The Sky Thief

How did Beebo Russell — a goofy, God-fearing baggage handler — steal a passenger plane from the Seattle-Tacoma airport and end up alone in a cockpit, with no plan to come down?

Tim Dickinson

June 24, 2021

Illustration by Jeffrey Smith for Rolling Stone

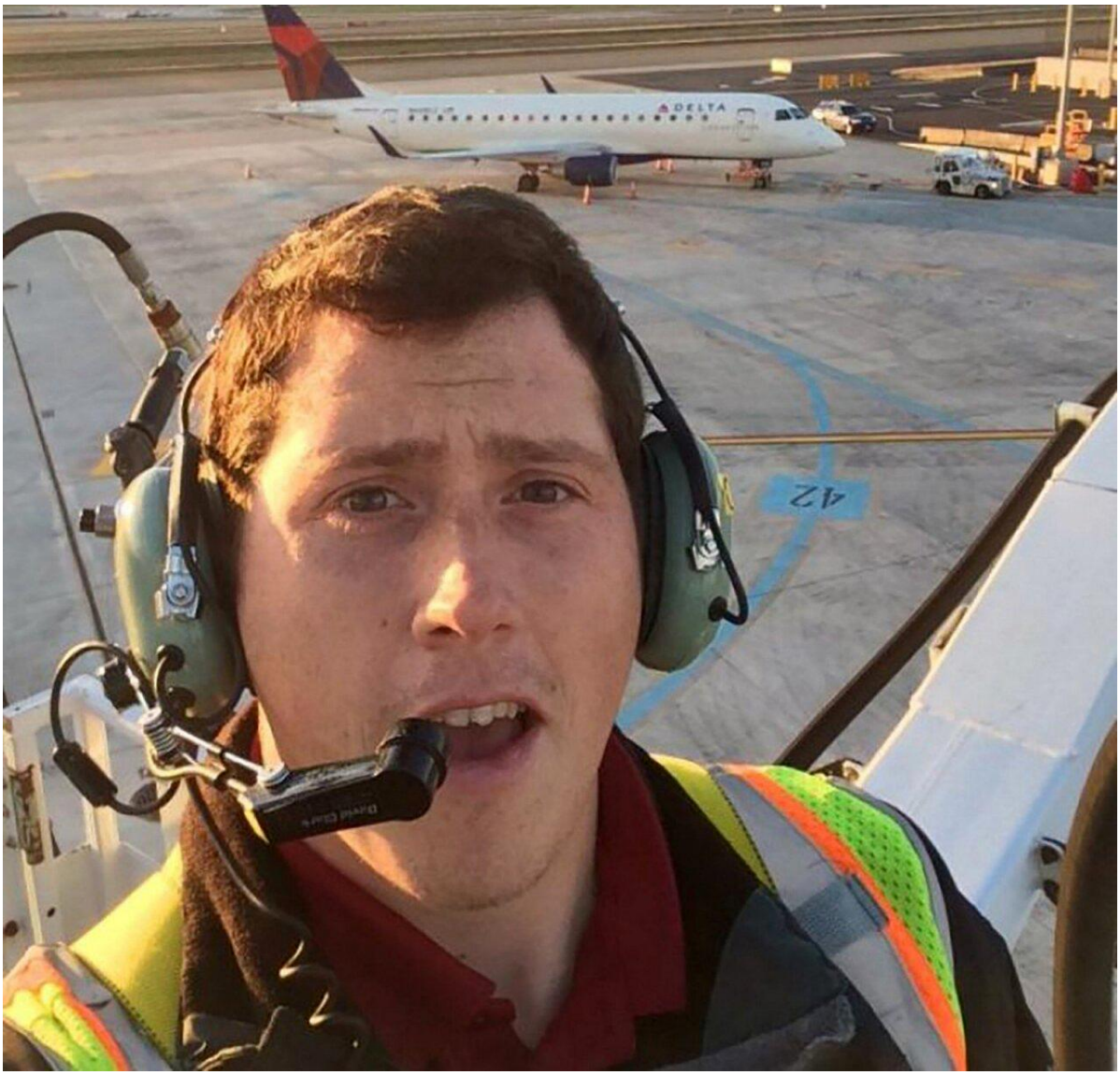
The stolen airplane began rolling forward under its own power, with no one in the cockpit. The twin engines of the Horizon Air Bombardier Dash 8 Q400 aircraft had been set to idle. But without anyone riding the brakes, the 13-foot propellers began pushing the plane slowly toward the runways of **Seattle**-Tacoma International Airport.

