



NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

Office of Aviation Safety
Washington, D.C. 20594

December 18, 2019

**Attachment 4 – Sun Country Airline Pilot Statement
and Interview Summary**

OPERATIONAL FACTORS/HUMAN PERFORMANCE

DCA19MA143

Interviewee: Sue Belair, 737 Captain, Sun Country Airlines

Date: May 23, 2019

Location: NTSB Headquarters, Conference Call

Time of Interview: 1000 EDT

Present: Katherine Wilson, Warren Abrams – NTSB

Captain Belair was not represented by Counsel

During the interview, Captain Belair stated the following:

The weather on runway 28 was dry when they landed, and the wind was light and straight out of the south at maybe a 4-knot so a minimal crosswind; they could have landed on either runway. The runway was dry and there were no thunderstorms at the airport when they landed but she could see them out in the distance to the southeast. They landed on runway 28 because a King Air was also in the traffic pattern. The King Air was landing on runway 28 so they landed on runway 28 as well. After landing, dispatch told them the inbound flight was running late and their flight departure time had been pushed back from 2200 to 2230 local.

They were tankering 7500 lbs. of contingency fuel for their arrival into NIP but there were no delays and it was normal vectoring for the arrival for landing on Runway 28, shortened. She stated they had 6000 feet of runway for landing because of the arresting gear across the runway. They stopped and turned off the runway in about 2500 feet because they were light with no passengers or troops onboard.

She was told by the Charter Rep, Richard, the troops were still airborne. They began to follow the progress of Miami Air on Flight Aware and could see the flight holding or what appeared to be holding. Later they noticed the flight appeared to be descending and she went to the cockpit to watch for the arrival. About the same time, she indicated that the rain was coming down in sheets and it was hard to see the plane on final.

They did not take on any additional fuel while on the ground in NIP.

The steps were up to the plane and the door was open. Once it started to rain heavily, they closed the door, but it was not latched.

She first saw the Miami Air flight over the threshold but could not be certain because it was raining so hard; she did not see the flight before that. She used the term “Blinding Rain” when describing the intensity of the rain. She noticed the landing lights and she thought they looked high on the approach, but it was hard to tell because of the rain. Again, she commented how hard the rain was coming down. The wind was not blowing that hard, but the rain was “really bad.”

It was dark and raining “really hard” so from her position in the cockpit, she could not tell if the plane had touched down when it passed her position. Based on the plane’s position when it passed her, she had a bad feeling about the outcome of the landing and that she immediately felt

heartbroken. She was shaken up a bit. It was almost like post traumatic stress syndrome. She felt shook up and that could have been her.

The following day, the Chief Pilot told her to write up what she had seen and that someone from their Critical Incident Response Program would be in touch with her.

After viewing what she thought was the plane going off the end of the runway, she did not know if everyone was okay and she felt helpless. She speculated about the crew landing as if the crew was low on fuel, or exhausted and making poor decisions from maybe being up all day, but she did not have any answers. She did not want to “Monday morning quarterback” as she was not in their position.

The Base Coordinator told her there were several people taken to the hospital but there were no serious injuries and they were trying to get the animals out of the cargo hold.

She used her personal phone to call the Sun Country dispatcher and told her that she did not see the airplane taxi back after landing. As a subcontractor for Miami Air on this trip, the dispatcher started making the necessary calls from the phone tree they had in place for these situations.

The FO came to the cockpit and she asked him to open his cockpit window and see if he could see anything that was going on. He stood up in the window opening and she indicated he could see the tail of the airplane in the water. Then she saw all these emergency vehicles heading to the end of the runway. She then tuned the airplane radios to the ground frequency but did not hear anything except some conversation between two emergency vehicles.

There was not much lightning when the plane was landing. There was more lightning before the accident flight landed. It was heavy rain when the accident flight was landing.

ATIS was calling 5 miles visibility and light winds. She would not associate a thunderstorm with that weather.

While sitting in the cockpit waiting for the plane to land, she stated, “BOOM” there it was describing when she saw the plane for the first time. It was in the clouds one minute and then it was there. They must have broken out at the last minute. She thought maybe the vertical visibility was better. There were two RNAV approaches to runway 10; she wondered where the PAPI was for the crew and if they had a chance to see it. She thought perhaps the crew thought they were farther out than they were.

She had ATIS up on ACARS. It was the METAR she was looking at and it was still reporting light winds. She clarified that the rain was not blowing, just heavy.

She went to the cockpit when she was told the airplane was descending and was like “holy cow, it’s really raining.” This was only a few minutes before the flight landed.

She had no passengers on the flight yet. All the passengers were on the Miami Air flight.

She had flown into NIP on one other occasion, but they landed at military bases all the time. They each had their frequencies, but she always got her ATIS from ACARS if she could. It was better than tuning in the ATIS over the radio and listening to it. She noticed in the NOTAMS the new ATIS frequency for NIP ATIS was 124.35 if she remembered correctly; it was a new ATIS frequency which she remembered seeing on the NOTAM. Most of the time they did not get the digital ATIS like at larger airports.

