
Letters to the Editor

Red-Eye Flights: War Against Fatigue

As the debate escalates among various factions on proposed airline pilot flight- and duty-time limitations ("An Air-Safety Battle Brews Over the Issue of Pilots' Rest Time," page one, July 1), I am strangely reminded of another debate that raged much earlier in my flying career. As a combat fighter pilot in Southeast Asia, dodging enemy fire on an almost daily basis, I was then mildly and perhaps cynically amused as to how much different my personal experience and perspective of the war were than that of any vocal stateside activist, both pro- and anti-war.

Twenty-five years later and now battling a much different foe, I find it similarly amusing as bureaucrats, scientists, and those with vested interests debate the implications of airline pilot fatigue on safety and proposals to impose the improved duty-time limits. My perspective today is that of an airline pilot who routinely flies an exhausting "red-eye" schedule and is pitted in a nearly continuous war against cumulative fatigue, which ultimately could be as deadly as any enemy surface-to-air missile.

Typically, pilots seem to have an inherent can-do attitude. Although they are not risk takers per se, airline pilots (not to mention their cost-cutting airline employers) will sometimes push themselves beyond normal and prudent limits. Perhaps because of personal ego or corporate pressure, pilots are often reluctant to call it quits, even when fatigue becomes a critical factor. Thus there is an exigent necessity for externally mandated and significantly improved flight and duty-time limitations.

I invite Air Transportation Association President Carol Hallett, who vigorously opposes duty-time limit improvements, to come fly with me and gain my perspective in my almost nightly war against fatigue. At 3:45 a.m., somewhere over the Midwest on my sixth flight of the day/night, following a month of multiple circadian-rhythm shifts and many unsuccessful attempts to adequately sleep in various hotels during the noisy midday, being away from home and family all week, eating airport and airplane food as time permits, having been on duty continuously since the previous day's afternoon, fighting congested air and ground traffic, delays and weather, but still having miles to go in the safe passage of the hundred-plus souls entrusted to me before I sleep, and even though I may be convinced that "I can still hack it," Ms. Hallett might ob-

serve that my usual flying skill and precision are somewhat degraded. That is if she were still awake.

JOHN CHESIRE
San Diego

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Your article on the FAA's proposal to change pilot duty and rest hours too casually dismissed fatigue countermeasures. You referred to them as "common-sense efforts encouraging pilots to stretch their legs, drink some coffee and perhaps grab a smoke as a way to increase alertness." In reality, stretching and smoking are completely ineffective, and caffeine offers a temporary benefit, but not a long-term solution.

True fatigue countermeasures based on scientifically validated studies do, in fact, exist and are now being tested and implemented in transportation industries and other businesses where alertness is required around the clock. Examples include NASA's experiments with cockpit napping on trans-Pacific flights, factories that have converted to "biocompatible" shift schedules, and locomotive engineers' use of specially designed headsets at two Canadian freight railways.

STEVEN A. MARDON
Editor, ShiftWork Alert
Cambridge, Mass.

Metromail Supports Protecting Kids' Privacy

In response to your June 14 article "Donnelley Unit Embroiled in Ugly Child-safety Debate," concerning Metromail and commercial mailing lists containing information about families with children:

Metromail shares Marc Klaas's desire to ensure children's safety. However, his charges against the company are unfounded. Mr. Klaas has acknowledged that our competitor John Phillips financially funds the Kids Off Lists campaign. Recently, Kids Off Lists threatened in a press release to follow Metromail from city to city while the company met with potential investors in preparation for its Initial Public Offering.

Metromail supports protecting the privacy of children. We believe the collection and dissemination of information about families with children should be done in a professional and ethical way. On Mr. Klaas's alleged connections between the use of commercial marketing data and the abduction of children, the facts are clear and indisputable: Commercial databases do not pose a threat to children. Metromail has met with a num-