The thief, Richard "Beebo" Russell, had just disconnected the tow bar of a tug vehicle he'd used to pivot the plane out of its parking spot. In a frantic, seven-second dash, the husky 28-year-old abandoned the truck and sprinted to the lowered passenger-entry door. He scrambled into the fuselage and hoisted up the hatch before flinging himself into the captain's seat.

It was August 10th, 2018, a warm, clear evening nearly two decades after 9/11. Inside the SeaTac terminals, the indignities of airport security were in full force: Transportation Security Administration agents were X-raying shoes, forcing travelers to toss out tubes of toothpaste, and palpating passengers' private parts with the backs of blue-gloved hands to guard against box cutters being smuggled in their bras or briefs. But no one was keeping tabs on Russell. He was not a pilot; he worked ground crew for Horizon Air. His core duties revolved around loading baggage onto short-haul flights, but he was also trained to tow planes on the tarmac. Silently, and without warning, he'd gone rogue.

The American system of airport security treats every passenger as a potential threat. But a different standard applies to the hundreds of thousands of workers at the nation's airports, who are vetted upon hiring and then broadly trusted not to pose a danger. This extraordinary faith extends to overworked, underpaid employees at the bottom of the airport pecking order, including ground agents like Russell who engage in monotonous, often backbreaking labor, exposed to the elements, jet exhaust, summertime smoke, and the roar of the runway.

The record of what transpired that August evening is extensive, but largely unofficial. The incident was one of the most serious domestic airline-security breaches since 9/11. "It's the first time that we've had a commercial aircraft stolen off the ramp of an active airport," says Steven Armstrong, vice director of operations for the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). But there was no commission to produce a public accounting of Russell's actions. The airline and TSA refused interview requests for this story. This account pieces together public air-traffic-control recordings; disclosures from the FBI; testimony before the Washington State Legislature; and an unpublished after-incident report commissioned by the Port of Seattle, obtained by *Rolling Stone* through a public-records request.



UNAUTHORIZED DEPARTURE: Russell took a job as a ground-service agent with Horizon Air in 2015, which afforded him free flights home to Alaska. "I lift a lot of bags — soooooo many bags," he said.

Richard Russell/Wordpress.com

Russell had begun his shift that afternoon as usual, clocking in just after 2:30 p.m. His window of opportunity didn't open until shortly before 7 p.m. Wearing a weathered yellow-and-orange reflective vest, Russell commandeered a tow rig at SeaTac's C Concourse and trundled a mile to the north end of the airfield, where the Horizon Air craft was parked for maintenance. The plane, with seating for 76, had completed its last scheduled flight for the day around noon, a 23-minute jump from British Columbia's Vancouver Island to Seattle, across the Salish Sea.

Russell's employee badge gave him access to both the tug and the remote cargo area. There was no lock on the door of the airplane. The cockpit was not secured. The biggest impediment Russell faced is that maneuvering a parked plane is a two-man job, and he had no accomplice. At 7:15 p.m., he hooked the tug to the front of the Q400, tossed aside the wheel blocks, and boarded the plane. Although trained to start the aircraft's auxiliary power unit, Russell exceeded all authorization — toggling levers and switches in sequence to fire up the engines. He then hopped out, reboarded the tug, and swiveled the plane toward the taxiway.

Matt Scott was the FBI's case agent for the investigation. He tells *Rolling Stone* that Russell's "brazen" **theft** of the Q400 was hidden in plain sight on the busy tarmac. "There didn't seem to be anything that was out of the ordinary — up until the last minute when he actually took it," he says. The lone security guard in the area was attending to an arriving vehicle at a nearby entrance gate. And the report from the Port of Seattle, which runs SeaTac, underscores that only Russell's short sprint back to the moving airplane would have raised alarms. "Even if the guard . . . had witnessed these actions," it reads, "the time frame was too short to have precluded the Horizon employee's entry to the cabin of the aircraft."

Back in the cockpit, Russell faced a confounding control panel. Far to his right, near the empty co-pilot's seat, he slid up the levers for each of the propellers, producing a satisfying roar. A dark luck was with Russell. The wind was blowing from the south. Air traffic was unusually sparse. "The plane had **direct** and immediate access to a runway going the right direction for takeoff," Wendy Reiter, director of aviation security for SeaTac, would later testify.

