

November 9, 2018

# **FBI Completes Investigation into August 2018 Unauthorized Flight from Seattle-Tacoma Airport**

## **Evidence Suggests That the Final Descent to the Ground was Intentional**

The FBI has completed its investigation of the unauthorized flight of a Horizon Air Q400 aircraft that occurred on Friday, August 10, 2018, from Seattle-Tacoma International Airport in Washington. Evidence collected during the course of the investigation indicates Richard Russell, 28, of Sumner, Washington, piloted the aircraft and that the final descent to the ground was intentional. Extensive investigative activity failed to reveal any additional subject(s) involved in the planning or execution of the unauthorized flight.

Given the death of Russell and his lack of co-conspirators, the FBI will not be pursuing federal charges.

As part of the investigation, the FBI considered information from the National Transportation Safety Board's review of the aircraft's flight data recorder (FDR) and cockpit voice recorder (CVR).

The FDR data indicated significant sideslip on the airplane during the final minute of flight, but the airplane appears to have remained in control, and the final descent to the ground appears to have been intentional. If the pilot had wanted to avoid impact with the ground, he had time and energy to pull the column back, raise the nose, and initiate a climb. Instead, the column remained in a position forward of neutral and moved further forward about six

seconds prior to the end of the FDR data, known to investigators as corresponding with the aircraft crash on Ketron Island in Pierce County, Washington.

The CVR did not capture any significant sounds beyond the voice communications that Russell conveyed over the cued microphone. These communications have been publicly available on various websites that capture and catalog air traffic recordings. Based on the CVR review, Russell did not make any phone calls while in the cockpit of the aircraft or make any other statements that addressed his motive.

Interviews with work colleagues, friends, and family—and review of text messages exchanged with Russell during the incident—did not identify any information that would suggest the theft of the aircraft was related to wider criminal activity or terrorist ideology. Although investigators received information regarding Russell’s background, possible stressors, and personal life, no element provided a clear motivation for Russell’s actions.

The Pierce County Medical Examiner’s Office identified the human remains found among aircraft materials from the crash site on Ketron Island as belonging to Russell and later provided a post-mortem examination report to the FBI that lists the cause of death as multiple traumatic injuries due to airplane crash and the manner of death as suicide. As part of its analysis, the Medical Examiner’s Office worked with the FBI to review the conversations Russell had with airport traffic control (captured on recordings), flight data, and information received by the FBI through extensive interviews. The Medical Examiner’s Office noted that “there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the death was intentional.”

The FBI investigation found that Russell was a properly credentialed employee of Horizon Air, had access to the exterior and interior of aircraft in the regular course of his duties, and did not appear to have violated any security measures or protocols until the theft of the plane. As part of his responsibilities as a ground crew member, Russell had knowledge regarding the operation of the aircraft’s auxiliary power unit (APU) and familiarity with tow equipment and maneuvering.

The FBI investigation did not reveal that Russell received any formal flight training. However, investigators learned that Russell was familiar with the checklist of actions for starting an airplane. Investigators were also aware of Internet searches Russell performed for flight instructional videos. Investigators did not uncover any conclusive evidence to suggest further, informal flight training.

The events of August 10, 2018, unfolded along this approximate timeline, all in Pacific Daylight Saving Time:

- 2:36 p.m. – Russell arrives at Port of Seattle-operated employee security checkpoint at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport for his work shift
- 2:38 p.m. – Russell clears through employee security checkpoint screening, without any anomalies
- 7:15 p.m. – Russell arrives in a tow vehicle at Cargo 1, at far north end of Sea-Tac airfield
- 7:19 p.m. – Russell climbs inside Horizon Air Q400 aircraft #N449QX
- 7:22 p.m. – Russell begins sequence to start aircraft, and propellers start turning
- 7:27 p.m. – Russell exits plane and uses tow vehicle to turn aircraft nose toward airfield
- 7:28 p.m. – Russell re-enters the plane
- 7:32 p.m. – The aircraft pulls away from its parked location
- 7:33 p.m. – The aircraft takes off from the airport
- 8:46 p.m. – FDR data shows end of flight, known to investigators as the aircraft crash on Ketron Island in Pierce County, Washington

The FBI investigation was conducted in conjunction with numerous partners, including West Pierce Fire and Rescue, Joint Base Lewis-McChord Fire and Emergency Services, the Gig Harbor Fire Department, the Pierce County Sheriff's Department, and the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, whose dedicated efforts ensured the safety of investigators at the crash site. Assistance from the NTSB and Alaska Airlines maintenance personnel was instrumental in the collection and processing of evidence, and Pierce County government agencies facilitated recovery and investigative efforts on Ketron Island. Coordination with the Federal Aviation Administration and Port of Seattle enabled investigators to proceed in a thorough and expeditious manner.