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Pilot suicide raised in French Alps crash, but data show it's rare

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FRANCK PENNANT/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Brice Robin (center), the prosecutor of Marseille, said the co-pilot intentionally downed the plane in the French Alps crash.

By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE STAFF MARCH 26, 2015

As evidence suggests that the co-pilot of a Germanwings intentionally flew the plane into a mountain in the French Alps on Tuesday, one possibility being considered is that he wanted to commit suicide.

Pilot suicides are extremely rare, according to records collected by the Federal Aviation Administration.

Over the past two decades, aircraft-assisted suicides, as the incidents are called, have accounted for less than one percent of all fatal accidents among general aviation flights in the United States, which include all civilian flying except scheduled passenger airlines.

There were no records of suicides by US pilots who were flying large passenger aircraft. But pilot suicide is suspected in several major crashes in the past few decades, including a Mozambique Airlines flight that went down in Namibia two years ago, an EgyptAir flight that crashed into the Atlantic Ocean about 60 miles southeast of Nantucket in 1999, and a SilkAir flight that crashed in Indonesia in 1997.

Pilot suicide is also a theory behind the Malaysia Airlines flight that disappeared last March.



Three pilots may be needed, safety experts say

Adding a third pilot would ensure that there is never a situation where a pilot is alone in the cockpit.

Out of the 6,406 fatal general aviation accidents in the United States between 1993 and 2012, two dozen of the accidents were believed to have been the result of pilot suicide, according to a [pair of FAA reports](#) that each analyzed a decade of data.

The pilot was the sole occupant of the aircraft in all but one case, in which there was one passenger on board. All pilots were male and all were adults, except for one 15-year-old student pilot.

The reports found that most of the pilots were experiencing significant stress in their personal lives, including domestic and criminal difficulties. Some of the pilots suffered from depression and had thought of suicide before, had attempted killing themselves, or had even left behind a message about their suicide. Some were found to have been under the influence of alcohol or were taking tranquilizers or antidepressants.

“Aircraft-assisted suicides are tragic, intentional events that are hard to predict and difficult to prevent,” said the latest of the two FAA reports. “Factors involved in aircraft-assisted suicides may be depression, social relationships, and financial difficulties, just to name a few problems.

“Suicide attempts using an aircraft almost always result in pilot fatality; they also have the unfortunate potential to cause collateral damage to property and life,” the report said.

Carsten Spohr, chief executive of Lufthansa, Germanwings’ parent company, [said Thursday](#) that all Lufthansa staff receive psychological training.

He said the co-pilot of Flight 9525, Andreas Lubitz, had passed his medical and psychological tests “with flying colors,” but noted that there was an interruption in Lubitz’s training that lasted “a few months. Spohr said he did not know why or whether it was related to a medical issue.

Spohr said the company would review its screening procedures for pilots, even as he emphasized he had full confidence in the company’s current policies.

Aircraft-assisted suicides between 1993-2012

There have been 24 cases out of 6,406 fatal general aviation accidents in the United States.

Case	Age	Domestic issues	Criminal issues	Depression	Prior talk/thoughts of suicide	Prior suicide attempt	Left suicide note/letter	Events preceding suicide	Substances found from toxicology test
1	45	-	Y	-	Y	-	Y	Father of 4; arrested; worried about jail; lewd behavior w/ minor	Alcohol
2	38	Y	-	-	-	Y	-	Negative publicity; order of protection; extramarital affair	None
3	20	Y	Y	-	-	-	-	Worried about jail; found guilty of pyramid	THC (marijuana)

									scheme	
4	32	Y	-	-	Y	-	-		Fight with spouse; police intervene	None
5	38	-	Y	-	-	-	-		Fatal hit and run; warrant for arrest	Alcohol
6	67	-	-	Y	Y	-	Y		Mother's death; worried about deteriorating health and FAA license	None
7	26	-	-	-	-	-	Y		Spent previous night drinking	Alcohol
8	41	Y	-	-	-	-	-		Marriage proposal declined	Diazepam, Nordiazepam (anti-anxiety)
9	40	-	Y	Y	Y	-	Y		Criminal history; suspect of arson	Alcohol, Cocaine, Diazepam & Nordiazepam (anti-anxiety), Temazepam (insomnia), Oxazepam (anti-anxiety/depression)
10	22	-	-	-	-	-	-		Undetermined	None
11	43	Y	-	-	-	-	-		Restraining order; escorted away from home	N/A
12	40	Y	Y	-	-	-	-		Subject of criminal investigation; estranged from adopted daughter	None
13	15	-	-	-	-	-	Y		Undetermined	None
14	54	-	-	Y	Y	-	-		Under therapy for severe depression	Venlafaxine, Desmethylvenlafaxine (depression)
15	43	-	Y	-	Y	-	-		Undergoing criminal investigation	None
16	47	-	-	Y	Y	Y	Y		Ongoing treatment for depression	N/A
17	26	-	-	-	-	-	-		Undetermined	None
18	44	Y	-	Y	Y	Y	-		History of depression w/ hospitalizations; shortly before the event, he was in hospital for attempted suicide	Fluoxetine & Citalopram (depression), Diphenhydramine (allergic reactions/motion sickness), Alcohol
19	68	Y	-	-	Y	-	-		History of drinking & suicide threats; alcohol consumption prior to	Alcohol

									accident	
20	20	Y	-	-	Y	-	Y		Distraught over relationship w/ friend; alcohol consumption prior to accident; beer recovered at accident site	Alcohol, Diphenhydramine (allergic reactions/motion sickness)
21	46	Y	-	-	-	-	-		Bitter child custody dispute	None
22	25	Y	-	Y	Y	-	Y		Distraught over breakup with girlfriend; alcohol and medication consumption prior to accident	Alcohol, Citalopram (depression), Clonazepam (anti-anxiety)
23	52	Y	Y	-	-	-	Y		Personal & business trouble w/ government agencies	None
24	48	Y	-	-	Y	-	Y		Difficulties in personal life; joked about suicide	N/A
Total	40.5 (median)	13	7	6	12	3	10		-	11

DATA: Federal Aviation Administration

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