

Nation

Answers sought in Northwest mishap

Pilots' story in overshooting destination has precedent, but some experts doubt it

By Alan Levin
USA TODAY

As the jet descended toward Charlotte, the two pilots began a bitter discussion of the pardon two days earlier of former president Nixon.

"You can't have a (expletive) pardon for Nixon and the Watergate people," railed the captain. Minutes later, after a conversation that ranged from politics to used cars, the Eastern Airlines Douglas DC-9 slammed into the ground 3 miles from the airport. The crash on Sept. 11, 1974, killed 71 of the 82 people aboard.

As investigators try to determine why two pilots aboard a Northwest Airlines jet flew past their destination in Minneapolis on Wednesday night, there are at least some precedents for the pilots' assertion that an intense conversation distracted them.

In interviews with police, Capt.



By Jonathan Ernst, Getty Images

Evidence: Flight 188's voice and data recorders wait to be examined.

Timothy Cheney and co-pilot Richard Cole said they had been talking and had lost track of radio communications. Cole downplayed the incident in brief comments to reporters Saturday, saying it "was not a serious event."

Several pilots and aviation safety experts expressed doubts about the Northwest pilots' story. Another possibility — that the crew fell asleep — may be more plausible, they said.

"Having no contact with controllers for an hour and 18 minutes and overflying the destination by 150 miles is inexplicable," said Steve Wallace, a corporate pilot and retired Federal Aviation Administration accident investigation chief.

Staying in radio contact with controllers is so ingrained in pilots that it's hard to imagine a distraction lasting that long, Wallace said. More likely, he said, is some kind of incapacitation such as falling asleep.

Cheney and Cole were interviewed Sunday by National Transportation Safety Board investigators, spokesman Keith Holloway said. The safety board did not reveal anything about what the pilots said.

Delta Air Lines, which owns Northwest, has put the pilots on leave, and the FAA notified them that they could face revocation of their licenses.

Flight 188, which was carrying 144 passengers and five crewmembers from San Diego to Minneapolis, lost touch with controllers east of Denver. It then traversed the Plains, flew

across busy airways carrying flights to Chicago and crossed into Wisconsin before turning back to Minneapolis.

Just as distractions have caused accidents, there are ample examples of airline pilots falling asleep.

In 1999, American Airlines' pilots union, the Allied Pilots Association, documented several cases in which pilots had fallen asleep.

One unidentified pilot flying an overnight route to South America told the union he had dozed off: "When I woke up, I looked over at the captain. He was sound asleep. I estimate that we were both asleep for 30 minutes. Just lucky that nothing happened."

NASA's Aviation Safety Reporting System, which collects anonymous safety reports from pilots, outlines several dozen cases of pilots falling asleep. In August 2006, one captain reported falling asleep along with the co-pilot while preparing to land at Dulles International Airport near Washington, D.C.

Contributing: The Associated Press