

'Is This Hell?' The Pilot Accused of Trying to Crash a Plane Tells His Story.

Joseph Emerson, charged with attempted murder, said he felt trapped in a dream after taking mushrooms. He had feared mental health treatments that could disrupt his career.

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Joseph Emerson, a pilot who was in the cockpit of the Alaska Airlines flight but off duty, said that during the flight he was struggling to discern reality after consuming mushrooms two days earlier. Ted S. Warren/Associated Press

In the minutes before he boarded an Alaska Airlines flight home last month,

Joseph Emerson, a pilot for the airline, texted his wife. He was eager to be home with their two young children and longing to be next to her. "I just want to hold you," he wrote.

The flight was full, and Mr. Emerson was off duty, so he settled into the cockpit jump seat, making small talk with the pilots as the plane climbed southward out of Everett, Wash.

The plane reached cruising altitude and crossed into Oregon on its way to San Francisco. But Mr. Emerson appeared to grow agitated, throwing off his headset, the other pilots told the authorities later. "I'm not OK," he told them.

Mr. Emerson suddenly reached up and yanked the plane's two fire-suppression handles — designed to cut the fuel supply and shut down both engines. The pilots snatched his wrists, wrestling his hands away in a frantic attempt to avert disaster. They radioed that the flight needed to make an emergency diversion to Portland.

In his first interview since the Oct. 22 incident, Mr. Emerson painted a terrifying picture of the hourlong flight, one where he was overcome with a growing conviction that he was only imagining the journey and needed to take drastic action to bring the dream to an end.

"I thought it would stop both engines, the plane would start to head towards a crash, and I would wake up," he said, speaking in a cramped visitation room at the county jail in Portland, where he was being held without bail.

Upon landing, police officers took Mr. Emerson, 44, into custody, and Multnomah County prosecutors charged him with 83 counts of attempted murder — one for every passenger and crew member he was accused of trying to kill. Separately, federal prosecutors accused him of interfering with a flight crew.

Mr. Emerson's account of what happened during the flight is corroborated in its key details by what flight attendants and pilots told the police, as well as text messages and his wife's description of her conversations with her husband both before and after the flight. Prosecutors did not discuss the case beyond the charging documents.

Mr. Emerson, who has pleaded not guilty, said he had no intention of hurting anyone that day. Instead, he said, he was desperate to awaken from a hallucinogenic state that had consumed him since taking psychedelic mushrooms two days earlier, during a weekend getaway with friends to commemorate the death of his best friend. It was a loss that had plunged him into deep grief and triggered a search for help with what he realized were longstanding mental health issues.

For decades, the Federal Aviation Administration has grounded pilots dealing with depression or other mental diagnoses, with policies so strict that the decision to seek psychiatric help or a prescription for standard antidepressant medication is enough to trigger a suspension of their flight eligibility. It is a system that has left many pilots, including Mr. Emerson, to struggle largely alone.

"A lot of us aren't as forthcoming as we otherwise would be," Mr. Emerson said.

'I can't diagnose you'

As a child, Mr. Emerson had such a deep fascination with airplanes that his friend's father helped organize an introductory flight for him in fifth grade. The instructor flew over Mr. Emerson's house, and by the time they were back on the ground, the boy knew what his future would be.

Over the next few years, Mr. Emerson said, he saved up money for flying

lessons, placing ads in the local newspaper in Cheney, Wash., to drum up lawn-mowing jobs. He began flight training just before he turned 15 and got his license at 17.

After college, Mr. Emerson began working as a commercial pilot, moving through jobs at Alaska's partner carrier, Horizon Air, then Virgin America, which Alaska later acquired. He developed a reputation among colleagues as a calm, levelheaded presence in the cockpit. To passengers, he often had this message: "Be excellent to each other."

His wife, Sarah Stretch, said he was the same way with their family. Every night he was home, he read to their two children, she said. He coached their younger son's baseball team.

Sarah Stretch said she had talked to her husband in the past about seeking more support or medications for the things that troubled him. Jason Henry for The New York Times

"He's the most caring and gentle person," she said.

He worried about being away so frequently, and by 2015, Mr. Emerson was tapped to begin working as an instructor, allowing him to stay closer to home.

But in 2018, his life was jolted by the sudden death of his closest friend, Scott Pinney, who had been best man at his wedding. He died while jogging during a work trip to Hawaii. Mr. Emerson helped bring his body home and has worn a necklace containing his friend's ashes ever since.

