

# **AARPBulletintoday**

## **Experience Counts in the Cockpit**

By: [Carole Fleck](#) | Source: AARP Bulletin Today | - January 16, 2009

---

Bert Yetman lived to fly. Each time he entered the cockpit, he felt fortunate to have his job. That is, until his birthday some 16 years ago, when the former Air Force fighter pilot was forced to retire from Southwest Airlines amid federal regulations that required commercial pilots to retire at 60.

Fit and healthy, Yetman continued to fly 737s—the same aircraft he piloted for Southwest—for a private company that refurbished American planes and sold them to foreign carriers overseas. For nearly a decade, Yetman says he flew even more extensively than he had for Southwest—to China, Korea, Russia, Indonesia and Korea—to deliver the jets.

At the same time, [his frustration](#) over the regulation that ended his career led him to create the Professional Pilots Federation, a 1,000 member-strong organization whose sole aim was to overturn the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) rule requiring pilots to retire at age 60.

"I would probably still be flying for Southwest if I could," says Yetman, now 76, who spearheaded five lawsuits and continues to fly his own small plane. "Experience is important [as a pilot] because other people's lives are at stake, but the unfortunate thing about experience is you have to get older to get it."

When the retirement age for pilots was raised to 65 in December 2007, Yetman's campaign came to an end. The law still requires at least one pilot on international flights to be younger than 60, but on domestic flights both can be 64 or younger.

Yetman says the FAA's concerns about safety were unfounded. In testimony before the [National Civil Aviation Review Commission](#) in 1997, he cited a study on aging pilots commissioned by the FAA that reported that older pilots had fewer accidents than their younger peers.

The study "showed that pilots in the age group of 24 to 39 had the highest number of accidents," he told the commission, "and pilots 55 and over had virtually no accidents. The charts accompanying the study showed no potential of increased accidents until [the pilots reached] age 68 or 69, and then nowhere near the level of the 24-to-39-year group."

The age 60 rule was instituted in 1959 by the FAA, which cited safety concerns. The 2007 change followed a move by European aviation authorities to raise the retirement age from 60 to 65 for most international pilots. U.S. pilots were particularly angered when European pilots over 60 flew into the United States at an age when they were forced to retire.

Laurie McCann, an attorney for AARP, which filed numerous friend-of-the-court briefs on behalf of older pilots who had challenged mandatory retirement laws, says efforts to oppose the rule were futile for years. "Age 60 was an arbitrary figure and [mandatory retirement] should be based on an individual's ability to do the job," she says.

Older pilots bring a level of experience that benefits passengers when unforeseen events unfold, as in yesterday's Hudson River crash, says David Hale, executive director of [Pilot Medical Solutions](#), which establishes whether commercial pilots with medical conditions or on medication are fit to fly.

"There never was a medical basis for making retirement mandatory at age 60," says Hale, a commercial pilot. "That's why it changed."

---

*Carole Fleck is a senior editor at AARP Bulletin Today.*