

# CALLBACK

From NASA's Aviation Safety Reporting System



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## The COVID-19 CONFRONTATION

In the world of aviation, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,"<sup>1</sup> almost overnight. The COVID-19 virus has challenged and continues to change the face of aviation across the globe. As problems surface and solutions take shape, issues seem to contort daily. Today's most volatile concerns may soon become irrelevant. What is current today may be different tomorrow, and temporary policies or procedures may quickly become obsolete. The most current information and latest developments in the U.S. aviation response to COVID-19 may be found on the FAA website.<sup>2</sup>

Many COVID-19 induced changes are predictable. Contamination and disinfecting problems, scarcity of supplies, the lack of relevant procedures, and other difficulties posed by social distancing appear obvious. Not so evident are complications rooted in the obvious but discovered only as one problem begets another. They can also present as unanticipated side-effects of operating equipment in an unfamiliar manner as the result of an individual or industry response to combat the virus.

As air traffic is severely curtailed, ASRS reporting has declined as well, although not to the same extent. ASRS has received COVID-19 reports over the past several months, identifying both obvious and less conspicuous problems encountered by aviation professionals. We expect more in coming months and well into the future, and we invite the reader to explore additional COVID-19 related incidents as they become available in the ASRS Database Online.<sup>3</sup>

This month, *CALLBACK* presents a few COVID-19 reports for rumination that may not fall clearly into the obvious category. Now, in early stages of restoring economies, as aviation evolves and guidance, procedures, and regulations adapt, we ponder what changes will come next, which ones will linger, and how well aviation will fare.

### Letting Your Guard Down

This air carrier Captain discusses a simple, but significant incident and the seductive threat that contributed to the event. Empty skies and airplanes induced by COVID-19 were factors.

■ *I am submitting this report to address two things: (1) My crew accepting a takeoff clearance when ATC called us*

*by the wrong callsign, and (2) A general lack of alertness that I am seeing on the line as a result of these extremely irregular times.*

*We were number 1 at the hold short [line]. ... We were the only aircraft out there. Nobody else was in line or even within 300 yards of the runway. ATC issued a takeoff clearance for the runway, and the callsign was very similar to ours. My First Officer (FO) accepted the clearance (reading back the correct callsign), and off we went. In retrospect, I believe that ATC referred to us as Company XXX (not YXX). This became clear to me when he said it again and corrected himself while switching us to Departure. There was no doubt in my mind that the clearance was intended for us, because we were the only ones there. ... I still should have clarified it. The takeoff was uneventful.*

*I believe that a factor in this event is the fact that all of us are becoming a little too complacent with [few] people on each flight and virtually no other traffic around us. Every flight is starting to feel like that delayed 2 a.m. departure, where the usual tension of flying aircraft tends to go away with direct clearances that, [otherwise], never happen and communications that are a bit too relaxed. We are letting our guard down at a time when we can ill afford it.*

*I should have stopped and asked the Controller to clarify. Even though I was 100 percent sure that the clearance was intended for us, I let my guard down. Verify that clearance was for Company YXX. He says, "Oops, sorry." We read it back, and off we go. If we weren't the only ones there, or the field was more complicated or congested, that could have bitten us. As a group we need to rededicate ourselves to being careful and methodical in our flying. Our airline and our industry are already hanging on by a thread. I can't imagine a worse time to add an accident to the mix. Nothing changes just because the aircraft or the airport or the sky is virtually empty. We need to do things the right way - the professional way. Anything less leaves our Company and our futures to chance.*

### Uncharted Performance

Missed level-off altitudes and RAs are predictable in a lightly loaded aircraft. This air carrier Captain experienced another type of problem, albeit less anticipated.

■ While climbing above FL320 to FL400, we outclimbed the pressurization ability of the aircraft and received a DIFF PRESS warning message. The cabin pressure did not exceed 8.6 psi. About 30 seconds before the warning, I noticed our climb rate to be above 3,000 feet per minute. I glanced at the cabin pressure and saw it was at 8.4 psi with a 600 foot per minute climb. I asked the FO, who was the Pilot Flying (PF), to reduce the climb rate, as there had been company communication recently that it was possible to exceed the cabin pressure differential limitation while flying with few passengers during the pandemic. We had four passengers aboard. About 10 seconds after the FO went into VERTICAL SPEED mode to reduce the climb rate, we received the warning. We followed the QRH procedure, which got the pressure differential under control and controlled the pressurization in MANUAL mode for the remainder of the flight. I sent an ACARS to the Dispatcher and to Maintenance and had [Maintenance] meet the aircraft at the arrival airport.

