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Cover story
Flier Beware

Flight delays should be the least of your worries. New York has the most crowded airspace in the world, plus antiquated equipment and lax security. Now more than ever, our airports are an accident waiting to happen.

BY ROBERT KOLKER

On a frigid winter evening not long ago, a few thousand feet above Queens, the pilot of a US Airways 737 was coming in for a landing at La Guardia Airport. He was seven and a half seconds away from the tarmac -- wheels out, lights on, all clear -- when along came the unthinkable. Out of the darkness, he spotted the American Airlines logo closing in from the right, getting bigger and bigger. When you're this close to the ground and you see something you don't want to see -- like another airplane heading for you -- tapping the brakes is not an option. The two planes missed, but not by much. A few hundred feet. Seconds. "Close call, huh?" the pilot said to the tower. "What's going on?" Which is just what the guys in the tower were thinking. "I'm not sure," the air-traffic controller said. "He just took the shot, and... whew! It was a slow roller, sir." An uncomfortable silence followed -- until the controller decided to try a little gallows humor. "What color were his eyes?"

That was January 23, 1998, at 6:19 p.m. Three months later, practically the same thing happened -- with just twenty feet of wiggle room -- apparently because of a spilled cup of coffee in the control tower. It happened eight months after that, too, during a light rain -- and it happened again twice last year, the worst year ever for La Guardia air traffic.

It keeps happening because at La Guardia, the world's busiest small airport, runway choreography is timed for maximum efficiency; arriving and departing planes are only seconds apart. The hurdle is La Guardia's famously outdated, short, intersecting runways, surrounded mostly by water and tormented by low-slung clouds. For more than a year now, the National Transportation Safety Board, which has investigated some of these near-tragedies, has urged the airport to space its takeoffs and landings further apart. They want to slow things down.

But the Federal Aviation Administration -- which has the right to disregard NTSB recommendations, and has thousands of planes to push through New York each day -- doesn't want things slowed down. Neither do the airlines, which have enough trouble getting in and out of La Guardia on time. And neither -- let's face it -- do many passengers, who've been groaning about delays for years. "This safety recommendation would unnecessarily impact the National Airspace System," the FAA replied to the NTSB in a memo last September. "Departure slots would be lost."

"The traffic is all climbing, diving, swerving, to get in and out of the busiest airspace on the face of the earth. Worldwide, New York is the challenge."

Last fall, after yet another close shave, an exasperated 757 pilot had enough. "After 34 years flying in and out of La Guardia, I now feel La Guardia has become a dangerous airport," he wrote in a complaint to the Aviation Safety Reporting System, an anonymous whistle-blower service. "Approach, tower, and controllers are stressed to the max. Air-Traffic Control is trying to stuff too many aircraft into too small an airport. I strongly feel La Guardia is an accident waiting to happen."

It had to happen sometime. After years of more and more flights and longer waits, we've finally hit critical mass. What was once a punctuality problem is now a safety problem -- not just at La Guardia, the heavyweight champ of delays, but also at JFK and Newark. The fates of all three are linked by the log jammed airspace they share.

Since 1996, New York air traffic has increased by a third, but the number of operational errors -- FAA jargon for controller slipups -- has jumped by 61 percent. Operational deviations, the label for slightly less life-threatening mistakes, have almost doubled. This year, New York controllers will screw up at least 70 times. And that's if we're lucky. "It's not because the controllers aren't good," says Mary Fackler Schiavo, a former Department of Transportation inspector general. "It's because they've been overworked."

Things aren't that much safer on the ground. As the number of scheduled flights increases, the risk of two planes' ramming into each other on a crowded runway jumps exponentially. This year -- again, if we're lucky -- JFK, La Guardia, and Newark will all weather four ground incursions, the FAA's term for close shaves on the tarmac. "Our study of close calls -- and La Guardia certainly has its share of those -- showed that when traffic doubles, the risks don't double; they quadruple," says Arnold Barnett, a statistician from MIT's Sloan School, who studied the risk of future collisions at the FAA's request.

How things got this bad is obvious -- too many planes trying to land on too few runways. Obsolete almost since the day it opened; pint-size La Guardia is now a punch line, like the Van Wyck. But what's not widely acknowledged is how, as the system frantically spends more dollars to fight delays, other equally vital functions get shortchanged. Ramp crews are pushed to cut their flight-turnaround times in half and prepare substitute planes faster. Flight dispatchers -- who are also responsible for signing off on safety regulations -- spend more time hastily recalibrating routes, and less on each individual plane. "Airline profitability is directly dependent on the amount of time they spend in the air and not waiting on the runway," says one Washington lawyer who works for the airlines. The whole culture of aviation is geared toward working the problem instead of fixing it.

New technology can ease the burden -- when, or if, we get any. Every decent-size boat on the Sound has a global-positioning system, but U.S. jets still don't. The FAA has yet to install a crucial radar technology to protect JFK and La Guardia from wind shear, the freak

gusts that slap planes out of the sky (though every other major airport has it). Much of the air-traffic-control world still seems to be experiencing aviation in a Cold War context. The primary communication link between the La Guardia tower and the air-traffic command center in Washington is a black rotary-dial telephone. When I ask Leo Prusak, the control tower's traffic manager, if he needs better equipment, he's too busy working the problem to think about it. "I don't even know," he says. "I mean, we don't spend our day in that realm."

Photo by Beth A. Keiser/AP.

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