testing. But after the results were in, it said it would rely on airlines to adopt it voluntarily.

Lexington police Officer Adrienne Thomasson stood by a piece of wreckage from Comair Flight 5191. Media representatives were escorted to the crash site, where the smell of jet fuel lingered. August 29, 2006 (Photo: Michael Clevenger/The CJ)

The NTSB in 2014 finally gave up, closing the recommendation and describing the FAA’s response as “unacceptable.”

In an interview, David Silas, of Montgomery, Ala., whose mother, Mary Jane, was killed in the crash, said it is disappointing that the government didn’t mandate that reform.

Silas and Hersman both plan to attend a memorial service Saturday in Lexington for the 10th anniversary of the accident, which killed everyone aboard except for the co-pilot, James Polehinke, who was at the controls and suffered severe injuries.

The Comair flight had been cleared before takeoff on runway 22, which is 7,003 feet long, but the crew mistakenly taxied onto runway 26, which is only 3,500 feet long, and attempted to take off. It ran off the end of the runway, struck the airport perimeter fence and trees, and was destroyed on impact, bursting into flames.

The NTSB later found that the flight crew missed multiple cues and markings that should have told them they were on the wrong runway. The crew also failed to cross-check instruments and
engaged in extraneous conversation that had nothing to do with the takeoff. The board also found that the FAA had failed to require air traffic controllers to issue specific clearances for crossing runways and had not addressed controller fatigue and training issues.

At the time of the crash, there was only one controller in the airport tower — rather than the required two — and he was doing administrative work when the plane took off, though the NTSB did not cite that as a contributing factor in the crash.

The disaster did prompt a host of changes designed to prevent a similar one.

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Shortly after the crash, the FAA issued an industrywide "call to action," leading to a ban on commercial flight takeoffs from unlighted runways.

In June 2010, the FAA established a rule that pilots must receive specific clearances from controllers for each runway intersection or crossing.

The agency embarked on a multiyear project upgrading runway markings and lighting at large and small airports, a program completed in December 2010.

And after years of work, the FAA and the National Air Traffic Controllers Association signed an agreement in July to implement policies to combat air traffic controller fatigue.

Hersman said the recommendation for moving maps or an alert system was designed to give pilots better “situational awareness.”

She said there was construction underway at the Lexington airport and the crew, which used paper maps carried in flight bags, did not have ones that were updated.

She said that while the technology was still being developed at the time, “today every one of us has it on our smartphones.”

While several manufacturers make the technology now, Perry Flint, a spokesman for the International Air Transport Association, a trade group for the airline industry, said it doesn’t track how many use it.

One company, Hilton Software, has marketed its “Smart Taxi” device on its website with an audio recording of what the Comair pilots would have heard if they had the software:

“On Runway 26,” the recording says. “3,400 feet remaining.”

Customer-service manager Jim Sweeney said the company’s current product, known as WingX, a $75-a-year software package, shows pilots where they are on the airfield and lights taxiways and runways in different colors as the aircraft enters them.

Phoenix-based Honeywell Aerospace said its Runway Advisory and Awareness System offers an “easy-to-install system with aural alerts to increase the flight crew’s situation awareness during ground and air operations relative to the runway.”
Steve Brecken, a spokesman for Honeywell, said the system is designed for all Boeing and Airbus commercial and business aircraft, but he said he couldn’t disclose the price for competitive reasons and he didn’t respond to a question about how many airlines use it.

Other software is designed for use on smartphone and tablets and is frequently employed by general aviation pilots, but avionics experts said pilots on many airlines aren’t permitted to use it.

Vaughn Jennings, a spokesman for Airlines for America, which represents domestic carriers, said an industry-government partnership dubbed Commercial Aviation Safety Team has taken a number of voluntary steps to develop and implement the use of moving map display and runway awareness systems, which he said are already in use or being implemented by carriers.

Hersman said the problem with the FAA’s decision to make use voluntary is that airlines that lean toward safety are likely to do so but marginal carriers will not.

The NTSB issues recommendations without regard to cost; the FAA considers comments from safety groups and the aviation industry before it issues regulations adopting them.

Hersman said that in fairness to the FAA, federal regulations of all types can only be enacted after a cost-benefit analysis that shows they are worth the cost.

She said that because air travel is already so safe, it is hard to show that additional technology will save lives.

“The problem when you put safety through a cost-benefit analysis is that you are almost waiting for another plane full of people to be killed," she said. "Then you can justify the costs.”