The SeaTac tower spotted Russell on the taxiway and radioed down in the mechanical monotone of air-traffic control: "Aircraft on Charlie lining up runway 1-6-Center, say your call sign." When Russell did not reply, the controller broke out of his professional rhythm, nearly shouting, "Who's the Dash 8 holding on runway 1-6-Center?!"

An Alaska Airlines pilot cut in on the radio: "That aircraft is taking off rolling," he warned. Were the brakes on? "His wheels are smoking left and right," the pilot said, "just rolling down the runway."

"I'm not even talking to him," the controller spat. At 7:33 p.m., according to the FBI, the Q400 lifted off, soaring south toward Mount Rainier, the 14,500-foot, glacier-topped volcano looming over the Puget Sound. The Alaska Airlines pilot said to summon military jets. "You need to call and scramble, now." The voice in the tower replied flatly, "We are."

Beebo Russell loved Jesus, craft beer, and cargo shorts. He was not the kind of man you'd peg for grand-theft airplane. Those who loved him describe him as compassionate, reliable, God-fearing, and goofy. He was raised in a military family with a reverence for fair play. A dedication from his family on his high school senior-yearbook page cites the Bible, 2 Timothy 2:5, which reads: "Whoever enters an athletic competition wins the prize only when playing by the rules."

Born in the Florida Keys and nicknamed Beebo as an infant, Russell was raised from boyhood in Wasilla, Alaska, outside Anchorage. He attended the same high school as Sarah Palin, graduating in 2008, the year Palin was picked for the GOP ticket. Russell was a three-sport star for the Wasilla Warriors, placing fifth in the state in discus and fourth in wrestling, in the 215-pound category. He was a quiet leader, recording school athletes' personal bests on their weight belts; his is still in the school gymnasium.

Russell was a brick of a young man, square-shouldered and stout with long, powerful arms. On the football field, he barreled for 327 yards, scoring six touchdowns as a standout senior fullback. He embraced contact and, according to friends and family, got his bell rung with some frequency. At the

time, concern about football brain injury had yet to enter the mainstream; Alaska would not implement a concussion protocol for school sports until 2011.

The Horizon Air Bombardier Dash 8 Q400, part of Alaska Air's fleet, which was commandeered by Russell.

EricSalard/CC BY-SA 2.0

With a shock of half-groomed brown hair and a face full of freckles, Russell was funny, extroverted, "a handful," relatives would later say; they all had "Beebo stories." As a high schooler he hosted booze-free bonfires for friends; on his MySpace page, misbehaving looked like shotgunning cans of Mountain Dew with his bros. In one senior-yearbook photo, he is posed atop a boulder, legs out to the side, his long arms holding up his blocky frame. His head is thrown back with a coy expression, as if the prompt had been "Give me a sexy walrus."

"You bring such humor and unpredictability to our lives," reads his family's yearbook dedication. "As you write the rest of this story, always remember you are loved."

Recruited to play football at North Dakota's Valley City State University, an hour outside of Fargo, Russell hoped to emulate Dallas Clark, a college All-American who would star for the NFL's Indianapolis Colts. But Russell's athletic chops didn't translate to the college game. In Wasilla, his exploits regularly made the pages of the *Frontiersman.* But in Valley City he redshirted his freshman year; in 2009 he traveled with the team, but the only public record of game action came against Concordia, when he gained three yards. His college coach Dennis McCulloch remembers Russell as "a no-issue guy on our team," but says he left the team after that season. "My guess, because he wasn't playing a lot."

Russell landed in Coos Bay, a small timber town on the Oregon coast. He enrolled in Southwestern Oregon Community College, a two-year school with a green, residential campus that attracts many

students from the Pacific Rim. God took up space left over by football. Russell was active in Campus Crusade for Christ, an evangelical student group, and volunteered, mentoring high schoolers.

"If you look at his picture, he looks like a smiling teddy bear kind of guy. And he was," says Pete Schaefers, who was Campus Crusade's adult adviser. "You could count on him." Schaefers recalls joining Russell to help clean the trash out of a young couple's messy garage — "shlucking out the refuse, throwing it into a trailer." Dirty work didn't phase Russell. "He was super good-natured, always," Schaefers recalls. "I never saw him when he wasn't."

At Campus Crusade meetings, Russell met Hannah, his future wife, who studied in the school's culinary program. "They went from sitting across the table to sitting next to each other," Schaefers recalls. Beebo and Hannah were married in 2012. In wedding pictures, he wore a red tie and a tuxedo vest, she wore a strapless white gown. Beebo smirked as if stoned on his own good fortune.