Mr. Emerson had been through counseling in the past, he said, beginning in childhood to help deal with brutal teasing at school, and later as a way to better himself and his marriage. But Mr. Pinney's death left him dealing with what his therapist said looked like depression.

"She's the first one who said, 'You know, I can't diagnose you, but would you ever consider seeing a doctor who could diagnose you and possibly get on an antidepressant?'" Mr. Emerson said. He did some research and learned that taking any medication would most likely ground him from flying for a prolonged period of time.

For decades, the F.A.A. banned pilots with depression from flying and prohibited them from using prescription treatments, even common antidepressants, hoping to avoid suicide attempts or other mental breakdowns in the cockpit.

Pilots undergo regular medical assessments in which they must disclose to the F.A.A. a range of medical diagnoses, including depression or anxiety, and document the health professionals they have consulted.

Such a strict system led many pilots to avoid both consultation and treatment. Acknowledging the stigma created by those rules, the F.A.A. in 2010 moved to approve certain antidepressants for use by pilots with mild or moderate depression. Pilots who choose to go on the medication are nonetheless prohibited from flying for months during a monitoring period, and the process of winning approval to go back to active flying can take even longer. Even then, they may not win approval to fly.

The potential effect on careers, according to aviation doctors, industry lawyers and pilots, has prompted many aviators to either lie about the treatment they are receiving — risking a punishment of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine — or simply avoid treatment.

On Thursday, the F.A.A. said it was establishing a [committee on pilot mental health](#) to look at "breaking down the barriers that prevent pilots from reporting mental health issues to the agency." It said it was already hiring more mental health professionals to decrease "return-to-fly" wait times and

incorporating research that allows for less-frequent testing of pilots using antidepressants.

Mr. Emerson said he had previously decided not to seek out a doctor's examination or possible medication, and instead pursued alternative help on his own. That included a treatment that attempted to relieve trauma by revisiting painful memories.

And while he did not consider himself an alcoholic, he said he often self-medicated by drinking — though not to the point that it jeopardized his ability to fly. Pilots are prohibited from consuming alcohol within eight hours of flying and occasionally face random testing.

Alaska Airlines said that Mr. Emerson completed his medical certifications throughout his career "and at no point were his certifications denied, suspended or revoked." In an email on Thursday, the company said that "more can be done" to support pilot mental health.

'Am I dead?'

Over the past year, work grew more demanding. Mr. Emerson was shifting from Airbus planes to Boeing aircraft, a big learning curve. He took on the role of safety representative for Alaska's San Francisco-based crew, charged with increasing the reporting of safety problems. The Boeing training kept him away from home for much of the summer, just as he and his wife were navigating health issues one of their children was having.

Then in October, he and several friends gathered on a remote property in Washington's scenic Methow Valley to honor Mr. Pinney's life — a memorial getaway they had also done the year before.

During a Friday night of sipping on whiskeys and beers, someone had the

idea of taking psychedelic mushrooms. Mr. Emerson had never tried them; he would often avoid even secondhand marijuana smoke in case it showed up in a drug test. He said his friends assured him they were safe, did not last a long time and would not show up on a drug test. He was not scheduled to fly again for six days.

Joseph Emerson began flight training just before he turned 15 and got his license at 17. Courtesy of Emerson Family

Around a fire, he ate a bit of the mushrooms. Soon, the friends were sharing deep conversations about Mr. Pinney, and Mr. Emerson fixated on the crackling of the blaze.

But as the others started going to bed that night, Mr. Emerson said, he began to feel a deep unease, a sense that his friends were teasing him and maybe trying to hurt him.

"I felt fearful of them," he said. At the same time, "I started to have this feeling that this wasn't real."

He said he began worrying about the safety of his wife and children, fretted over his estranged relationship with his brother, replayed shameful things that had happened over his lifetime, from childhood to days in adulthood when he drank too much.

"I thought of a lot of traumatic things in that time where I was like, 'Am I dead? Is this hell?'" he said. "I'm reliving that trauma."

He woke up the next morning desperate to return home. He spent the day with a nagging sense that he was locked in purgatory.

'I am horrified'

For many people, the acute effects of a psychedelic trip last for several

hours. But as a legal therapeutic market for mushrooms [recently launched in Oregon](#), some researchers have cautioned that psychedelics may have prolonged effects for those vulnerable to a psychotic disorder.

Having had little or no sleep, Mr. Emerson departed the getaway with a friend on Sunday and made his way to the airport in Everett, still with the recurrent feeling that none of what was happening was real. The GPS directions in the car made no sense to him; the airline staff seemed to be using the wrong protocols for boarding the plane; in the cockpit, he felt like he should have known one of the two pilots, but he did not and was confounded as to how that could be.