When they landed on runway 28, the runway was dry, and the arresting gear was across the runway. With 6000 feet of runway to land on, it was not a big deal because the runway was dry. It made a huge difference in the B737 if the runway was wet or dry.

Runway 10 was a better runway for them, she speculated and stated runway 10 was better for them as it was a longer runway.

When in the cockpit watching for the landing Miami Air flight, she stated she did not have the radios on or turned up and did not hear any of the ATC communication between the tower and the plane. She did not turn the radios on until about 10 minutes after the accident airplane landed. There were a couple of emergency vehicles talking on the frequency, but it was way after the fact.

She almost always landed with Auto Brakes 3 although their Ops Manual indicated that 2 on the Auto Brakes was an acceptable setting for their landing; she used autobrakes 3 for almost every landing. MAX Auto was very aggressive, and it was rarely called for. She did not know if the runway was wet and the arresting was up what the Auto Brake setting would be.

She never felt pressure to land especially doing a Military Charter. There was always pressure but the Military was less pressure than scheduled flights. The airline was more pressure to be on time. She followed up speculating the Miami Air crew might have felt pressure because of time constraints, duty day limitations, and concern for the passengers if they diverted and the passengers were stranded in Orlando.

She was on a 2 hour call out on reserve. It was her understanding that she was called because the Miami Air crew was going to time out.

Again, Captain Belair lamented that the landing Miami Air crew may have been feeling pressure to land because of a Duty Period limitation. When you are tired, thunderstorms in the area, you have been on duty since early in the morning, and you have people in the back of the plane that were counting on you, it can lead to some Human Factors issues. She knew it was part of a pilot's job to sort it out and make good decisions; she wondered if the accident crew's decision to land would have been different 6-8 hours earlier. Further speculating, she wondered aloud what would have happened to the passengers if they had gone to Orlando and the crew timed out.

At Sun Country she was not happy with the reserve call out system in place; FAR Part 117 may look good on paper, but it was unrealistic. It could lead to some very long duty days that last into the middle of the night.

If there had been a loss of life on the Miami Air flight, she might not have ever flown again. It was that traumatic of an event for her. She felt bad for everyone involved.

She did not know the accident crew. She had never heard anything bad about Miami Air or the company pressuring the crews to land. She did not want to throw anyone under the bus.

There is a Critical Incident response Program, CIRP, at Sun Country and she was thankful for it. After talking to the Chief Pilot, he got a female Captain that was on the CIRP to contact her and discuss the situation and it was very helpful. The F/O was also contacted by a F/O CIRP member. They were trying to enhance the program. They also had an ASAP program.

She had been flying for Sun Country Airlines for 6 years come July. She was hired as a F/O on the B737 and had been a Captain on the B737 for three years. She had approximately 1000 hours PIC time on the airplane and 5500 hours total time. She indicated that she was a sheet metal mechanic by trade and previously owned an FAA-approved repair station for 14 years that worked primarily on the V-Tail Beechcraft Bonanza.

The call concluded at 1055.

NOTE: See Appendix 1 for a written Statement from Captain Belair to Employer (Sun Country Airlines).

APPENDIX 1

DCA19MA143

Sun Country Captain Written Statement to Company

Flight Crew Summary Report 4188

Overview:

Title: FLT - Aircraft Operation - Other - Witnessed Accident - NIP

Employees:

Employee Duty: Pilot

Employee Number: [REDACTED]

First Name: [REDACTED]

Last Name: [REDACTED]

Employees:

Employee Duty: Flight Attendant in Charge

Employee Number: [REDACTED]

First Name: [REDACTED]

Last Name: [REDACTED]

Employees:

Employee Duty: Flight Attendant

Employee Number: [REDACTED]

First Name: [REDACTED]

Last Name: [REDACTED]

Employees:

Employee Duty: Flight Attendant

Employee Number: [REDACTED]

First Name: [REDACTED]

Last Name: [REDACTED]

Processing:

ID: [REDACTED]

Title: FLT - Aircraft Operation - Other - Witnessed Accident - NIP

Date/Time When Event Occurred: Fri, 03 May 2019 21:40 Z

Local Time When Event Occurred: 10:40

Viewer Accessible: No

Event: 1

Baseline Risk Assessment

Likelihood:	D
Severity:	5
Risk Factor:	Low

D5

Description

ATC Information:

Name of ATC Facility: Jacks approach

Aircraft Configuration:

Nickname: 710SY

Tail Number: 710SY

Aircraft Type: B737-700

Seat Belt Sign: On

Flight Crew Employee Information:

Duty Off Time: Sat, 04 May 2019 03:00 Z

Duty On Time: Fri, 03 May 2019 11:00 Z

Primary Duties During Time of Event: Other

Flight Information:

