Airbus A380 Collision Proves Big Planes Are Troublesome

Chris Hawley and Joan Lowy, Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A frightening collision between one of the world's largest airliners and a commuter jet on a dark, wet tarmac at John F. Kennedy International Airport is underscoring worries about ground accidents as U.S. airports begin handling a new generation of giant planes.

A total of 586 passengers and crew members were aboard the two aircraft Monday night when the left wing of an Airbus A380 operated by Air France clipped a Bombardier CRJ-700 regional jet flown by Comair, spinning the smaller plane nearly 90 degrees. No one was injured.

The superjumbo Airbus is so immense — as tall as a seven-story building, with a wing span as wide as a Manhattan block — that its wing almost cleared the smaller plane. But not quite.

"It's the sheer size of these aircraft and the congestion at these airports that's the problem," said Allan Tamm, a consultant with Avicor Aviation, based in Portland, Ore. "It's a serious concern for all these airports trying to accommodate these aircraft. It's going to happen more and more."

The collision happened at one of the nation's most congested airports on a rainy night when flashing lights reflecting off wet tarmac can obscure small aircraft. It comes as airports around the country are beginning to receive a new class of huge aircraft.

Fourteen airports have obtained waivers from the Federal Aviation Administration to receive the new Boeing 747-8, which falls into the same new size class as the A380, The Associated Press reported this week. And Boeing is working with 13 more airports to get approval from the FAA, though not all of them may require waivers.

Most U.S. airports cannot legally handle the A380 or 747-8 because of FAA space requirements aimed at keeping planes from bumping into each other. But the FAA can issue waivers if airport officials agree to certain procedures, such as using only certain taxiways or halting other traffic when one of these mammoth planes is on the move.

Many of the airports asking for permission to handle the Boeing 747-8 may have trouble handling them, especially when aircraft are turning, Tamm said.

"A lot of these airports are only marginally ready," he said.

The flurry of new waivers coincides with an increase in air traffic as the U.S.

economy recovers. The number of passengers flying in the U.S. increased from 767 million in 2009 to 782 million in 2010.

JFK was built in the 1950s, when jets were smaller. Airport officials had to secure FAA waivers for the A380 and the 747-8. Monday's collision might spur the FAA to take a second look at JFK's rules for handling large aircraft, said aviation consultant John Cox.

The National Transportation Safety Board is reviewing radio recordings, radar data and flight recorders from both aircraft in Monday's accident.

The impact tore open the leading edge of the Airbus' left wing and broke off half of the wing fence, a vertical fin that sticks out from the wingtip, photos from the NTSB show. The Bombardier had a hole in its rudder and a dent on the leading edge of the tail.

"This wasn't just two airplanes bumping together. The Air France plane really creamed the regional jet," said Bill Voss, president of the Flight Safety Foundation, an advocacy group.

The regional jet was carrying 62 passengers and four crew members, the Airbus 495 passengers and 25 crew members. Comair is a regional subsidiary of Atlanta-based Delta Air Lines Inc.

Audio of the collision indicates the Comair jet, which had just arrived from Boston, was trying to exit the taxiway as the France-bound Airbus made its way to the runway. But the Comair plane may have stopped short because of congestion in the parking area, Voss said.

In the dark and rain, "both pilots and controllers would have been confronted with a sea of flashing lights and reflections which could partly explain why the Air France pilot may not have seen the regional jet," Voss said.

The collision shook the Comair jet "very, very violently," passenger Sabastian Pinel said, "and then the next thing we knew we were told to hurry out the plane."

Air France passenger Stephen Brown said he saw "a little puff of smoke."

"I says, 'Oh, there's a bit of smoke,' and then we seemed to stop as if the pilot was putting the brakes on a bit too quickly," Brown said.

The main danger in a collision between two taxiing aircraft is that a fuel spill will lead to a fire, Cox said. He praised the flight crew of the regional jet for immediately requesting airport fire and rescue help.

Kennedy's FAA-approved rule book for the A380 is 36 pages long and limits the planes mostly to Taxiway A, which encircles the terminals. The Air France flight was on Taxiway A. Other planes may have to be held on taxiways until the A380 passes by, Cox said.

But Michael Barr, who teaches aviation safety at the University of Southern California-Los Angeles, said that could cause an uproar.

"You try to sterilize an area for an A380 and just listen to everybody else at that airport have a heart attack," Barr said. Ultimately, he said, it is the responsibility of the pilot to make sure there's enough room.

The problem of planes colliding with each other on runways — or with baggage carts, other vehicles or people that might be crossing runways — has been a top aviation safety concern since the late 1980s, when there was a spate of deadly incidents.

Among the steps taken by FAA have been briefings on runway safety for air traffic controllers, improved airport signs and other markings so that pilots know where to turn, and installation of runway lights that turn red to warn pilots against entering or landing on the runway or taxiway. However, only about two dozen airports have the runway lights.

Beginning in 2001, the FAA began installing warning systems that collect and analyze data from airport radar in order to detect potential collisions on airport runways and taxiways. When a potential collision is detected, controllers receive visual and audio alerts. But the NTSB has said the alerts don't give flight crews enough time to react.

The agency also has been encouraging airlines to equip cockpits with electronic displays that show pilots the positions and movements of all aircraft on runways and taxiways. However, the agency has stopped short of requiring the equipment and it has not been widely adopted.

In 1977, in what remains the world's deadliest aviation accident, two jumbo jets collided on a runway on Spain's Canary Islands, killing 583 passengers and crew members.

The worst U.S. runway accident involving two aircraft was a collision between a USAir 737 and a Skywest Metroliner commuter plane at the Los Angeles airport in 1991. Thirty-four people were killed.

Monday's collision shows the complexity of ground operations, a part of air travel often overlooked by passengers eager to get out of their seats and on their way home, experts said.

Working ground control at a busy airport like JFK is one of the most demanding jobs in the nation's air traffic control system, Voss said.

"It is extremely complex, highly visual, and the workload can become almost superhuman," he said.

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Lowy reported from Washington.

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