

# Tampa Bay pilots grapple with aftermath of deadly Germanwings crash



Jamal Thalji, Times Staff Writer

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No U.S. airline pilot is believed to have ever done what German pilot Andreas Lubitz is accused of doing Tuesday: deliberately crashing a commercial airliner, killing himself and 149 others.

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Now Tampa Bay area pilots are wrestling with a stunning act they can barely comprehend.

"This is so far from the standard that professional pilots maintain and hold themselves to," said retired St. Petersburg airline pilot and aviation safety expert John Cox, 61. "It is almost indescribable."

The apparently intentional crash of Germanwings Flight 9525 into the Alps also raises questions about the American system for screening pilots for whatever afflicted Lubitz — and what could prevent the same deadly act from being committed aboard a U.S. passenger plane.

In the U.S., pilots are required to self-report any physical or mental health issues they have. Their fitness to fly is also scrutinized by their fellow pilots.

There are ways for concerned pilots to ask the airline or the union to intervene, evaluate, and ground a fellow pilot before that person is allowed

to fly.

Cox said he's had to intervene a handful of times when he thought another pilot was not up to the job. In those cases, he said, the other pilots were dealing with stress and lack of sleep from wrestling with medical issues at home.

That left them unable to concentrate on their duties. But they were eventually cleared to fly again.

"In all the cases that I'm personally aware of, that help is welcome," Cox said. "It's not as though you're ratting out a fellow colleague. You're actually getting them the help they need."

Airline pilot Mark Weinkrantz, 58, of Palm Harbor believes the U.S. system works because pilots make it work.

"I would rather hurt somebody's feelings," he said, "than go into the air with somebody I didn't feel comfortable flying with."

However, authorities have discovered that Lubitz did not disclose his medical issues to the airline. Investigators said they found in his home several doctor's notes that said Lubitz was too ill to work — including one given the day of the crash.

A group of concerned aviation experts and pilots believe the U.S. and European commercial airline industries do not have truly effective means of regularly evaluating the mental state of pilots.

"There really is no mental health vetting," veteran U.S. airline pilot John Gadzinski told the Associated Press.

While pilots undergo regular physicals, those doctors might only make a cursory examination of their mental health. They could ask a few questions or none at all. It's not at all standardized, critics say.

Gadzinski, who also flew for the Navy, said that in 29 years of being evaluated to fly, no flight surgeon has ever asked him about his mental state.

Former American Airlines pilot and executive Bob Kudwa put it this way to the Associated Press: "They don't do anything for your head, no."

But aviation psychologist Diane Damos, who screens the cognitive abilities of prospective pilots, doesn't think it's possible to screen the mental health of every single U.S. airline pilot.

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In 2013, according to the federal government, there were 74,000 airline pilots in the United States. Damos believes it would be too unwieldy, expensive and unreliable to systematically screen all of them on a regular basis.

"If you start taking some kind of written test and the pilots take it every six months, pretty soon everyone knows the questions and the test becomes useless," she said.

"The (other) problem is you're going to have false positives. So now we're going to have to spend a lot of resources investigating people that there is really nothing wrong with." Damos said that while psychiatric exams could discover those pilots who do need help, those tests cannot predict what pilots will need help in the future.

"I might look fine now," she said, "and a year from now I could be very clinically depressed."

But the U.S. does have a rule in place that could prevent a single pilot from taking the same deadly action that authorities think Lubitz took:

Two members of the air crew must be on the flight deck at all times. Governments and airlines across the world are quickly adopting that rule after the Germanwings incident.

Investigators think Lubitz locked the cockpit door after the captain left. They said the voice recorder detected pounding and yelling outside the cockpit door as the captain tried to re-enter the cockpit and then passengers started to panic.

But on a U.S. commercial airliner, a flight attendant is required to take the place of the captain or co-pilot if they needed to leave the flight deck.

In the end, Cox said, there's no getting around the fact that there are critical jobs that require humans to trust one another.

"You can engineer all the safeguards you want," he said. "But the deliberate act of a deranged individual is going to cause major harm, because society has to trust certain people to do high-risk jobs."