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Air Traffic Kid Not the 1st Safety Lapse

JFK Incident May Point to Bigger Problem; Air Safety Officials Forgetting "It's Every Rule Every Time"

(CBS/AP)

For the third time in seven months, the judgment of those who operate the nation's air traffic control system has been called into question and raised concerns that the system may not be as safe as officials claim.

While major air crashes have declined sharply over the last decade, thanks largely to improved technology, aviation safety experts say they are seeing signs that complacency may be causing controllers and their supervisors to bend rules and relax their vigilance.

The latest incident was reported this week: A controller twice brought a child to work at the control tower at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, one of the nation's busiest airports, and allowed the child to radio instructions to pilots. The Federal Aviation Administration said Wednesday the controller and his supervisor have been suspended pending an investigation of the incident last month.

The boy, whose name and age haven't been disclosed, was apparently supervised by his father, a controller named Glenn Duffy, reports **CBS News correspondent Sharyl Attkisson**. Late Wednesday, the FAA told CBS that Duffy also allowed another child to interact with pilots the next night - one who sounds even younger than the first.

Duffy has not been seen or heard from publically since the incident, and family members tell **CBS News** they've not heard from him, either.

The problem extends to airline pilots as well. In several recent accidents - the crash of a regional airliner in upstate New York a year ago that killed 50 people is one example - pilots broke a cardinal safety rule prohibiting nonessential conversation during landing approaches.

"The hair is beginning to stand up on the back of our necks a little bit," said Jack Casey, an aviation safety consultant and former airline pilot. "When you get complacency, you run a higher risk of having an accident."

Other recent incidents:

- In October, several controllers handed off responsibility for a Northwest Airlines jet without alerting the next controller that they had been unable to make radio contact with the plane. Supervisors also failed to follow procedures for alerting a national security communications network to the problem. As a result, the Airbus A320 carrying 144 passengers was out of radio contact for 69 minutes before the security network was alerted. Rules put in place after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks are supposed to trigger an alert when a plane can't be raised by radio for 10 minutes.
- Last August, an air traffic controller at Teterboro Airport in New Jersey who handed off a private plane to controllers at a neighboring airport failed to correct the plane's pilot when he read back the wrong radio frequency. Controllers at both airports later tried unsuccessfully to reach the pilot. The plane collided moments later with a tour helicopter over the Hudson River. Three people in the plane and six in the helicopter were killed. The Teterboro controller was chitchatting on the phone with a female friend until seconds before the collision. The controller's supervisor had left the airport to run a personal errand.

The incidents suggest a casualness about rules that undermines safety, said Carol Carmody, a former National Transportation Safety Board member and former FAA official.

"If they don't follow fairly rigid procedures, they're going to make mistakes," Carmody said. "If you are in the safety business, you make a big deal out of anything like this because random events cause accidents."

Even more serious is that the controllers in the Teterboro and Kennedy incidents appear to have felt free to break rules, which suggests supervisors tolerated such lapses, said Michael Barr, who teaches aviation safety at the University of Southern California.

"It's a big deal," **Peter Goelz**, former managing staff director of the NTSB tells **CBS News correspondent Kelly Wallace**. "The reason we have the safest air system in the world is because it's made up of rules, checklists, and people are expected to follow it. Pilots, mechanics, controllers, ground handlers, people follow the rules, the traveling public is safe."

However some aviation experts say the JFK incident has been blown out of proportion, and that passengers were never actually in any danger.

"He was just letting the child speak the words for him," analyst Harley Carnes tells "**The Early Show**". "He wasn't off the job. He wasn't letting the child do the work."

FAA spokeswoman Laura Brown said the incidents were "isolated occurrences" and not indicative of a broader safety problem.

"The unfortunate behavior of a few individuals doesn't reflect the true caliber of our work force," she said.

The FAA is implementing a new program that encourages air traffic controllers to report safety problems, including their own mistakes, so that the agency can spot trends and act to prevent future problems, Brown said. To encourage reporting, controllers aren't punished for errors they identify.

The agency has had a similar program for pilots for nearly a decade.

FAA Administrator Randy Babbitt, in speeches and congressional testimony, has called on pilots and air traffic controllers to create a professional atmosphere in cockpits and radar facilities and not to tolerate rule-breaking by colleagues.

The NTSB is concerned enough about the situation that it has scheduled a forum this spring on pilot and air traffic controller professionalism.

In a statement responding to the Kennedy incident, the National Air Traffic Controllers Association - the union that represents controllers - said it doesn't "condone this type of behavior in any way."

But Mary Schiavo, a former Transportation Department inspector general who has filed a lawsuit against the FAA on behalf of the families of five Italian tourists killed in the Hudson River collision, said there needs to be a strong message sent from the top. She suggested Babbitt and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood call "an all-hands-on-deck meeting and make sure air traffic controllers know it's every rule every time.

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