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The Northwest Airlines pilots who flew their jet past their destination city of Minneapolis, Minnesota, on October 21 have blamed air traffic controllers for the snafu ...

The Airbus A320 was flying at 37,000 feet over the Denver, Colorado, area at 5:56 p.m. when air traffic controllers lost radio contact for more than an hour, the NTSB said in a report. Northwest Flight 188 had departed San Diego, California, en route to Minnesota carrying 144 passengers, the two pilots and three flight attendants.

The pilots said there was "a concentrated period of discussion where they did not monitor the airplane or calls" from air traffic control, though both said they heard conversation on the radio, the report said. Neither pilot said he noticed messages sent by company dispatchers, it added. It said the men were talking about the new monthly crew flight scheduling system put into place after the Northwest-Delta merger.

"Each pilot accessed and used his personal laptop computer while they discussed the airline crew flight scheduling procedure," the report said. "The first officer, who was more familiar with the procedure, was providing instruction to the captain."

Both pilots said a flight attendant called the cockpit about five minutes before the plane was to have landed and asked their estimated time of arrival, the report said. "The captain said, at that point, he looked at his primary flight display for an ETA and realized that they had passed the airport", it added.

After landing at Minneapolis-St. Paul, both voluntarily underwent alcohol breath tests, which were negative, the report said.

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If you've been wondering about NW flight 188 (updated), James Fallows, Dec 11, 2009

That's the one that "missed" Minneapolis, overshot by 150 miles or so, then did a U-turn over Wisconsin before returning for a safe landing. Afterwards the two pilots said they had been "distracted" by a discussion about new scheduling software on their computers and therefore just didn't notice that they were out of touch with air traffic controllers for 90 minutes.

The FAA, in no-nonsense fashion, revoked the pilot certificates for both men. Below is a PDF of the original emergency-revocation letter from the FAA:

You engaged in conduct that put your passengers and your crew in serious jeopardy. NW188 was without communication with any Air Traffic Control facility and with its company dispatcher for a period of 91 minutes (over 1.5 hours) while you were on a frolic of your own. Failing to comply with ATC clearances or instructions while engaged in air carrier operations is extremely reckless. Not only did you not comply with clearances or instructions, you did not even monitor the aircraft's air-ground radios. You were disengaged and impervious to the serious threat to your own safety, as well as the safety of people for whom you are responsible. This is a total dereliction and disregard for your duties.

CNN : <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/US/12/07/wayward.pilots/index.html>

The Atlantic: www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2009/12/nw-flight-188-the-pilots-speak/32247/

