

Letters

Flight Time Limitations

I am a professional airline pilot of 25 years standing, and have operated both short, medium and ultra-long haul flights. Consequently, I read with interest the article on flight time limitations (Out of the FOG, June 2006, *The Aerospace Professional*) by Dr Simon Bennett.

Dr Bennett is quite correct that the 900 hour annual limit was only ever legislated to allow airlines to meet acute (i.e. short-term) crewing needs, brought about by temporary problems such as rapid expansion by the airline, or widespread sickness within the pilots corps. It was never intended as a career-long rostering target and the evidence is that it is simply not sustainable in practical terms. Thirty years ago, a thorough study in the USSR concluded that no airline pilot should maintain a career roster flying more than an average of 650 hours per year.

The problem is that this is already known to the airline industry. The medical evidence already is conclusive but rostering presses on relentlessly towards the legal limits on the premise that "... since it is legal, it must be safe..."

And once airlines manage to roster effectively to the legal limit, they then seek to have the limits extended, either by lobbying governments to legislate, or by pressuring regulating civil authorities to do so by executive fiat.

And this is done habitually without either input from, or the knowledge of, airline pilots or the flying public — the two groups most directly affected adversely by any such change.

As pilots fly more, they fall sick more, which should self-regulate the problem. But in such circumstances, airlines — instead of recognising that they have a problem, and hiring more pilots to meet their scheduling needs — then resort to such devices as 'Absence Management Programmes' which contain punitive measures such as warning letters placed on individual pilots' personal files, deliberately awful individual rosters, denial of promotion, demotion or even outright dismissal for any sick pilot, who is — by refusing to fly — only carrying out his duty as demanded by legislation.

Indeed, for a pilot to fly when sick or excessively fatigued is criminal, both morally and legally. But to seek to intimidate pilots covertly into ignoring the law and compromising flight safety, so that airlines can meet their arbitrary

commercial targets, is even worse.

And if an accident or incident consequently occurs, the pilot is then blamed for failing to have observed his legally required duty of refusing any flight for which he believes himself to be unfit. This is easy enough — the pilot is usually not around to defend himself.

I was one of 49 pilots purportedly dismissed in July 2001 for no reason whatsoever. Indeed, my employer has since sworn that I committed no breach of contract (nor is any alleged), and that I was guilty of no misconduct (nor is any alleged).

Within days thereafter, new contracts were sent to all the remaining pilots with new rostering arrangements, with a two-week deadline within which to sign.

Professional airline pilots are conservative by nature and practice. Many of us are businessmen in our own rights and, both politically and industrially, we know that our continued employment in our chosen profession requires that the airlines for which we work remain financially healthy.

And we are many of us quite happy for the annual flight time limit to remain at around 900 hours, provided the laws are changed specifically and explicitly to recognise that this limit is NOT to be rostered on a regular or career basis.

Experience has taught that it is no good relying on the informal word of airlines to abide by such an undertaking; a verbal promise is not worth the paper it is (not) written upon!

But to this end, is it too much to ask that flight time limit legislation be altered so that additional clauses guarantee that:

- no pilot will fly during his career more than an average of, say, 700 hours per year, and;
- any period of flying amounting to between 700 hours and 900 hours within any given year of employment be limited to one year in a row, with no more than six such instances in any pilot's career, and;
- any dispensations or variations to the legal rostering limits be granted to any airline only with the agreement of (and not just after 'consultation' with) the affected pilot corps?

If airlines are going to respond that this will be too complex to administer, then let the absolute annual limit be lowered to no more than 700 hours, with no flexibility whatsoever.

Flight time limitations and flight safety are both far too important to be treated merely as the wish-list of



Eurofighter photo.

Could Eurofighter Typhoon be the end of the line for UK combat aircraft development?

airlines and to be altered at their commercial whim. There is a price to be paid for flight safety and it cannot and must not be paid in human lives.

How many more passengers and crew must die from the consequences of pilot fatigue before safer flight time limitations are enacted? And enforced?

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