Two months after they wed, the Russells opened Hannah Marie's Artisan Breads and Pastries, offering biscotti, maple-pecan scones, and pumpkin muffins. A newspaper profile described Hannah as the perfectionist master baker; Beebo was cast as the mischievous apprentice who experimented with "wild" recipes. A Bible verse hung visible to customers: "I have loved you with an everlasting love. I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt."

To Schaefers, who'd often pop in for a bite and linger to chat, "both of them just seemed stellar." But by the end of 2014, Beebo and Hannah had wearied of the isolation of Coos Bay, a six-and-a-half-hour drive from Seattle. To Russell's chagrin, they chose suburban Sumner, Washington, over Wasilla. "Failing to convince Hannah of Alaska's greatness," Russell later wrote, "we settled on Sumner because of its close proximity to her family." They sold the bakery that fall, alerting customers to "stop in for some Christmas cookies and a last hurrah."

Russell's voice cracked out on an air-traffic recording about 10 minutes into his flight. He sounded strong, jocular, clear. But there was a buzzy undercurrent. A mix of adrenaline and panic. Russell was speaking to an air-traffic controller, whom the FBI identifies as Andrew Drury, at the Seattle Terminal Radar Approach Control, an FAA facility near SeaTac. The controller's question doesn't come through in the air-traffic recording, but Russell laughed it off: "Man, I'm a ground-service agent! I don't know what that is."

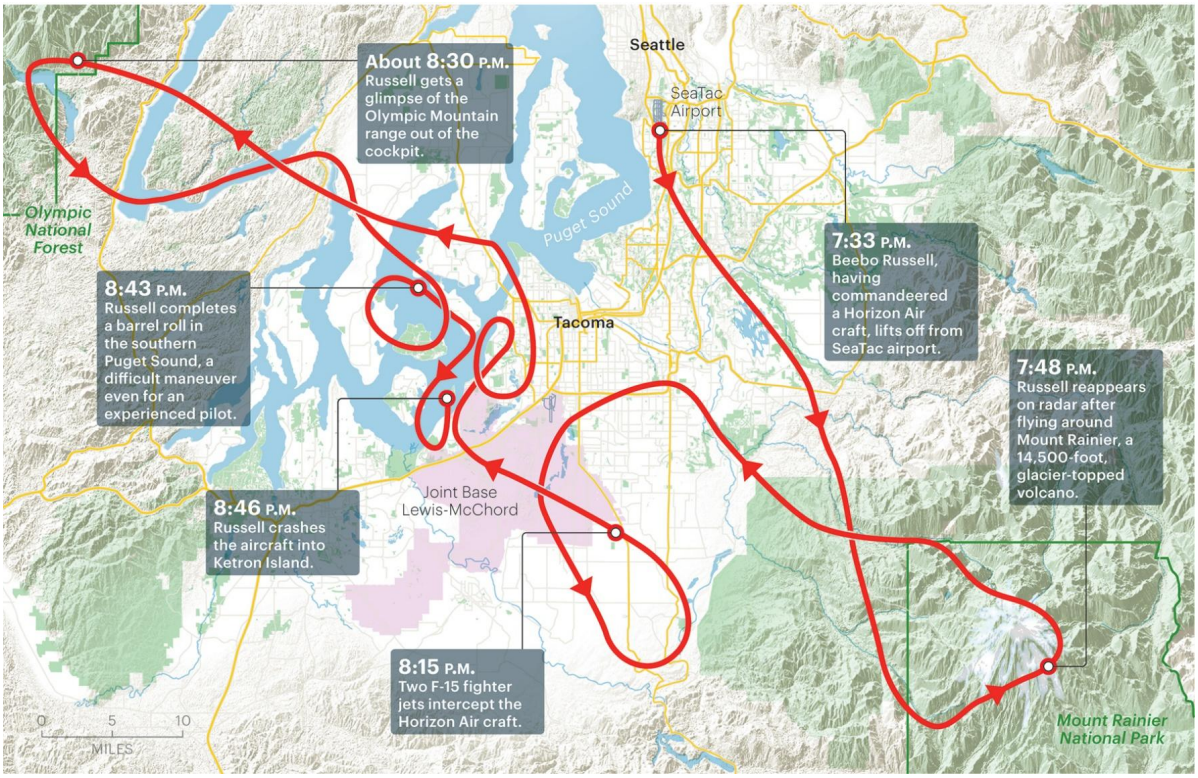
Russell told the controller his objective with the Q400 was to "start it up [and] get it to go — a couple of hours, I guess." But he confessed a disturbing lack of an end game. "Um, yeah, I wouldn't know how to land it. I wasn't really planning on landing it," he said. "I just kinda wanna do a couple maneuvers — see what it can do before I put her down, ya know?"

