

Feds examine pilots in US Airways crash

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CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Although just 25 years old, Katie Leslie, captain on US Airways Express Flight 5481, had 3,400 hours of total flight time with the airline and 1,800 hours flying the type of plane that crashed Wednesday, a typical level of experience.

First Officer Jonathan Gibbs, 26, had less flying time — 1,100 total hours with the airline and 750 hours in the Beechcraft series — but had graduated from a rigorous two-year training program.

According to an Associated Press report, Jonathan Gibbs graduated from the University of Oregon in 1997 with Spanish and economics degrees. His father, Skip Gibbs, spoke to Santa Rosa's The Press Democrat.

"(Jonathan) had an incredible range of interests and skills," Gibbs said. "He was very generous, full of humor and kindness."

Jonathan Ornstein, chairman and chief executive officer of Mesa Air Group, also spoke highly of the pilots.

"Both of our employees were fine airmen and fine people," Ornstein said. The Phoenix-based Mesa Air Group is the owner of Air Midwest, which operated the plane under the US Airways Express banner.

Although the crash investigation appeared to focus Thursday on maintenance and mechanical issues, the National Transportation Safety Board is also looking into the experience of the pilots.

It was unclear late Thursday which pilot was at the controls as the plane took off. But both were among a cadre of commuter pilots who work long hours to rack up flying time, often with an eye on someday flying larger jets, pilots and aviation experts said.

Frank Graham, an experienced pilot and former safety director at CCAir, a Mesa subsidiary, said Leslie's experience level was typical for an operator of a 19-seat aircraft. And 700 hours for the first officer is equivalent to about a year of flying that type of plane. Gibbs would have had at least 250 to 300 hours of training on top of that before flying for the airline, Graham said.

He also said it's not unusual to have a captain of Leslie's experience teamed with a first officer of Gibbs' experience.

Mark Kaufman, a former commuter airline pilot in Charlotte, N.C., also noted that pilots at regional carriers can gain experience quickly, practicing takeoffs and landing on as many as six flight legs a day.

"We've got 23- and 24-year-olds flying \$200 million aircraft defending our country with less flight experience," Graham said.

Leslie joined Mesa in March 2000 and was promoted to captain about a year later. Gibbs was hired in May 2001. The Mesa training program he participated in at San Juan College in New Mexico has a "high washout rate" because of its rigorous requirements, Ornstein said.

With 3,400 hours, Leslie was at

the middle of the seniority list at Air Midwest. By comparison, Ornstein said, pilots leave the military with about 4,000 hours.

Even at regional airlines, companies train pilots how to handle stalls and abnormal situations, such as rolls and steep pitches, said Dave Esser, professor of aeronautical science at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University at Daytona Beach, Fla.

Commuter pilot salaries can start below \$20,000 but reach about \$100,000, said John Mazor, spokesman for the Air Line Pilots Association. That compares to major airline pilot salaries which can max out at more than \$200,000. Mesa wouldn't say what Leslie and Gibbs earned.

Before being hired by a regional airline such as Air Midwest, pilots often gain flight hours by flying cargo or working as flight instructors, pilots said. After that they might strive to land a major airline job. Increasingly, though, more are opting to stay at commuter airlines.

"They are making a lifestyle decision," Mazor said. "Although the pay is less, most of the flying is local. In many cases, they can go home at night."

The airline industry's financial problems, including mass pilot layoffs, also have made jobs scarce at the big airlines.

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Sharon struggles for power

Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson

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JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon took to the airwaves Thursday night in an angry performance aimed at saving his struggling re-election campaign by characterizing bribery allegations against him and his hawkish Likud Party as "despicable libel."

It took Israel's election commissioner just 13 minutes to order local television and radio to stop broadcasting the news conference, calling it election propaganda that violated broadcasting laws.

The truncated speech highlighted Sharon's fading hopes of a strong Likud election finish Jan. 28, which would allow him to be in firm control of the government in coalition with much smaller conservative parties. Instead, analysts say, a severely weakened Likud probably will have to reach out to form a coalition with the dovish Labor Party.

The result could be that Sharon is forced into a much softer stance

toward dealing with Palestinians than had been expected just a few days ago.

A new Likud-Labor partnership was unthinkable even a month ago. Sharon's "national unity" government collapsed at the end of October when Labor ministers withdrew from his Cabinet to protest budget measures supporting Jewish settlers in the predominantly Palestinian West Bank. The collapse strengthened Sharon's and Likud's popularity.

Now Likud is fighting to stay in power amid the bribery scandal, in which some party members have been accused of buying votes in the primaries. The number and intensity of the allegations are unprecedented in Israel's 55-year-old history, said Ephraim Ya'ar, a Tel Aviv university sociology professor who specializes in Israeli political trends.

"It's an embarrassment for Israel," Shinui Party Knesset member Avraham Poraz, the deputy leader of his party, declared in an

interview with Knight Ridder.

The biggest blow came this week, when Sharon also became embroiled in a bribery scandal. On Tuesday, the liberal English-language daily newspaper Ha'aretz reported that the prime minister received a \$1.5 million loan from a South African businessman to use as collateral for another loan that covered the return of illegal campaign funds from 1999.

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