Alcohol in the Cockpit

by Richard A. Hansen, M.D., AME

The Airbus was being towed to the runway for takeoff from the Miami International Airport, bound for Phoenix, Arizona, when air traffic controllers ordered the plane back to the gate – immediately. The passengers, 124 of them, wondered what was wrong with the plane. A security screener had noticed the pilots were red-eyed, flush-faced, and were reeking of alcohol. Much to the embarrassment of America West, and with two flying careers on the line, the two pilots had played pool at a bar until 5 a.m., and consumed 350 ounces of beer between them, the equivalent of nearly 22 pint glasses, after earlier sharing a bottle of wine with two flight attendants. Last week the jury heard the story, exactly as reported above.

As all airmen well know, the FAA takes very seriously the rules about flying a plane on alcohol. It doesn't burn well in the fuel tank, and doesn't fly well in the blood stream. The rule book bars pilots from consuming alcohol for eight hours before a flight. And, the legal limit for alcohol levels in a pilot's blood is 0.04 percent, half the amount allowed in most states for motorists. The pilots mentioned above (whose names are public information, but will be protected here) had blood alcohol readings of 0.091 and 0.084, respectively.

Their defense attorneys argued that the pilots should not be convicted because they were not "operating" the plane at the time in question. The aircraft was being towed away from the gate, and the driver of the tug truck had control of the aircraft, they said. Thus, "they couldn't endanger anyone as long as they were connected to that tug," said attorney Dan Foodman. "The plane is inoperable at all times that they were in that plane." Further, the defense argued that the fact that the pair had consumed alcohol the night before the flight and the fact that they smelled of alcohol did not mean they were impaired. "Mr. _____ was able to see, hear, walk, talk, et cetera," attorney James Rubin said of his client. What would you do if you were on this jury?

Fortunately, violations of the Federal Aviation Administration's alcohol and drug regulations are rare. However, they can be costly, not only in jobs but also in lives. General aviation has its share of fatal plane crashes related to alcohol. The statistics have recently been studied by researchers at John Hopkins University. The study team, led by medical epidemiologist Guohua Li, M.D., Dr.P.H, found that most alcohol-related plane crashes, 52 percent, occurred during nighttime hours, between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m. In contrast, most non-alcohol-related plane crashes, 72 percent, occurred during the day, between 7 a.m. and 6 p. m. Statistics also showed that 64 percent of alcohol-related crashes occurred in worsening weather conditions, such as rain or fog, which forced the pilot to switch from visual flight rules (VFR) to instrument flying (IFR).

In actuality, pilots should never mix alcohol consumption with flying, because it can impair their ability to think about key functions in operating a plane, such as interpreting flight instruments, or coping with spatial disorientation. Reaction time is slowed, vision and hearing are impaired, and the ability to multitask or do several simultaneous actions may be significantly affected. While this may go unnoticed in straight and level flight, in smooth air and using the autopilot, the

needed skills will be lacking in judging distance, descending through turbulence, or in the precision needed for a smooth rollout and landing. When it is just one life at risk, and a million dollar airplane, you had better be sure of yourself when your wife is along, or the children, or a whole planeload of passengers. The arguments of the lawyers quoted above are really quite hollow.

In the year 2002, 22 commercial airline pilots tested positive for alcohol. And the numbers are rising. That is only a fraction of the approximately 75,000 U.S. airline pilots, not to mention another 400,000 general aviators. The checks and balances in the realm of pilot preparedness operates mostly on the honor system. There are random tests of 10,000 airline pilots every year, mandated by the Transportation Department. If caught drunk while on duty, pilots must wait a year and go through rehabilitation to get their medical certificates restored. To get their airman's certificate they must also wait a year and then retake all the written and flight tests required to fly a plane. That is a big price to pay for a night on the town, or a weekend bender.

Looking at the issue from the AME standpoint, I would say without hesitation that the safest course is not to drink at all. Alcohol is not a food. It is a toxin, both to the brain and the liver. And the organ in your head, is a fine-tuned computer, which can be programmed to fly a glider, or a Cherokee, a Cirrus (hopefully, keeping the parachute in its hopper), or even testing a new fighter jet. It is said that there are old pilots, and bold pilots, but few old, bold pilots. It seems to me that one of the "boldest" things an airman can do is fly while intoxicated. The Airbus incident may be a good lesson for us all, to keep us all flying, and our passengers safely delivered to their destination.

*[Doctor Hansen, author of the popular book on home health care, **Get Well At Home**, currently serves as medical director of the **Emerald Valley Wellness Clinic**, and its **Live-for-Health Seminars** in Creswell, Oregon. Pilots who for health reason are having trouble passing their medical should contact us. For further information or inquiries, contact: **clinic1@emeraldwellness.com**]*