NOTE: the following pages include 17 photos from 'Gallery: A look back at Comair Flight 5191, 10 years later'.

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<th>COMAIR MEMORIAL SERVICE</th>
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<td><strong>WHAT:</strong> Memorial service for victims of Comair crash.</td>
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<td><strong>WHEN:</strong> 10 a.m. Saturday.</td>
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<td><strong>WHERE:</strong> University of Kentucky Arboretum, 500 Alumni Drive in Lexington.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PARKING:</strong> Attendees are advised to park in the lots close to Commonwealth Stadium. Visitors will be shuttled to the arboretum for free.</td>
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<td><strong>SEATING:</strong> Bring lawn chairs since seating is limited.</td>
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A portion of the nose of the aircraft.
August 29, 2006 Michael Clevenger/ The Courier-Journal

The flight data recorder from Comair Flight 5191, foreground, and the cockpit voice recorder are carried in to National Transportation Safety Board headquarters in Washington, Aug. 27, 2006. A commuter jet taking off for Atlanta crashed just past the runway and burst into flames, killing 49 people before dawn Sunday and leaving the lone survivor in critical condition. The flight data recorder and cockpit recorder from the Comair jet were carried into National Transportation Safety Board headquarters. Kevin Wolf, AP
A tree that was snapped near the base from flight 5191. Crash investigators walk in the background. August 29, 2006 Michael Clevenger/ The Courier-Journal

Jeff Garris, left, with Lexington fire, and Lewis McClain, Frankfort fire, examine a portion of wreckage of Flight 5191. August 29, 2006 Michael Clevenger/ The Courier-Journal
A police officer guards the crash site of a Delta aircraft that crashed at Bluegrass Airport in Lexington. Ross Mantle, The Courier-Journal

A portion of the landing gear rests in a field approximately 100 yards from the remainder of the wreckage. August 29, 2006 Michael Clevenger/ The Courier-Journal
Crash site west of a 3,500-foot runway 26 at Lexington airport. August 27, 2006  Michael Hayman

Lexington police Officer Adrienne Thomasson stood by a piece of wreckage from Comair Flight 5191. Media representatives were escorted to the crash site, where the smell of jet fuel lingered. August 29, 2006  Michael Clevenger/ The Courier-Journal
Memorial service for airport employees at Bluegrass Airport on Aug. 29, 2006. Arza Barnett/ The Courier-Journal

A somber crowd at the memorial service for victims of flight 5191 at Southland Christian Church in Lexington. Seven families at the church had family members in the crash. Sept 3, 2006  Michael Hayman
Six-year-old Dylan Welch snuggles against his mother, Amy, at the memorial to air crash victims at Blue Grass Airport in Lexington. Relatives and friends of the crash victims held a private memorial service at the Lexington Opera House. August 31, 2006 Michael Hayman, The Courier-Journal

A memorial set up by airport employees at Bluegrass Airport for those lost in the Comair crash. August 29, 2006 Arza Barnett/ The Courier-Journal
UK Arboretum unveiled a sculpture by Douwe Blumberg on Aug. 27, 2011, made in memorial for the 49 passengers that lost their lives in Comair flight 5191 in 2006. Jonathan Palmer, Special to the Courier-Journal

Five years after the Comair Flight 5191 crashed, a memorial sculpture by Douwe Blumberg was erected in Lexington. Here, Karen, left, Wayne, and Neely Turner visit the memorial made for the 49 passengers that lost their lives in 2006. Wayne Turner was the brother of victim Dr. Larry Turner of Lexington. Saturday, Aug. 27, 2011 By Jonathan Palmer, Special to the Courier-Journal
Roller skates left on a bench near the grave of Mike Finley in London starkly illustrate the void left in towns and cities across Kentucky, where most of the victims of Comair Flight 5191 lived. Finley owned Finley’s Roller Rink in London, where two generations of Laurel County youngsters learned to skate. He had expanded the business to sites in Danville and Somerset. By Michael Clevenger, The Courier-Journal

Barry McKee hugged his grandson Caleb after a memorial service in 2007 to honor the victims that were killed on Comair Flight 5191 in Lexington. McKee’s wife, Linda, was killed in the plane crash. Matt Stone/The Courier-Journal
The charred remains of a section of the Comair jet stood as a somber monument to the destruction and devastation of the crash, which occurred after the plane tried to take off from a runway that was too short. The co-pilot was the only survivor of the 50 people aboard. Michael Clevenger The Courier-Journal