Testimony of John Michael 'Mike' Loftus
Father of Madeline Loftus
'Families of Continental Flight 3407'

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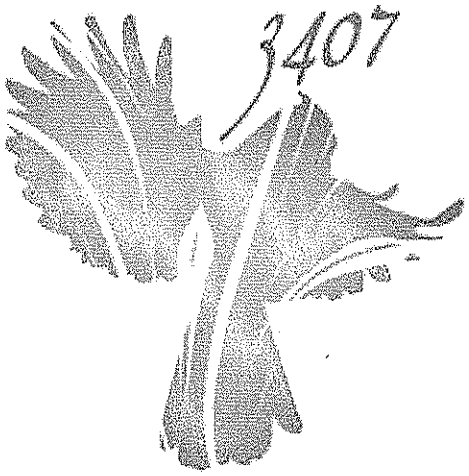

Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Aviation
Hearing on 'Regional Air Carriers and Pilot Workforce Issues'
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(202) 225-4472

Making Air Travel Safer in the Wake of the Continental Flight 3407 Tragedy

Mr. Chairman and subcommittee members, thank you for the opportunity to speak before your subcommittee today. My name is John Michael Loftus. I am here today to testify on behalf of the 'Families of Continental Flight 3407', both as a father, and as a former pilot with Continental Airlines for over 20 years.

My daughter, Maddy Loftus was onboard Continental Flight 3407. On February 12, 2009, Maddy was a beautiful twenty four year old woman just starting down the pathway of her adult life. She had finished her education and returned to her home in New Jersey where she had landed an excellent job with an outstanding advertising agency. She was surrounded by family and friends who loved her. As she boarded flight 3407 she was so excited about going back to Buffalo State College for an alumni hockey game - so excited to see old teammates and friends and pursue one of the loves of her life: hockey. In other words, she was poised to begin "the rest of her life." But, that night, onboard Flight 3407, all her hopes and dreams and plans for the future - career, love, marriage, motherhood - were brutally extinguished. And I am left sitting here today asking why? I don't think we can ever make sense of the tragic loss of Maddy and the other forty nine human beings who died that night. But we can, we must, do everything in our power to ensure that it never happens again.

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Maddy grew up as the daughter of a Continental pilot, and she had traveled on Continental flights throughout her life. She was a member of the Continental Family. However, this trip was even more significant. Maddy was excited, as she had bought her

first airline ticket. No more standby travel for her.... she had arrived! When she bought that ticket, she bought it on Continental - a company that she had grown up with, a company that she trusted and flew all her life. She never realized that she had actually purchased a ticket on Colgan Air, the regional carrier who in fact operated that flight. Had she known of the significant differences in pilot training and experience levels between Continental and Colgan, she may never have boarded the plane.

Unfortunately, her flight never did arrive in Buffalo. Her life, along with the lives of forty nine others, was tragically taken on that February night. The real tragedy of Flight 3407 is, of course, that it did not have to happen. It was the result of a number of failures, each of which was completely preventable. With your help, the devastation of Flight 3407 does not have to be repeated – without your help, it most surely will happen again in some shape or form.

I speak to you not only as a grieving parent. I also bring my aviation background, having been a commercial pilot for over 26 years as well as having 22 years of experience working for Continental Airlines and Continental Express.

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My flying experience started in 1980 as a flight instructor. I have flown cargo planes, charter planes, and even flew three seasons as a crop duster. When I was hired into the Continental Express family of airlines in 1984, I had over five thousand hours of flight time; I now have over twenty thousand hours. I started my career as a First Officer with Provincetown Boston Airlines (PBA) in 1984, and continued the normal progression

from First Officer to Captain in smaller airplanes, and then on to Captain in larger airplanes. Notably, I have flown the ATR-42 and ATR-72, which are similar airplanes to the Bombardier Q400 that took my daughter's life.

In 1998, I advanced to Continental Airlines where I served as a First Officer on the Boeing 737, 757, 767, and 777. Finally I became a Captain on the Boeing 737, before leaving Continental in 2006 for family reasons.

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I also had the experience of holding numerous union positions while at Continental and Continental Express, including serving on the Negotiating Committee from 1996 through 1998. While on this committee, I was able to observe firsthand the discussions between labor and management pertaining to both hiring and training.

If I can leave each of the members with only two thoughts today, they would be:

1) There is no substitute for experience in the air; and

2) The importance of pilot training, especially in emergency circumstances, cannot be overstated.

My experience in the cockpit involved many difficult flying conditions. I flew in thunderstorms, low ceilings, dense fog, and many winter seasons involving icing conditions. As was normal in the aviation industry during that period, I was able to gain knowledge by flying with other, more experienced pilots, who had dealt with these same difficult flying conditions for longer than I had.

