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# Ex-Boeing Pilot Complained of Management Pressure on MAX, Former Colleagues Say

Federal investigators are looking into Mark Forkner's effort to preclude expensive pilot training before rollout, according to people familiar with the situation



Two crashes of Boeing 737 MAX jets in less than five months took a total of 346 lives. PHOTO:STEPHEN BRASHEAR/GETTY IMAGES

*By Andy Pasztor and Andrew Tangel*

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Mark Forkner, a former senior Boeing Co. [BA 1.04%](#) ▲ pilot who was publicly vaulted into the company's 737 MAX crisis, complained years ago that he felt pressure from management to ensure the series of jets wouldn't require expensive pilot training, according to former colleagues.

Mr. Forkner, who at the time was the chief technical pilot for the MAX and who is a focus of a federal probe of the jet's development, became well-known Friday when internal messages that Boeing turned over to congressional investigators suggested he might have had concerns about the plane's flight-control system after encountering some problems in a simulator.

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successful effort in 2016 and 2017 to persuade the Federal Aviation Administration not to require extra simulator sessions before allowing MAX pilots to fly passengers, one of these people said.

Mr. Forkner's attorney David Gerger declined to address questions about his client, who is now assisting with technical matters at Boeing's largest MAX customer, Southwest Airlines Co. Mr. Gerger told The Wall Street Journal on Monday: "Mark flew the MAX. His Air Force buddies flew the MAX. He would never put himself, his friends or any passenger in an unsafe plane."

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According to a fellow pilot who had worked closely with Mr. Forkner at Boeing, Mr. Forkner repeatedly indicated to this ex-colleague that he feared losing his job if the FAA rejected Boeing's arguments to minimize training, and the fellow pilot recalled making that point in an interview

with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

That interview is part of the widening Justice Department probe into how the MAX was designed and certified as safe by the FAA and whether Boeing officials may have misled regulators as part of that process.

Boeing didn't respond to a request for comment about pressure on Mr. Forkner. Over the weekend, the company said it was still investigating the circumstances surrounding the internal messages. "We understand entirely the scrutiny this matter is receiving and are committed to working with investigative authorities and the U.S. Congress as they continue their investigations," the company said. A Justice Department spokesman declined to comment.

On Tuesday, Boeing removed Kevin McAllister as head of its commercial airplanes unit, making him the highest-profile departure from the company since the MAX crisis.

The FBI, which is working with the Transportation Department's inspector general's office, is looking into whether inaccurate statements, incomplete technical submissions or undue management pressure inside Boeing contributed to two fatal crashes of MAX jets in less than five months, according to people familiar with the situation. The misfire of an automated flight-control feature known as MCAS led to the accidents that took a total of 346 lives and grounded the global fleet in March.

Mr. Forkner's responsibilities at Boeing focused on pilot-training issues and devising manuals for

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Rick Ludtke, a former Boeing flight deck engineer who worked with Mr. Forkner, said: “Mark was under an enormous amount of pressure....He clearly was stressed.”

Some of Mr. Forkner’s former colleagues recall him as an honest co-worker who wasn’t able to fly much at Boeing because of labor disputes and budget issues affecting the group he worked in. One former colleague described him as someone with the character to take a stand over safety issues. The fellow pilot said some co-workers were surprised when Mr. Forkner, known as an avid Seattle Seahawks football fan, took the Southwest job and relocated to the Dallas region, leaving a large group of relatives behind.

When Mr. Forkner’s internal Boeing messages to another pilot emerged Friday, Southwest Airlines Pilots Association President Jon Weaks said the messages showed “Boeing misled pilots, government regulators and other aviation experts about the safety of the 737 MAX.” Southwest has pulled the MAX from its schedules through early February.

In the documents that congressional investigators have gathered, which total hundreds of thousands of pages, is a Boeing marketing brochure for the MAX that advertised the jet wouldn’t require significant additional pilot training, according to Rep. Peter DeFazio, the Oregon Democrat who chairs the House Infrastructure and Transportation Committee. Boeing has said that was a design objective “always subordinate to other requirements, including safety.”

Southwest, with some 10,000 pilots, years ago signed what Mr. Ludtke has called an unusual deal for a Boeing customer: a \$1 million rebate for any aircraft that required extra simulator training for cockpit crews.

Investigators for the House panel also have documents verifying that arrangement, according to a person familiar with the committee’s work. Mr. DeFazio said Mr. Forkner has declined to meet with congressional investigators. A Southwest spokeswoman said its MAX contract was a “very standard agreement” that “holds parties accountable to previously determined benefits of launching a new aircraft type.”

The union representing pilots at Southwest has sued Boeing, alleging that the plane maker rushed its 737 MAX jet to market and misrepresented the plane as safe. Boeing has said it respects the Southwest pilots but it will defend itself against the suit.

Southwest had 34 MAX jets in its fleet at the time of the grounding and was supposed to have around twice as many by the end of the year.

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Boeing has tried for months to interview Mr. Forkner about what he meant in the messages, a person familiar with the company's internal review of the matter said.

People familiar with the matter said Boeing and Mr. Forkner don't have a joint defense agreement, indicating that their interests might not be aligned and that they aren't routinely sharing documents or other information.

Instant messages between Mr. Forkner and a colleague in November 2016 were lighthearted and technical by turns and started with banter about drinking vodka in a hotel room.

Later in the exchange, Mr. Forkner said: "So I basically lied to the regulators (unknowingly)," apparently referring to how engineers modified the MCAS flight-control system. Mr. Gerger has said Mr. Forkner was referring to a malfunctioning simulator program, not problems with the MCAS feature itself.

In January 2017, Mr. Forkner said in an email to the FAA that all mention of MCAS should be removed from manuals because the flight control system activates "way outside the normal operating envelope," meaning pilots would practically never experience its activation. An earlier email included Mr. Forkner's mention of his skill at "Jedi-mind tricking" foreign regulators into adopting the FAA's position on training requirements.

Mr. Forkner's internal messages have sparked condemnation on Capitol Hill, where Boeing Chief Executive Dennis Muilenburg is slated to testify before two panels next week. They have also further strained an already tense relationship between Boeing and the FAA.

During the time of the internal messages, four months before U.S. regulators in March 2017 approved MAX to begin commercial service, Mr. Forkner sent a separate message from his official Boeing email account to an FAA official about working to certify the jet with the FAA and foreign regulators.

"It was a huge deal, but I got what I needed to, at least so far," he wrote. The message ended with: "You know me. I usually get what I want." The name of the recipient was blacked out in the copy, which was among a batch of emails obtained by congressional investigators and which was reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

Over the weekend, Boeing said various FAA officials knew about MCAS's final configuration regardless of what Mr. Forkner said in chat messages or emails. The company said Mr. Forkner's counterparts at the FAA were exposed to the modified system on test flights starting a few

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At Southwest, Mr. Forkner has worked on regulatory and MAX issues, people familiar with the airline said, sometimes shaping discussions between the FAA and Southwest's management. The Southwest spokeswoman said Mr. Forkner has worked on various projects as part of the flight operations technical team but hasn't worked as a leader on the airline's plans to return the MAX to passenger service.

**Write to Andy Pasztor at [andy.pasztor@wsj.com](mailto:andy.pasztor@wsj.com) and Andrew Tangel at [Andrew.Tangel@wsj.com](mailto:Andrew.Tangel@wsj.com)**

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