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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

BUSINESS | JANUARY 5, 2011

Spilled Cup of Joe Causes Terror Fear

By SCOTT MCCARTNEY

Few people are fans of airplane coffee, but one particular cup caused heartburn for hundreds of travelers.

A spilled cup of java left 241 passengers grounded on a United Airlines flight from Chicago to Frankfurt when it created communications and navigation problems on a Boeing 777.

Flight 940 diverted to Toronto on Monday night, according to a report from Transport Canada, the nation's civil aviation authority, after one of the plane's pilots spilled coffee in the cockpit. A United spokesman said flight turbulence prompted the mishap.



Scott McCartney explains why a spilt cup of coffee in the cockpit of a Boeing 777 triggered the plane's transponder to send out distress signals, including code 7500, which means hijacking or unlawful interference, resulting in a terror alert.

Cockpit spills are a fairly common hazard in airplanes, but typically lead to corrosion in floors and sidewalls over the years rather than the immediate malfunction of radio systems.

The airline said the spill sparked problems in one radio system, and while pilots were switching to backups they attempted to enter a "No Radio" code—7600—into the plane's transponder to alert air-traffic controllers they were out of radio contact. Instead, the pilot mistakenly entered 7500, the international distress code for hijacking or unlawful interference.

Transport Canada said Canada's Department of National Defense was notified after the hijacking code was transmitted. But with the help of United's dispatch staff in Chicago, which can send and receive text messages with pilots, the flight crew

confirmed it was a communication issue and not a hijacking.

In addition to the radio problems, navigation anomalies related to the spill prompted the pilots to fly the plane to Toronto rather than heading out across the Atlantic, the airline said.

The United spokesman said the airline flew another 777 to Toronto that night to pick up the passengers and bring them back to Chicago, where the airline put them up in a hotel overnight.

An extra 777 flight to Frankfurt was added Tuesday afternoon for the stranded passengers. The coffee-compromised plane was ferried without passengers to Washington, D.C., for repairs on Tuesday, United said, and reentered service Wednesday evening. United said it offered passengers the choice of vouchers for discounts on future flights or extra frequent flier miles because of the disruption.

Such mishaps are rare because cockpits must pass spill tests before aircraft are certified, Boeing said. "The test

must confirm that no liquid will penetrate the equipment whatsoever," a spokesman, Bret Jensen, said. Airplanes have long been designed with seals, drain paths and special moisture-controlling finishes to prevent corrosion from the occasional cockpit spill.

The incident was reminiscent of the 1964 movie "Fate is the Hunter," based on a book by pilot Ernest K. Gann, who flew for American Airlines. A mysterious crash is ultimately found to be have caused by coffee spilled on the console between two pilots.

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