

Chance Curbow

44-year-old off-duty pilot Joseph Emerson attempted to shut down the fuel supply to the engine of an Alaska Airlines flight from Everett, Washington to San Francisco on Sunday, Oct. 22.

Emerson began the flight seated behind the two pilots operating the plane in the cockpit and carrying conversation normally before the incident occurred. According to one of the pilots, Emerson stated that he was “not okay” before attempting to “grab and pull two red fire handles that would have activated the plane’s emergency fire suppression system and cut off fuel to its engines,” according to prosecutors.

The pilots stopped Emerson from pulling the handles all the way and enabled the plane to continue flying. He wrestled with one of the pilots for over a minute before calmly agreeing to leave the cockpit.

“It’s crazy to think that a simple lever pulled by a pilot could have killed everyone,” said Michael Brindley, senior communications major. “Maybe they should look into that as well.”

Having been a pilot of 22 years, Emerson had been allowed to travel in the cockpit and was supposed to pilot a different flight upon landing in San Francisco. Instead, the plane made an emergency landing in Portland, Oregon, because of his actions and Emerson was taken into custody by Port of Portland police officers.

Emerson reportedly had not slept for 40 hours and was under the influence of psychedelic mushrooms. His attorney is currently denying the reports, but it is alleged that Emerson told police officers of his inebriation upon being arrested. Another factor that may have affected Emerson’s behavior is his reported feelings of depression over the past 6 months surrounding the recent loss of a friend.

Emerson allegedly told an officer during conversation that it was his first time trying psychedelic mushrooms. He also said that he had taken them 48 hours prior to the incident and denied having taken any other medications, such as antidepressants or mood stabilizers.

After being subdued, Emerson spent the remainder of the flight seated at the back of the plane with zip ties around his wrists. Had he been successful in pulling the lever, the valve inside the plane’s wing would have closed, which would then have shut off the engines’ fuel supply.

Flight attendants said they heard Emerson talking to himself, saying things such as “I messed everything up,” that he “tried to kill everybody,” and that he “had just put 84 peoples’ lives at risk tonight.”

Shortly after making those comments, Emerson attempted to grab the handle of an emergency exit. The flight attendants were able to stop him.

Currently, Emerson is facing 83 felony counts of attempted murder, 83 counts of reckless endangerment and one count of endangering an aircraft. His attorney, Noah Horst, submitted a plea of not guilty to all counts in court.

Alaska Airlines has since removed Emerson from all duties. They also released statements about both his state entering the plane on Sunday and his medical certification with the Federal Aviation Administration.

Through his 22 years of service, Emerson’s certifications had never been “denied, suspended or revoked” until now. He also was given a first-class medical certification – which is the highest awarded certificate – at his FAA examination last month.

“This story is a perfect example of how additional forms of assistance are needed for those experiencing depression, among other mental and physical health struggles,” said Dylan Almond, sophomore computer science major.

Alaska Airlines also trains both flight attendants and gate agents to “identify signs and symptoms of impairment,” further stating that “at no time during the check-in or boarding process did our gate agents or flight crew observe any signs of impairment that would have led them to prevent Emerson from flying.”

“Psychedelic mushrooms, still being an illegal substance in the U.S., are usually extremely hard to dose correctly,” said Trenholm Fahy, junior psychology major. “They probably don’t come in a bottle with clear directions on how much to take. That combined with the fact that it was the pilot’s first time taking them, it’s no wonder that he took too much.”

Federal authorities have told CNN that they don’t believe the incident to be related to terrorism or any other motivated violence movement. Rather the FBI is attempting to figure out if it was a psychedelic trip, mental health crisis, or something else of that nature.

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