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The Mary Rose Diefenderfer Story

Mary Rose Diefenderfer is a former airline pilot and FAA Safety Inspector, still haunted and hounded by the FAA, her former employer.

Mary Rose made the mistake of taking a leadership position as the Principal Operations Inspector (POI) of Alaska Airlines in 1993. She wasn't a lone-wolf; she was a team leader. She quickly became known as a warm, and bubbly 'can-do' person. She led a team of safety inspectors. Their job was to ensure airline safety; exactly what they tried to do. It quickly became apparent that her team had an unpleasant; but rewarding job to do. Personality wouldn't matter.

Over time, the blood-money politics of airline deregulation were to shoot her down in flames. Her mistake was believing in the traditional American way. Like most of us, she didn't see the ever-so-gradual changes happening in the shadows; they were deliberately subtle, and very effective.

Contrary to the propaganda, airline deregulation wasn't about enhancing competition or diminishing government control. The issue behind the scenes was the mechanics of directing huge profits into dedicated pockets - legally (or so it would seem).

Before reaching the point of being compelled to quit the agency, the Federal Aviation Administration managers in Seattle twice removed her from her leadership job of monitoring Alaska Airlines. Both times, she was transferred out of the job after initiating an investigation of Alaska Airlines for violating pilot training regulations or violating safety certification rules.

After her first punitive transfer, in 1993, she won back her job. The FAA was then part of the traditional Civil Service; with rules for the agency to follow. Then, the rules were changed, the FAA was removed from the Civil Service environment, becoming a free agent, subject to its own selective interpretation of Federal rules. They may as well be street rules; made up on the spot.

Upon her second removal as team leader, Mary Rose had no protections; Civil Service standards were gone. She got stuck with a desk job, only there was no desk, for months. In her final days with the FAA, she was humiliated by having to answer questions for the safety inspectors who were doing her former job.

Many of the FAA's 3,000 safety inspectors have received the same treatment. Mary Rose is one of the few who won't quit, even on the outside.

It didn't start with Mary Rose. Former FAA inspector and author [Rodney Stitch](#), tells a similar but more dramatic story in his book "Unfriendly Skies," not to be confused by the same title allegedly written by 'Captain X,' an appropriate authorship of the other book.

In an interview with the Seattle P-I, Mary Rose said, "I have nightmares of a smoking hole in the ground, containing charred bodies, in the twisted metal that used to be an airplane."

Not even a year after she was pressured to quit the FAA, her worst nightmare came true, only the wreckage ended up in the ocean. The obvious horror of that accident was that the people on board knew they were going to die for an eternity before it finally happened. The accident was preventable for many reasons. It simply didn't have to happen. Mary Rose and her team lost the battle.

The accident brought tears to Mary Rose's eyes. Her only consolation was that it didn't happen on her watch; it wasn't enough. She is still haunted by the eternal question, "Was there anything more that she

or her team could have done?"

Her answer came in the form of repeated incidents after the fatal accident. The two most immediate incidents happened for the very same reason as the fatal crash. Nothing seemed to have been learned from an actual crash; the answer to her question is simply, "**no.**" Hindsight and possibilities aside, there was nothing more that she or her team would have been ALLOWED to do. The political barrier was that solid.

The FAA facilitated the savings of corporations by not pushing the science of Crew Resource Management (CRM). While safety can be expensive, it's a long term investment with a terrific return. CRM is simply a high standard of professionalism. It calls for crew teamwork; if a mistake is to be made, the crew is to err on the side of safety. Yes, that can be an expense, but radically cheaper than the alternative. CRM is a scientific version of common sense.

Despite passionate appeals from the NTSB, the FAA couldn't be bothered with insisting on CRM at the cockpit level. Late in 1999, the FAA gave their final refusal in writing. Corporate culture had won the battle; dollars were saved - **lives were not.**

One captain's philosophy says, "I'll forgive any mistake; I can't forgive a bad attitude." The cash-hungry attitude behind Alaska 261 begs eternal condemnation. The crash was the direct result of the corporate culture Mary Rose and her team tried to dissolve; their efforts didn't work.

In her personal battle with the FAA, she has a lawsuit pending against the FAA, with little hope of breaking the FAA's bureaucratic code of silence. She is an example of what happens when people lose their designation as "team-players." She is not alone; just defiant. The 'whistle-blower' laws are no more than paper.

It took four years for Mary rose to come to grips with the reality of FAA politics; between 1993 and 1997.