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My fellow regional pilots at Continental and I also had the benefit of having access to the same training and pilot resources that the pilots at the "major" carrier had. At the time, I felt there was no better regional airline operation than Continental Express. We had an excellent safety record.

However, once the major airlines turned to a third tier of regional airlines for their domestic passenger feed, there became separate and unequal systems of educating and training pilots. While the training and processes may have met the FAA minimums, they were nowhere near what the majors required of their own pilots. Consequently, I witnessed the industry evolving to two standards of safety – one for the majors, and a second for the regionals.

I do not impugn the pilots who fly for these third-tier carriers, and most certainly do not mean to denigrate Captain Marvin Renslow and First Officer Rebecca Shaw. I admire both for how dedicated they were to pursuing their dream of flying – Renslow following a non-traditional career path and not breaking into the cockpit until later in life, and Shaw for all the ways in which she sought to gain knowledge of planes as she was growing up and trying to break into the field. They were both trying to gain the experience to further their careers.

Unfortunately, I feel that they were not given the proper tools to gain that experience, as the pilots of my generation and I were given. Indeed, the transcript of the cockpit recorder makes plain that the ice build-up on the aircraft was a condition they themselves

had not been adequately trained for. When they began as first officers, they were not exposed to pilots with the same experience level as I was fortunate enough to have been, and therefore were unable to draw on the wealth of experience normally handed down from highly experienced pilots to their first officers. Flying for a small regional carrier like Colgan Air with inherently less resources, they were not availed of an extensive training department with decades of institutional knowledge like I had at Continental Express. And as we now know from testimony at the public hearings, Colgan had not fully implemented industry best practice safety initiatives such as FOQA (Flight Operational Quality Assurance program) and LOSA (Line Observation Safety Assurance).

Clearly, this accident also underscores the need for flight time and duty regulations to be re-examined. We are currently employing a model that is over fifty years old. These regulations are very complex and confusing. When I was flying, I remember thinking to myself, 'How can we expect the pilots to manage their duty days and rest periods if they cannot understand what is expected of them?'

Commuting is a way of life for pilots and this will not change. During my years flying as an international pilot, I recall many a crewmember walking into the cockpit and requesting the first break on a flight, because he or she had commuted in from the west coast on the red-eye and spent all day in the crew room. I would like to see management

and labor collaborate on instituting effective and practical commuter policies for pilots, realizing that the foundation of a safe flight is a properly rested flight crew.

However, these changes will take time to implement. In the meantime, it is imperative that the pilots maintain the highest standards of professionalism when it comes to commuting and gaining the proper rest, remembering the immense responsibility that they are charged with.

When considered all together, the pilots of Flight 3407 were not given the same chance to succeed when faced with difficult flying conditions. From my years in the cockpit, there is just no substitute for experience as well as the most advanced training that the industry can offer.

So, Mr Chairman and fellow subcommittee members, those are some of the insights I have into the safety issues that the tragedy of Flight 3407 has brought to our attention. Most importantly, however, all of the family members, here and not here, implore you to help bring forth solutions.

First, we need to take an industry-wide look at experience requirements in terms of hiring, upgrading, and the pairing of pilots in the cockpit. While I do not have data from

other regional carriers to compare to, I was shocked to hear that Colgan only required 650 hours of total time and 75 hours of multi-engine time to be hired.

More importantly, we have to realize that the safety net for this industry in terms of hiring first officers with little experience is an effective system of gate-keeping to ensure that airlines only upgrade pilots to the left seat when they are ready and capable of mentoring young first officers. So, we argue that the criteria for upgrading to Captain needs to be re-evaluated as well. Ironically, Colgan has voluntarily taken steps in both of these areas since the accident. This only serves to evoke questions of the effectiveness of the current FAA minimum standards.

Second, we need to revamp the approach to training. In theory, FAA-approved training programs certify that each and every airline is training its pilots to the same standard. The fact that Colgan's FAA-approved training program did not include a hands-on demonstration of the stick pusher, essentially the pilot's last line of defense in stall recovery, leaves much to be questioned in terms of the validity of the current minimum standards for training.

More importantly, the difference of not just *what* is trained, but *how* it is trained, needs to be more fully considered. In listening to testimony at the NTSB hearings in May, it became very evident on numerous occasions that there exists a wide gulf in the quality of

training offered by the regional carriers versus the major airlines. As an example, Colgan safety officials were quick to pat themselves on the back for implementing Continental's two-day, pilot-facilitated Crew Resource Management/Threat Error Management (CRM/TEM) program in the wake of the accident. To us, this just serves to prove that there are two different levels of training, and therefore, unfortunately two different levels of safety. This even brought NTSB Vice Chairman Robert Sumwalt to lament that all major carriers do not make all their most advanced training available to their regional partners.

After all, the cold, hard fact about the airline industry that is staring us all in the face is that the pilots **most** in need of the best training, who fly in the oldest (often turboprop) planes, and who fly the shortest routes at lower altitudes with more take-offs and landings every day, are the less-experienced pilots at these regional airlines.

