

Regulations and Required Rest:

The rules set forth by the Federal Aviation Administration under their Code of Federal Regulations Part 121 (Operating Requirements: Domestic, Flag, and Supplemental Operations) specifically referring to Subpart Q: Flight Time Limitations and Rest Requirements for Domestic Operations.¹

To summarize: a pilot working in the United States flying for a commercial airline, operating under Part 121, can fly² for a total of 8 hours *between required rest periods*; 30 hours within 7 consecutive days; 100 hours in any calendar month and 1,000 hours in any calendar year.

Deducing from FAR 121.471, a pilot can log just shy of 8 hours of flight time while being on duty for a maximum of 16 hours straight as long as he/she gets 9 hours of rest. Most airlines institute a 14-hour duty day limitation, which can be extended to 16 hours due to inclement weather and mechanical delays. But in no instance shall a crew take a flight knowing well that they would violate the 16 hour regulation. At that point, your pilots usually advise you that they will need to re-crew the aircraft and flight in order to get you to your destination.

Rest begins 15 minutes after the crew opens the door and lets passengers off the aircraft. This is not to be mistaken for when one arrives at their designated hotel for the overnight. More specifically, a crews' rest period begins before they even get to leave the airport, get to the hotel and fall asleep. Usually, it takes about 15 minutes for the crew to get off the airplane when they have to wait around for a wheel chair or the passengers to deplane. On various occasions, the time it takes to travel from the airport to the hotel can take up to 45 minutes each way greatly reducing the amount of sleep a pilot can get. So, for example, when I have a minimum rest period of 9 hours, I can only get, at most, 6 hours of shut-eye. Breaking it down even further, I get off the aircraft around 10pm, get to the hotel around 10:30pm, finally get to bed around 11:00pm if I'm actually able to sleep and unwind in 30 minutes, wake up at 5:00am, be ready downstairs with or without eating breakfast by 6:15am, get to the airport by 6:45am for a 7:00am duty in, take off by 7:45am and fly until 9:00pm!

There have been many fatigued related incidents and accidents throughout the years in which pilots study and analyze. It wasn't until Capt. Rich Rubin requested, back in September 2000, for a thorough investigation and interpretation of FAR 121.471 that the final rule came about. Even since then, the current rules and regulations have remained unchanged since 1985!³

¹http://rgl.faa.gov/REGULATORY_AND_GUIDANCE_LIBRARY/RGFAR.NSF/0/0CD035F7648A95F8852566EF006D0B3D?OpenDocument

²(*def*: from door close to door open, not including the time at the airport waiting for the aircraft, hanging in the cockpit boarding passengers, or deplaning at the destination or refueling)

³http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0UBT/is_22_16/ai_87073652

A recent article published two weeks ago in the New York Times provides another clear representation of what I am trying to convey within this essay. Another fact being brought into life is quoted below.

“In 1995, under pressure from the National Transportation Safety Board and the Air Line Pilots Association, the F.A.A. proposed shortening pilots’ workdays and redefining duty hours to include the time spent getting from plane to hotel and back.

But the airlines, which deny that pilot fatigue is a significant problem, opposed the changes, and the agency eventually backed off.”⁴

A colleague of mine, who will remain unnamed, witnessed first-hand the priorities of the airline he works for, which will also remain unnamed. Granted he has had experiences of both being a crew scheduler and a pilot, he is well aware of the angst that the desk job can provide as well as the physical abuse can receive while being on a four day trip.

He woke up in Monterrey, Mexico (long before the Swine Flu) ready to begin his final day of a 4-day trip with a fever and chills. He felt like he was in good enough shape to fly. Later that day, still waiting for his duty in at the airport, he realized that he would only be good for one leg (Monterrey to Atlanta). He called crew scheduling to inform them that if they had planned on adding another round trip to his schedule, he would be unable to do it due to his physical condition. He arrived in Atlanta, turned on his phone, and had a voicemail waiting for him from crew scheduling informing him of a short round trip he was assigned that left 3 hours from then. He was forced to call in sick, risking punishment from the company due to the fact that ones’ number of sick calls per year are tracked and held against you. It could have *potentially* saved the company money by making him fly it rather than another reserve pilot, and they were willing to take the risk of him flying in poor physical condition for that reason alone.

A second example of careless scheduling by airlines is when they pay no attention to sleep cycles, duty in and duty out times, and rest periods when making the determination of whether or not to extend or schedule a pilot. They check the Part 121 regulations to see if it’s legal...that’s it. That same colleague was on a 4 day trip, with the first 3 days starting later in the day and ending late in the evening, with his

⁴<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/17/nyregion/17pilot.html?pagewanted=1& r=1>

final day beginning at 4:45 am flying one leg to Atlanta from Louisiana in which was to be released to go home. It had already been a long week and they had gotten in late the night before. He got about 4.5 hours of sleep that night. While he was pre-flighting his aircraft that early morning, he got a call from crew scheduling informing him of a schedule change. He was no longer flying to Atlanta and going home. He was flying to Atlanta, deadheading⁵ to Cincinnati, flying a round trip from Cincinnati to Tulsa, then from Cincinnati back to Atlanta. What was supposed to be a 3 hour day, justifying his lack of sleep the night before, turned into 14.5 hours, ending at approximately 6:30 pm. Said pilot was nervous driving home that night because he was so tired. He had no recollection of the final 15 minutes of the last approach into Atlanta that night, of which he was at the controls of the aircraft. Not an uncommon story within the entire airline industry.

I will provide more details on pay and commuting in a follow up paper. Till then, fly safe and say hello from time to time!

⁵(*def*: riding as a passenger in the back to the company's desired destination to where one would pick up a plane and operate it to another destination)