

AIRLINES

Wayward pilots say they were distracted by their laptops

■ Two Northwest Airlines pilots who overshot their destination by 150 miles drew much criticism after telling a federal probe that they were working on their laptops.

WASHINGTON — (AP) — Two Northwest Airlines pilots have told federal investigators that they were going over schedules using their laptop computers in violation of company policy while their plane overflew their Minneapolis destination by 150 miles, the National Transportation Safety Board said Monday.

The pilots — Richard Cole of Salem, Ore., the first officer, and

Timothy Cheney of Gig Harbor, Wash., the captain — said in interviews that they were not fatigued and didn't fall asleep, the board said in a statement.

Instead, Cole and Cheney told investigators that they both had their laptops out while the first officer, who had more experience with scheduling, instructed the captain on monthly flight crew scheduling. The pilots were out of communication with air traffic controllers and their airline for more than an hour and didn't realize their mistake until contacted by a flight attendant, the board said.

Many aviation safety experts

had said it was more plausible that the pilots had fallen asleep during the cruise phase of their flight last Wednesday night than that they had become so focused on a conversation that they lost awareness of their surroundings for such a lengthy period of time. Air traffic controllers in Denver and Minneapolis repeatedly tried without success to raise the pilots of the San Diego-to-Minneapolis flight by radio. Other pilots in the vicinity tried reaching the plane on other radio frequencies.

Their airline tried contacting them by using a radio text message that chimes.

Authorities became so alarmed that National Guard jets were readied for takeoff at two locations and the White House Situation Room alerted senior officials, who monitored Northwest Flight 188 with its 144 passengers and five crew members as the Airbus A320 flew across a broad swath of the mid-continent completely out of contact with anyone on the ground.

"It's inexcusable," said former NTSB Chairman Jim Hall. "I feel sorry for the individuals involved, but this was certainly not an innocuous event — this was a significant breach of aviation safety."