She and her three-member team had a rough and dangerous road to travel. They had to breach the macho "bush pilot attitude," still symbolized by leather flying jackets in place of the professional uniform jacket. It didn't work. Worse, nobody seemed to care.

In the aftermath of eighty-eight fatalities, evasion of detection was increased and a code of silence was effected.

The media continues to document the FAA facilitation of profitable safety breaches. The Alaska Airlines story is well known at the highest levels of Washington D.C.. Amazingly, nobody seems to care; not even in an election year.

Mary Rose and her safety team had to battle the modern corporate version of the Alaskan Territory frontier mentality. "Do whatever it takes; let us worry about the consequences."

The corporate culture was oriented around the ignoring and bending of the rules. Not understanding the modern power-politics of money, she was amazed when her supervisors consistently backed the airline over her team of inspectors.

Perhaps the most dramatic story is the account of her first confrontation with Alaska's management and her FAA supervisors in 1993 when an Alaska Airlines pilot became lost in Russian airspace. The particular pilot was Alaska's then - Vice President of Operations; also a former FAA official - and friend of her supervisor.

The Russian route required specially trained pilots. Mary Rose discovered that he and four other pilots were not properly trained and that the records had been falsified by the individual pilots. Eventually, five pilots confessed to altering the records, temporarily costing them their captain's certification. Despite the grievousness of the offense (a Federal felony, as well), Alaska didn't fire them. Through a convenient

technicality, they were still allowed to fly.

Conversely, Mary Rose was punished. She was pulled out of her FAA position and transferred to another job. Two months after filing a complaint under the last days of the Civil Service rules, she was reinstated.

In the next three years Mary Rose and her team discovered still more major issues. Mary Rose still believed in the FAA system, fighting to get the issues corrected. The resistance came from behind. Safety wasn't to be considered; the political relationship was sacred. It's a common story throughout the FAA system. Mary Rose hadn't seen the political writing on the wall.

Following the FAA withdrawal from the Civil Service System, the rules became highly selective. Rhetoric and semantics were employed to evade the obvious issues. Mary Rose was pulled down in June of 1997. Her crime was not being a "team-player." Taking a stand for safety and regulatory compliance earned her the description of being abrasive and hostile.

Despite her attempts to transfer to another region to escape the treatment, she'd effectively been black-listed. She had superior qualifications, yet, the transfer requests were refused without explanation.

While her pay was unaffected, her treatment at the hands of the FAA became unbearable. Ultimately, she resigned, accepting a position with ProAir, a small airline with growing pains, but a determination to solve the problems and to grow.

Today, despite a good safety record, the FAA is treating ProAir almost as a criminal element. Amazingly, the FAA is supposed to be giving as much support as possible to 'new-entrant' carriers. The Seattle FAA office is the force majeure, as the corporate offices are located in Seattle.

Mary Rose is the Vice President of Safety and Regulatory Compliance at ProAir. The unspoken fear is that she is the magnet for unparalleled harassment by the FAA. Ironically, a radically magnified version of the FAA's reason for pulling her away from Alaska Airlines. Selectively, the political relationship isn't entirely sacred.

The amazing difference is that ProAir isn't violating any regulations, beyond their 'share' of inadvertent events; as does any carrier. The political cross-hairs have been trained. The FAA doesn't take political prisoners, nor do they allow escapees. Again, Mary Rose isn't unique, other former FAA people have gotten the same treatment. The dogs of corruption follow them to the edge of the industry. No survivors are allowed.

Conversely, the news regularly reports carriers with a long-standing record of problems having repeated incidents and accidents. Mysteriously, they do not suffer the FAA enforcement nightmare.

In the FAA National Headquarters, one carrier's name is almost forbidden to be used. The carrier is cryptically known as, "the carrier with the worst safety record." Despite such references, that record is mysteriously allowed to continue. Its incidents and accidents are almost unknown to those who were not involved. The NTSB and FAA data bases only carry its minor incidents, such as turbulence or a catering truck striking an aircraft.

The most amazing part of the Mary Rose Diefenderfer story is that it's well known, even in Washington D.C. - her story, among others, has been reported, to all the major agencies and investigative bodies. These stories have been reported to the White House. Her issues (and others) with the FAA are being investigated by the FBI - **mysteriously, it just doesn't seem to matter.**

Its all about money and power; too late, Mary Rose understands.

Will the families of the crash victims on the horizon understand?

We are certain to find out; the answer is already known.

We just can't be certain of the three terrible questions, "When, where and who?"

The most damning answer IS known, "**why.**"

As a reader; it's your move.