

'I Don't Like To Fly'

A Top Air-Safety Cop On Why Off-Brand Airlines, Spotty Inspections And Control-Tower Snafus Worry Her

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ONE OF THE MOST DISTURBING FLIGHTS I EVER TOOK was on a perfectly safe plane. The Delta L-1011 was flying in a fierce August thunderstorm on approach to Dallas in 1985. Suddenly, the pilot came on the loudspeaker, his voice cracking. "There's been an . . ." and then there was a long pause. No one in the plane said a word. Then the pilot finally said, "There's been an incident" ahead of us. After being diverted partway to another airport, we circled back to Dallas. As we descended, we could see the wreckage of a plane sticking out of the ground in the distance. We taxied to a gate next to the one where the other plane had been scheduled to park. As we filed into the terminal, there were dozens of crying people who had just heard the news: Delta Flight 191 had crashed, killing 137 people. We had been flying directly behind it -- on the same type of aircraft and on the same airline.

The terrible ValuJet crash near Miami last week is a powerful and tragic reminder of what can go wrong -- any time, on any plane. My job is helping to police the country's skies, and the more I learn, the more troubled I become. I got interested in aviation very early on. I took my first flight at the age of 10, in a six-seater flying over Pioneer, Ohio, and I got my pilot's license when I was 18. Yet I keep seeing the holes in the safety net -- gaps in regulation and oversight that can produce spectacular cases like ValuJet. My job at the Department of Transportation is to investigate problems and fix them -- a great position for a former prosecutor with a passion for planes. In more than five years, we have found serious deficiencies in airline inspections, parts and training, and in the air-traffic-control system. We recently discovered that, rather than checking every aircraft, many inspectors simply examine whatever plane happens by when they are on duty. One plane was inspected 200 times in one year; others not at all. That was not as shocking as when we convicted a New Age guru of fraud this year after he received \$1.4 million from the FAA to give management courses. (Among other things, the cult believes in UFOs.) The truth is, like many Americans who are reading more and more about failing air-traffic systems, near misses and disasters like the ValuJet and the unsolved 737 crashes in Pittsburgh and Colorado Springs, I don't like to fly.

But I do. I am, however, a very careful consumer. I go out of my way to stay off commuter planes. I have skipped conferences because I would not fly on marginal airlines (and because of its many mishaps, I also avoided flying on ValuJet). In recent years, small commuter planes have been more than twice as likely to be involved in an accident as the major carriers, and until this year the FAA allowed them to operate under significantly less stringent safety standards. Weather is also a major factor. If there is a thunderstorm with high winds -- if I see a mass of red on the Weather Channel radar scope -- I simply take a later flight. If you look at the crash statistics, bad weather is a major problem.

I do not want to just spread doom and gloom. I have great faith in the major U.S. carriers. They have a terrific safety record. They have risen above the FAA's shortcomings. When DOT wanted to crack down on the use of bogus plane parts, the U.S. carriers stepped up long before the FAA -- which is part of Transportation -- would. Airlines backed us in Congress, even when the legislation cost them money. They figured out that safety sells.

Still, flying can be nerve-racking. One especially unlucky summer day several years ago, I was going from Kansas City to San Francisco. From my seat, I noticed mechanics trying to reattach a piece of the plane's metal skin with duct tape. I pushed the flight attendant's button and said I would like to get off the plane. They would not let me, but other passengers spoke up, too. Hours later, the airline took the plane out of service. Fortunately, flying days like that are not the norm. But they -- like the disturbing images of debris in the Everglades -- are reason enough to worry.

Trouble in the skies

In the last 13 years, there have been 255 commercial-airline accidents in the United States. A

breakdown of what went wrong:

Known Causes of Accidents from 1983-1996 by Percentage*

Flight Crew.....	38.4
Mechanical.....	23.9
Maintenance.....	7.5
Weather.....	17.3
Traffic controllers.....	3.1
Other.....	24.3

*Due to multiple-cause accidents, count total exceeds 100 percent.

Source: National Transportation and Safety Board

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