

Officials Query Pilots Who Missed Airport

By MATTHEW L. WALD

WASHINGTON — Federal investigators on Sunday questioned the captain and first officer of the Northwest Airlines airplane that overshot its destination by 110 miles on a flight Wednesday from San Diego to Minneapolis-St. Paul, but the officials gave no immediate public comments on what the pilots had said.

While some aviation experts have speculated that the pilots were napping, officials at Delta Air Lines, which absorbed Northwest in a merger last year, said privately that they were skeptical that the two men had been asleep. The pilots had a layover of about 17 hours in San Diego, airline employees pointed out, and while staying alert is a problem at some hours of the day, the idea that both could fall asleep in the late afternoon did not seem likely.

The pilots have not given any detailed public accounting of what happened, but there have been reports from other sources that before they landed, they told air traffic controllers that they had been involved in a heated discussion of company policy and had lost track of everything else. The pilots have not said publicly what that conversation was about.

One Delta pilot said on Sunday that the hot topic of discussion in



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First Officer Richard I. Cole on Friday was interviewed by federal investigators Sunday.

Seeking answers after a plane flew 110 miles past its destination.

the cockpits of the company's planes lately had been the integration of procedures between Delta and Northwest. Delta is standardizing its checklists and procedures, mostly by imposing its operating rules on the Northwest pilots, and this has given the Northwest pilots a lot of new in-

formation to absorb, the Delta pilot said.

The pilots of the flight, Northwest 188, Capt. Timothy B. Cheney, 53, of Gig Harbor, Wash., and First Officer Richard I. Cole, 54, of Salem, Ore., were interviewed in the Minneapolis area on Sunday.

Keith Holloway, a spokesman for the federal Transportation Safety Board, said that investigators would interview the flight attendants in the next few days. People involved in the investigation said the pilots had been alerted by a flight attendant using the plane's interphone system, who asked why they were not descending.

The plane, an Airbus A320 with 144 passengers and three flight attendants aboard, was above Eau Claire, Wis., before it turned around.

Investigators have removed the plane's cockpit voice recorder and given it a preliminary check. But the voice recorder may be of limited use because it captures only 30 minutes of sound, up to the time that the plane pulls up to the gate and the engines are shut off.

The Federal Aviation Administration has sent enforcement letters to the two pilots, which could be the first step in stripping them of their licenses. Delta has already suspended the pilots.