

CONTROLLER ASLEEP AT REAGAN NATIONAL AIRPORT- SOME QUESTIONS

First question- Was the decision to land, made by the United and American flight crews, a safe one?

The answer is an emphatic yes. We have been landing airplanes without Air Traffic Control since the Wright brothers did it in North Carolina a long time ago. In any case, these flights were communicating with and under the watchful radar eye of the TRACON located near Warrenton Virginia. In fact, would it surprise you to know that airlines schedule flights every day to airports that either don't have a control tower, or the tower is closed when they arrive.

Back in the day when I flew for the largest airline in the world, we used to fly a late night trip to Saginaw, Michigan from ORD in Chicago. We were given a Cruise Clearance and didn't talk to anyone after leaving the Chicago area until we had landed. All this with a load of passengers.

Second Question- Would it have been safer if the Controller was awake for the landings?

Sure it would have been safer but, by how much? The real question is did the operation take on too much risk and what were the alternatives? Both flights could have gone to Dulles or BWI and landed with a fully operational control tower. But then the passengers would not have been where they were supposed to be. A somewhat costly problem for American and United Airlines. At that late hour, air traffic was almost non-existent, so the risk of collision was minimal at best, and remember they were being watched by radar and talking to the radar controllers. Could there have been something on the runway the pilots didn't see? Sure, but at night unless that something is wearing a blinking light, the tower controller won't see it anyway. Yes, it would have been safer, but I think the extra risk was well within the acceptable level for a safe operation. There can never be a flight with no risk. Flight crews make hundreds of decisions every flight, weighing the risks, and almost invariably make the correct decisions. And that's what these crews did.

Third question- Should control towers ever be manned by just one person?

It's probably not a good idea to ever put just one person in a safety sensitive position, whether it's manning a control tower or running a nuclear power plant. You can fall asleep at the wheel of a car, or operating a boat, or manning a control tower. And what happens if you get sick because you ate something that didn't go down so well, or something more serious like a heart attack.

Consider how close Reagan National is to very sensitive places like the White House, Capital Building and Pentagon, all of which have been targets of terrorists using airplanes. This is probably the last place you want just one controller on duty.

Fourth Question- Has this ever happened at Reagan National before?

Yes, on December 24, 2007, the tower was unmanned for nearly an hour during the 12 to 6 AM shift, when the controller walked out of the cab and left his access card inside by mistake. During that hour four aircraft safely landed.

Fifth Question- Has there ever been a serious accident as a result of there being only one controller on duty?

Yes, the most recent was in August 2006 at the Lexington, KY airport when Comair Flight 191 took off on the wrong runway. It was not noticed by either the flight crew or the single controller on duty. Forty-eight people lost their lives. According to the NTSB, part of blame belongs to having just one controller on duty.

Captain Roy Liggett