Departure Airport, Runway and Gate: KMSP/MSP - 17/35

Flight Number: 8992

How full is flight (Percent)?: 0

Revenue Flight: Part 121

Time of Day: Dusk

Non-Revenue Flight: Ferry

Scheduled Arrival Airport, Runway and Gate: KNIP/NIP - 10/28

Landing Airport, Runway and Gate: KNIP/NIP - 10/28

Filed Altitude (MSL): 410

Narrative:

FLT ID [REDACTED] - Captain - Other

On Friday May 3rd 2019 myself and my crew were called on reserve to complete a military flight for Miami Air in Jacksonville NAS (NIP) going to Norfolk VA. (NGU) then ferry back to MSP after that. Our scheduled arrival time was 2100 we arrived just at dusk 2044 and landed visual runway 28 "shortened" with cables on opposite end. Winds were light straight out of the south at the time. TAF indicated +TSRA to move through 2100 to 0400 if I remember correctly. We tankered 7500 in fuel hold fuel, and had an alternate of MCO in case it got there early, after we landed we followed the follow me truck and parked next to A7 taxiway parallel to the touchdown zone of 28. After parking we discovered our troops weren't there yet, and were coming on a different aircraft arriving at 2123. Our original flight from NIP to NGU was scheduled to leave at 2200 and now was pushed back to 2230. We visited for awhile and starting getting things ready when about 2110 it began to rain right before their scheduled arrival time. Richard our charter rep pulled up their aircraft on flight aware and they were still awhile out but they were starting to descend, after about 10 minutes they did enter into a hold at either 9 or 6000 ft I can't remember at this time it was raining harder and the storm was almost right over the field. After about 10 minutes of holding they started descending again, by now the rain was coming down in sheets, still light winds according to ATIS and 5SM visibility. I decided to sit in the flight deck and watch for them. I seen the lights break out just past the approach end of runway 10 very very high, it was hard to see with the bright lights and the blinding rain but I watched as the airplane continued to descend but never truly land, it passed by our airplane located parallel to the touchdown zone in a flare but still not on the runway. I was praying to myself that this angle of attack was in fact the initiation of a go around but I could sort of tell by no

sounds of thrust or shedding water from power, that it probably wasn't. My heart sank and I knew they had probably just went off the end of the runway. I sat by myself in the flight deck for awhile and watched for them to taxi and they never did. I tuned up ground and tower but didn't hear anything. After about 5 minutes I shared with my crew in the back what I thought might have happened, I called dispatch at 2158 and shared with them what I just witnessed and at that time I seen emergency vehicles start to emerge, and Danny opened his window and verified there was a tail of an aircraft way off in the distance. For the next 30 minutes or so we waited for news of everyone's condition while watching what seemed like hundreds of emergency vehicles arrive. It was truly horrible, and quite frankly amazing everyone is okay. Thank goodness the airplane ended up in a river. Unfortunately, and so, so, sad, there were 3 pets in the belly that did not survive, they did drown. We got word about 2230 that everyone was going to survive and the injuries overall were not too bad, 17 people were taken to the hospital and like I said, the three pets perished, they said the captain just couldn't tell where he was because the visibility turned so poor with the blinding sheets of rain.

FLT ID [REDACTED] - Captain - Other

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Phase of Flight:

Flight Phase at Start of Event: Non-Flight

Weather:

Meteorological Conditions: VMC

Weather Description: VMC thunderstorm in the distance heading east towards the airport

Cause

Approach/Arrival Event:

Unstable Approach: Yes

Other Causes:

Other Aircraft/Pilot: Witnessed other aircraft accident

Weather:

Lightning/Static: Moderate

Thunderstorms: Severe

Wind: Light

Detection

How Event Detected:

Unknown: Yes

When Event Detected:

Other: I Witnessed the final approach and attempted landing

Reaction

Action Taken:

Notified Supervisor: Yes

Flight Crew:

Contacted Operations: Yes

Flight Status after Event:

Flight Cancellation: Yes

Suggestions

Narrative:

FLT ID [REDACTED] - Captain - Other

. We're pilots, we know our options. Divert, go around, It was in fact a full blown thunderstorm at the actual time they attempted to land, which of course was a very bad decision, in addition though, I do know they were trying desperately to complete their mission before they timed out, maybe if the timing was different, their decision making process would have had a different outcome. Not making excuses, just pointing out the pressures. For example, our scheduled duty time was being tested that night as well, we had one hour to play with at the completion of our trip back into MSP (on reserve they can extend to 16 hours) think about that. 3:00 am Maybe they looked at the visibility 5SM and winds 350@4kts and disregarded +TSRA and FRQ LTGIC OHD TS OHD. Maybe they didn't know the weather, we have no way of knowing their thoughts or what steps were taken to decide to land. , This was a horrible night.

FLT ID [REDACTED]5 - Captain - Other

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Report generated Wed, 08 May 2019 23:17 Z