Finally, in the same vein, we need to require (as opposed to merely recommend, as the FAA currently does), that all regional carriers implement the best practice safety initiatives that are commonplace among the major carriers – FOQA, LOSA, and ASAP (Aviation Safety Action Program). These safety programs are important in detecting trends in poor safety practices, and the data they produce is a great tool for young pilots to get a better feel for their profession and all that goes into the safe operation of airplanes. Once again however, these programs cost money to implement, which can

prove to be a challenge for these regional airlines. But again, their pilots are the ones who need the benefits of these programs the most.

We would love to see these above-mentioned areas addressed in the upcoming months to ensure that there is no repeat of Flight 3407. Furthermore, to all of the stakeholders in this industry, we implore you to rededicate yourself to even higher standards of safety, and to rethink some of your long-held mindsets that may be impediments to providing the safest air travel possible to the American public.

For the pilots, this accident certainly brought to the forefront some glaring deficiencies in the way many pilots have to go about their day-to-day business, especially in terms of pay and rest. We are certainly supportive of steps being taken to ensure that more experienced, better-compensated, and more well-rested pilots are in the cockpit every time we get on a plane. However, on the flip side, if concessions are to be made in these areas, we expect pilot unions to not just blindly defend their pilots to the detriment of safety, and to instead, to be supportive of safety initiatives taken by the airlines such as FOQA, as well as any other actions taken to ensure that pilots who do not live up to the standards are not retained, or even worse, promoted to the left seat.

For the airlines, it is time to acknowledge, not just in words but in actions, that the responsibility for the lives of human beings makes an entry level pilot's job different

from nearly every other profession. This means concessions in the areas of pay and duty day/scheduling. For the major carriers, it is also time to step up and take more ownership of the regional carriers' training programs and implementation of best practices. Clearly, the regional carriers exist to fill a low-cost niche in the industry, and therefore, they seemingly cannot afford to spend the same dollars per pilot on training and safety programs when their existence is tied to being the lowest bidder. In that model, safety will always lose out. Consequently, we believe the only solution is for the major carriers to get involved, whether it be in mandating more advanced training, assisting in the design of the regional partners' training programs, allowing the regional carriers to piggy-back on the major carriers' training, and/or auditing the training that is going on with their regional carriers to ensure that it is of the same high quality.

Most importantly, though, we turn to you as our leaders in government. You will be faced with some difficult choices in the aftermath of yet another tragic accident. Unavoidably, there will be a price tag associated with each and every one of these decisions, and the industry lobby is going to be in your ear vigorously reminding you of that everyday.

And yet, we are here before you to say that no price tag, no matter how large, can stack up to the price we have paid for the loss of our loved ones, and the price that other Americans will have to pay in the future, if the issues of pilot experience, training and fatigue are not addressed. When you make these tough decisions, please think of ***your***

daughter or son or loved one flying on a turboprop plane, on the last flight of a long day, in the dead of winter in Minnesota, Illinois, or Wisconsin. And please, just ask yourself, how much you think that your loved one's life is worth.

Unfortunately, as a veteran of this industry, I have often heard it said that most aviation regulations and procedures are written in blood. My Maddy and 49 other people who died that tragic day in February **have given** their blood. And now, we believe that they are owed solutions.

I miss my daughter everyday. Her mother, brother, and sister miss her terribly too. My only wish is to not have to see another father, mother, husband, wife, or child sitting here before your committee searching for answers. Let's solve this now.

Thank you.

In Memory – Continental Flight 3407

Mary Julia Abraham
Clarence A. 'Larry' Beutel III
Ronald and Linda Davidson
Beverly Eckert
Ronald Gonzalez
Zhaofang Guo
Kevin W. Johnston
Ellyce Kausner
Jerome Krasuski
Beth Ann Kushner
Madeline Linn Loftus
Don McDonald
Dawn Monachino
Jennifer Neill (and Baby Neill)
Mary 'Belle' Pettys
Matilda Quintero
Capt. Marvin D. Renslow
John G. Roberts III
Rebecca Lynne Shaw
Jean Srnecz
Susan Wehle
Douglas C. Wielinski
ClayYarber
Georges Abu Karam
David Borner
Alison Des Forges
John J. Fiore
Brad S. Green
Steven L. Johnson
Ruth Harel Katz
Nicole Korczykowski and Johnathan Perry
Brian Kuklewicz
Sean Lang
Lorin Maurer
Coleman Mellett
Donald, Dawn, and Shawn Mossop
Gerard Niewood
Donna Prisco
Ferris Reid
Julie Ries
Kristin Safran
Dipinder Sidhu
Darren Tolsma
Ernest West
Shibin Yao
Joseph J. Zuffoletto