

Airport Controller And Supervisor Suspended For NY Crash

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WASHINGTON (AP) — A personal phone call and the absence of a supervisor during last week's collision over New York's Hudson River has led to two air traffic controllers being removed from duty, although officials said the actions probably had no impact on the tragedy.

The Federal Aviation Administration said in a statement Thursday that a controller at Teterboro Airport in New Jersey and his supervisor have been placed on administrative leave after the controller was found to be involved in "apparently inappropriate conversations" at the time of the crash between a small plane and a tour helicopter. Nine people died.

The agency said while there was no reason to believe thus far that the employees' actions contributed to the accident, such conduct is unacceptable. The controller had handed off the monitoring of the small plane involved in the collision to another airport shortly before the plane collided with a tour helicopter.

The two employees, who were not identified, were placed on administrative leave with pay. The FAA said it has begun disciplinary proceedings against the pair. Three members of a Pennsylvania family on the plane and five Italian tourists and a pilot on the helicopter were killed when the two stricken aircraft plunged into the river.

The FAA said the supervisor was not in the building at the time, as required.

The controller had cleared the small plane, a single-engine Piper, for takeoff and then made a personal call to a woman, said sources familiar with the investigation, who asked not to be named because they weren't authorized to speak publicly.

While still on the phone, the controller handed off the Piper to the control tower at Newark Liberty International Airport, which monitors low-flying air traffic over the Hudson but doesn't actively try to keep aircraft separated, they said. The controller was still on the phone when the accident occurred. This sequence of events lasted only a few minutes.

National Transportation Safety Board and FAA investigators learned of the telephone conversation earlier this week while examining recordings of telephone calls on a landline phone in the tower that controllers use to communicate with other parts of the Teterboro Airport. The employee made his personal call on that landline.

The controller and supervisor were removed from duty immediately.

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

Air traffic controllers are expected to be alert at all times while on duty and typically are given about a 15-minute break roughly every two hours for that reason.

The National Air Traffic Controllers Association, the labor union representing controllers, said in a statement that it supports a full investigation of the allegations "before there is a rush to judgment."

The FAA's action came as an amateur video surfaced that captured the moment of impact between the two aircraft. The images, taken by an Italian man practicing with a new camera while on a boat tour, show the helicopter flying overhead when suddenly a single-engine plane appears behind it, apparently climbing and turning. The plane clips the helicopter's rotor blades, and a wing shears off. Debris rains down, and the plane flips. Both aircraft fall toward the water.

On the video, aired Thursday on "NBC Nightly News," one or more onlookers can be heard in the background saying, "Oh, my God!"

Teterboro Airport, located directly across the Hudson River from New York City near the George Washington Bridge, handles corporate and private aircraft.

It is operated by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and handles nearly 200,000 flights a year.

Source URL (retrieved on 01/30/2015 - 9:09am):

http://www.impomag.com/news/2009/08/airport-controller-and-supervisor-suspended-ny-crash?qt-most_popular=0