The recent pandemic has seen us carrying fewer and fewer passengers, and...we are seeing aircraft performance every day that we would have rarely seen. As such, we are not conditioned to look at the climb rate of the aircraft in regard to the pressure differential. There had been some recent company communication that reminded us of this issue, which I remembered when I saw the rate of climb of the aircraft versus the rate of climb of the cabin.... I merely noticed and asked the FO to reduce the rate of climb. It was too late to stop the warning from occurring. After the event, I went and looked at the memo again, and I will pay more attention to reducing my rate of climb once above FL300 from now on.

The QRH procedure works well in reducing the pressure differential. The problem is that it does not address this particular situation (outclimbing the pressurization). Once we got the differential [pressure] under control, the QRH guides you to manual pressurization operation for the remainder of the flight, even though I assume there is nothing actually wrong with the pressurization. Perhaps adding a line into the QRH to direct you back to automatic pressurization if you simply outclimb the system would reduce the workload of the Pilot Monitoring (PM) versus having to operate the system manually while maintaining the same level of attention required of the PM.

## Control in the Time of Corona

A Controller speculates on the cascade-like threat of COVID-19 induced changes. The result was an airspace violation and no notification to the receiving Controller.

■ I had taken over the position, which was running multiple sectors combined. This is an unusual configuration. I have heard that we are using this for social distancing because of COVID-19. Because of the range covered, I had to use my mid[shift] settings, [with] adjusted [filter limits] for the altitudes. Aircraft X was following a slower company aircraft at FL340. I asked Aircraft X if he would like to change altitudes or slow down. The pilot said he would like to climb, so I climbed the aircraft to FL360. When I went to switch the aircraft to the adjacent Center, I realized that I had not coordinated with the sector above me. I then made sure that the sector above me was aware of Aircraft X and switched him. Usually when the area is in the mid[shift] configuration, [my] airspace includes the above sector. I speculate that this is why I assumed that I had FL360 in my sector when, in fact, I did not. Standardized reminders on or near the scope would be helpful when we are forced into unusual [configurations].

## Wing Walkers' Wisdom

Two Ramp Agents voiced concern and frustration over a viable threat of COVID-19 transmission. Regulations and procedures had not yet caught up with protocols that the virus demands. Two possible solutions are presented.

From Wing Walker Number 1's report:

■ While working our flight outbound, we were instructed to put the headsets on. First of all, we are in a pandemic situation across the world. Secondly, these headsets are not being sanitized after all flights. [They are] dirty and transferring germs to everyone wearing them. Why are we still wearing these headsets when we can be wearing our own personal headsets or hearing protection? It makes no sense why we are contaminating our own work group. I can see the pushback driver using the headset to communicate with the pilots, but for wing walkers to be using this is unsafe. There are limited supplies for cleaning, and yet we are being told to wear this. What happens when it's hot? Still wear them during this pandemic?

From Wing Walker Number 2's report:

■ ...Why are we still insisting on using wing walker headsets in line stations? We don't have cross traffic, and our pushback alley is one way in and one way out.... Why are we still putting agents at unnecessary risk? One possible solution, until this passes, is to use old-fashioned hand signals.

1. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*.
2. <https://www.faa.gov/coronavirus/>
3. <https://asrs.arc.nasa.gov/search/database.html>

ASRS Alerts Issued in April 2020	
Subject of Alert	No. of Alerts
Airport Facility or Procedure	1
ATC Equipment or Procedure	1
Company Policy	7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9</b>

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 A Monthly Safety  
 Newsletter from  
**The NASA**  
 Aviation Safety  
 Reporting System  
 P.O. Box 189  
 Moffett Field, CA  
 94035-0189  
<https://asrs.arc.nasa.gov>

April 2020 Report Intake	
Air Carrier/Air Taxi Pilots	1,491
General Aviation Pilots	542
Flight Attendants	183
Mechanics	115
Military/Other	109
Controllers	78
Dispatchers	70
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2,588</b>