NORAD was already tracking Russell's flight. Its Western Air Defense Sector was receiving updates on a 24/7 phone line called the Domestic Events Network, or DEN. The first call from SeaTac came seven minutes into Russell's flight. Four minutes later there was an update: The pilot sounded suicidal.

Russell banked the Q400 on an arcing flight path around the massive summit of Mount Rainier. NORAD lost him on the radar. Radio communication fell silent. But by 7:48 p.m. the Q400 had circled the back side of the volcano and was traveling toward the Seattle metro at what the military would describe as "accelerated speed." Russell had been in the air for approximately 15 minutes. Only now did Western Air Defense seek authorization to scramble F-15s. But NORAD's continental U.S. chief of combat operations ordered only a "suit up" by the pilots.

As Russell regained audio contact, his banter had less manic swagger. He'd hit turbulence cruising over Rainier — and lost his lunch. "Sorry, my mic came up. I threw up a little bit," he said. Regret was starting to creep into his voice, along with empathy: "Man, I'm sorry about this," he told the controller. "I hope this doesn't ruin your day."

Beebo gave the controller his legal name, "Richard Russell," and asked for advice: "What do you think I should do, FAA guy?" The controller tried to gauge Russell's competence: "Just flying the plane around, you seem comfortable with that?" Russell's braggadocio bounced back: "Oh, hell yeah! It's a blast, man. I've played video games before," he said, "so, ya know, *I know* what I'm doin' a little bit."



"Everything's peachy," he insisted. "Just did a little circle around Rainier. It's beautiful." Then, referencing the mountain range separating the Puget Sound from the Pacific, he added: "I think I got some gas to go check out the Olympics."

Moving to Washington in 2015, Russell quickly found a gig as a ground-service agent with Horizon Air, a regional carrier operated by Alaska Air Group, which services cities from Fairbanks to Austin. It was the opposite of a dream job. "I always felt bad for the guys and gals who handled luggage," he wrote in a blog entry in 2017. "Every time I traveled I would look out my plane window and see these sullen-looking individuals . . . throwing bags into a cart. It seemed like such miserable work."

But for Russell, the job literally offered a ticket out. Free-flight benefits opened up the world — a jaunt to the Yucatan with the boys, trips to Ireland and France with Hannah, and most important, tickets to Alaska, which still felt most like home. "Flight benefits," Russell wrote, "were my last hope of seeing my beloved family and state on a regular basis."

In an online profile, Russell wrote he was passionate about "mountains, pastries, and craft beer." He aspired to visit every national park, and friends from work recalled him often having a book in hand. Little about his life seemed political, though he'd "liked" a Facebook page for Ben Carson. Outside of work, Russell's life was busy. In December 2017, he graduated cum laude with a bachelor's degree in social sciences from Washington State. His blog entries, written for a communications class, described aspirations to join the military, law enforcement, or even management at Horizon.

A video project for that class contrasted the drudgery of his work life in the soggy Pacific Northwest to the global travel it enabled. "I'm Beebo Russell," he said, "and I'm a ground-service agent." Continuing in a chipper voice-over as bags descended from a plane on a conveyor belt, he added with crisp comic timing, "That means I lift a lot of bags. Like, a lot of bags — *sooooooo* many bags." Over a selfie in the rain, Russell said, "I usually have to work outside in this. But it allows me to do some pretty cool things too. . . . It evens out in the end."

Were there warning signs? Russell was quietly fascinated with flight. "I fly as much as I possibly can," he wrote in an online profile, listing a "floatplane tour through Misty Fjords National Monument" in Alaska as one of the "most amazing" things he'd done. For a graphic-design assignment at Washington State, he'd made a personal logo — a suitcase with straps reading "Russell Hustle" and a circular blue badge featuring a silhouette of what he described as a "minimalistic Q400," in the center.

