AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLERS MAKING MAJOR ERRORS REMAIN ON JOB, INCLUDING AT IAH

News / Airlines

At airports and flight control centers around the country, **air traffic controllers** who have made **major errors** have been allowed to stay on the **job**, without loss of rank or pay, Channel 2 Investigates has found.

Some of those mistakes have been highlighted in federal probes as contributing factors in catastrophic commercial and general aviation accidents.

"So you can make an error that causes a plane to crash and you're not losing your job?" KPRC 2 News reporter Joel Eisenbaum asked.

"That's correct," said Pete Burgess, a former Federal Aviation Administration manager and current aviation industry consultant.

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When questioned by Channel 2 Investigates, the FAA declined to cite a single instance where an air traffic controller had been fired for incompetence.

The FAA instead provided insight into how the agency handles such mistakes in general.

"The FAA has learned through experience that a non-punitive safety culture encourages employees to share information and engage in frank and open discussions about situations that they might otherwise be reluctant to bring to a supervisor's attention," the statement from an FAA representative reads. "In cases involving willful neglect or dereliction of duties by an employee, the agency does not hesitate to take the appropriate measures as defined under agency policies and collective bargaining agreements."

A recently retired veteran air traffic controller who worked at Houston's Air Route Traffic Control was faulted in a 2009 fatal crash.

Mike Farrior, of Houston, was responsible for separating and guiding aircraft flying in Texas air space.

According to FAA guidelines, he was also responsible for providing inclement weather information to pilots as a secondary responsibility.

The NTSB found Farrior did not fulfill his duties regarding relaying important weather information. He was also found to have transposed call signs and was not wearing his glasses, as required, at the time of the accident.

Four people died when the twin-engine Beechcraft hit heavy weather and crashed west of Corpus Christi. Christina Schippers lost her husband, Rick, and her stepson, Shane, in the crash.

"I was devastated. They were so nonchalant. 'Where were your glasses?' 'Oh, in my desk drawer,'" Schippers said.

Farrior, the air traffic controller in question, spoke to Channel 2 Investigates candidly about the accident.

"It was a horrible thing. I am very sorry there was loss of life. It was a busy day. There were a lot of planes going on," Farrior said.

Farrior said he went through retraining following the accident, but received no demotion or loss of base pay following the incident.

One of Farrior's colleagues, who in a civil deposition could not explain why he did not speak up when he noticed the Beechcraft headed into trouble, remains on the job at IAH's Air Route Traffic Control Center.

Channel 2 Investigates found air traffic controllers in cities across the U.S. who have kept their jobs after making notable mistakes.

In 2009, a Teterboro air traffic controller was faulted for monitoring his air space while carrying on a conversation with his girlfriend.

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A mid-air collision between a plane and a helicopter over the Hudson River was partially attributed to Carlyle Turner's "non-pertinent telephone conversation."

An FAA employee directory showed that Turner is now employed in air traffic control operations in Virginia.

"So when an actual accident happens, (what is) the very worst of the worst?" Eisenbaum asked.

"They don't do anything," Burgess said.

An FAA representative released the following statement

"The Federal Aviation Administration developed a robust Safety Management System to analyze all incidents and accidents. In this particular situation, the agency conducted a thorough review and identified ways to improve the dissemination of weather information to pilots. Those improvements were put in place immediately, and included enhanced training for all air traffic controllers and supervisors in the Houston Air Route Traffic Control Center."

"The FAA has learned through experience that a non-punitive safety culture encourages employees to share information and engage in frank and open discussions about situations that they might otherwise be reluctant to bring to a supervisor's attention. As a result, the agency is confident that the overall safety of the air traffic system remains the highest priority of all involved."

"In cases involving willful neglect or dereliction of duties by an employee, the agency does not hesitate to take the appropriate measures as defined under agency policies and collective bargaining agreements."

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