As the plane took off, he said, he struggled to understand the pilots' response to a report of mild turbulence ahead. Were these really pilots? Was he still dreaming? He texted the friend who had dropped him off at the airport, reporting that he was "having a panic attack." The friend asked if he needed anything.

"Send love," Mr. Emerson replied. "I need to be home."

The friend's reply came through a spoken text-to-audio message he heard through an earbud under his cockpit headset. "Do your breathing exercises," the friend advised. It was a comment that made no sense to him. He threw off the headset and yelled at the pilots for help. When nothing happened, Mr. Emerson said, he panicked, convinced he was indeed imagining the whole thing. He needed to wake himself up.

He grabbed the engine shut-off handles, located just above the jump seat where he was sitting.

The pilots sprang into action, grabbing his wrists. They pushed the emergency handles back into place, acting before the engines were starved

of fuel.

Temporarily jarred back to reality, Mr. Emerson recalls leaving the cockpit, closing the door, asking a flight attendant for help and walking to the back of the plane.

As he moved past the passengers, he said, he saw a mother and children looking at their tablets, and it reminded him of all the times he had traveled with his own family. Nobody seemed alarmed, he said. Did they not know what had happened in the cockpit? Or was he still dreaming?

The pilots turned toward Portland, looking for a place to make a swift landing, and called for the aid of law enforcement. "We've got the guy that tried to shut the engines down out of the cockpit," a pilot told air traffic controllers.

At the back of the plane, Mr. Emerson asked a flight attendant to restrain him. "You need to cuff me right now, or it's going to be bad," he said, according to a police officer who interviewed the flight crew.

Crew members affixed a set of flex cuffs, connected in the front, that still allowed Mr. Emerson some movement. Soon, he picked up a pot of coffee, chugging from it directly until a flight attendant took it away.

Mr. Emerson said he still was able to reach his phone and send off a few texts. Screenshots show he messaged a group of friends: "I'm having a mental breakdown and tried to turn off both engines on my flight home." He sent another to his wife: "I've made a big mistake."

The Multnomah County Justice Center in Portland, where Mr. Emerson is currently in custody. Will Matsuda for The New York Times

Flight attendants recalled his repeatedly asking whether things were real or

whether he was in a nightmare. At one point, he reached out to open the emergency door, thinking that if he jumped out, he would certainly wake up. A flight attendant stopped him by grabbing his hand.

When the plane landed, a line of law enforcement officers moved in to take him into custody.

He still could not shake his sense of confusion. One officer reported in documents that Mr. Emerson asked if their conversation was real. When the officer replied that it was, Mr. Emerson told him: "If this is real, and all of that was real, then I have done something to me that is unfathomable."

Held in a detention room at the airport, he recalls stripping naked, trying to jump out a window, urinating on himself and trying to make himself ejaculate — all in hopes of waking up.

At one point, he was given a chance to call a lawyer and instead phoned his wife. She said it was clear from the call that he was not himself. At times he was mumbling and asking, "Is this real?" Then, suddenly, he was singing Boyz II Men's "It's So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday."

"It was not the Joe that I know," Ms. Stretch said.

Over the weekend before the flight, she had been shocked when he phoned her from the retreat and told her he had taken mushrooms. She was bewildered about the emotion in his calls; he kept saying how much he wanted to be home.

Ms. Stretch said she had talked to her husband in the past about seeking more support or medications for the things that troubled him. He would say he did not want to take anything more than allergy pills; he did not want to risk their livelihood.

"His pilot career was his life," she said. "This kid, since he was 11 years old, wanted to be an airline pilot."

At his court arraignment two days after his arrest, Mr. Emerson said, he was still struggling to determine whether the proceedings and his lawyers were real. It was not until Wednesday, five days after consuming the mushrooms, he said, that things started to become clearer.

"I am horrified that those actions put myself at risk and others at risk," he said. "That crew got dealt a situation there's no manual, checklist or procedure that's been written for. And they did an exemplary job keeping me and the rest of the people on that plane safe."

What happens next, he said, is out of his hands. He said he wants to be as transparent as possible about what happened.

He also understands that however it ends, life may never be the same as it was before he boarded that plane.

"I don't know if I'll ever fly an airplane again," he said. "I really don't. And I had a moment where that kind of became obvious. And I had to grieve that."

A correction was made on

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An earlier version of this article misstated the name of one of the airlines that employed the pilot Joseph Emerson. It is Virgin America, not Virgin Airlines.

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