BOSTON-BOUND AIRLINE PILOT DIES; CO-PILOT LANDS SAFELY IN NY

News / Airlines

An American Airlines captain became gravely ill and incapacitated while flying from Phoenix to Boston and later died, but his first officer safely diverted and landed the nearly 150-passenger plane, an airline spokeswoman said.

Passengers on the flight were told the pilot was sick and it was making an emergency landing in Syracuse, and they later learned of his death in a scenario that's rare but not unheard-of: Seven pilots for U.S. airlines and one charter pilot have died during flights since 1994, the Federal Aviation Administration says.

American Flight 550 left Phoenix at 11:55 p.m. local time Sunday and was diverted mid-flight, landing shortly after 7:00 a.m. EDT, American spokeswoman Andrea Huguely said. After the flight's captain was stricken, the first officer safely took over with 147 passengers and five crew members onboard.

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"American 550. Medical emergency. Captain is incapacitated," the first officer calmly told the Syracuse airport tower, requesting a runway to land.

In a recording of his exchange with the tower, he expresses concern whether ambulance medics can get on the plane quickly. He's assured they can and is told to go into a gate where the medics would meet the plane.

Details of the medical emergency and the identity of the dead pilot weren't immediately released, and the airline wouldn't say when the death occurred.

"We are incredibly saddened by this event, and we are focused on caring for our pilot's family and colleagues," the Fort Worth, Texas-based airline said.

A replacement crew was sent to Syracuse, and the plane, an Airbus A320, landed in Boston at 12:30 p.m.

Aviation experts said there was never any danger to passengers because pilots and co-pilots are equally capable of flying.

Former airline pilot John Cox, an aviation safety consultant, said when one pilot becomes unable to fly the other will rely on help from the plane's automated systems and get priority treatment from air traffic controllers.

"The passengers were not in danger, absolutely not," he said.

Passenger Louise Anderson, who was heading from Reno, Nevada, to Boston via Phoenix, said she had dozed off on the flight.

"What I woke up to was the flight attendant telling us we were making an emergency landing because the pilot was ill," she said.

She said rumors of the pilot's death circulated in the Syracuse airport but were confirmed only by an announcement on their makeup flight to Boston.

Anderson said the mood on board then was somber, but she commended the crew's handling of a tragic situation.

Airline pilots must pass physical exams every 12 months, every six months for captains 40 or older.

Captains and co-pilots usually take turns flying and doing takeoffs and landings, said former airline pilot James Record, who teaches aviation at Dowling College in Oakdale.

"The advantage to that is the co-pilot gets an equal amount of experience and the captain gets to see how the other guy flies," he said.

Record noted the co-pilot remained calm while describing the emergency and requesting permission from air traffic controllers to land.

"He was doing what he's trained to do - fly the plane," Record said. "He was probably more concerned with the health of his buddy, his crew member," than his ability to fly.

Modern airliners are capable of largely flying themselves. There's debate in aviation circles about whether over-reliance on automation is eroding pilots' flying skills. Incidents like Monday's help

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ensure regulators won't allow unmanned cockpits or unaccompanied pilots anytime soon.

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