Russell's tow-crew work gave him access to the flight deck of airplanes as a matter of course. (The task is accomplished by a pair of workers, one in the tow rig, the other in the cockpit riding the brakes.) But a pilot would later tell investigators that he'd twice encountered Russell acting "suspicious" inside his planes. Joel Monteith, in a call to authorities obtained by the *Seattle Times,* identified himself as a pilot for SkyWest Airlines, whose jets were serviced by Horizon ground crew at SeaTac.

BEEBO'S LAST FLIGHT: After completing a barrel roll, Russell crashed into Ketron Island in Puget Sound, just off the shore between Olympia and Tacoma.

Ted S. Warren/AP

Monteith described one troubling encounter with Russell, who'd wanted to observe his preflight "flows," the startup sequence for the aircraft. On another occasion, about a year before Beebo's flight, Monteith said he'd found Russell and another ground-service crew member inside a jet "flipping switches." He speculated that Russell's exploit wasn't "a plot this dude just came up with, like, overnight," suggesting, "This guy had been thinking about doing this for a long time, and . . . the Q400 that he took was just an airplane of opportunity."

Russell also kept a Pinterest profile, where he went by the handle "Beebro" and collected memes, including several from the satirical site Despair.com. In July 2018, days before his unauthorized departure, Russell pinned an image to a board called "Dank memes." It was a Photoshop of a chubby kid with brown hair dressed up as Sonic the Hedgehog, with a sad, distant look in his eyes. It's not a spitting

image, but it's hard not to see Russell in the child's face. "No matter how fast I run . . ." the text reads, "I cannot run away from the pain."

As the clock ticked toward 8 p.m. local time, the gravity of what Russell had set in motion began to settle in — including the likelihood of a military response. He asked if the directions from the controller were "taking me to the jets?" The controller reassured him: "No, I'm not taking you to any jets. I'm actually keeping you away from aircraft that are trying to land at SeaTac." Russell was instantly apologetic: "Oh, OK. Yeah, I don't want to screw with that," he said. "I'm glad you're not, you know, screwing up everyone else's day on account of me."

The controller advised Russell to begin planning his landing. This was a daunting suggestion. The Q400 is designed to climb sharply out of small airports; its engines are high-powered when the plane is full and even more powerful when empty. Pilots jokingly refer to it as the "Crash 8" because of how difficult it is to land.

"There is the runway just off your right side in about a mile, do you see that? That's McChord Field," the controller said. Joint Base Lewis-McChord is a massive Army and Air Force installation south of Tacoma. Russell distrusted that suggestion. "Oh, man, those guys would rough me up if I tried landing there. I think I might mess something up there too. I wouldn't want to do that," he said, before practically shouting with paranoia: "Oh, they've probably got anti-aircraft!"

"No, they don't have any of that stuff," the controller responded. "We're just trying to find a place for you to land safely."

"Yeah, not quite ready to bring it down *just yet,*" Russell responded, "but holy smokes, I got to stop looking at the fuel 'cause it's going down *quick.*" Then, for a moment, Russell began to imagine the consequences he would presumably face if he managed to touch down: "This is probably like jail time for life, huh? I mean, I would hope it is for a guy like me."

As Russell zoomed over the lush, green southern Puget Sound region, his flight raised alarm. "What the hell?" said a woman recording a cellphone video of the aircraft careening low over an exurban neighborhood. "Holy shit," added a man's voice. "It's a fucking Alaska Airlines Q400. What the fuck is he doing over here?!"

The controller was busy connecting Russell with a professional pilot who might coach him through a landing, first briefing the professional on the situation: "Apparently he's a grounds crewman with Horizon, I guess," the controller said. "And he just needs some help controlling his aircraft." Russell, listening in, retorted: "I mean I don't need *that* much help!" But he confessed: "I would like to figure out how to get this cabin . . . make it pressurized or something. So I'm not so lightheaded."

Over the next several minutes the recorded conversation became disjointed, and so did Russell's mental state. The professional pilot asked about flight data — altitude and speed. "I'm just kinda hand-flying right now," Russell responded. The plane appeared to go in and out of radio range and Russell complained about having something in his ear, before he exploded with uncharacteristic menace, demanding a response from the controller: "Dammit, Andrew!" Russell yelled. "People's lives are at stake here!"

The unauthorized flight of the Horizon craft should not have come as a surprise, least of all to the TSA. In July 2018, just before Russell's exploit, its Aviation Security Advisory Committee produced a report for TSA Administrator David Pekoske titled, "On Insider Threat at Airports." Pekoske, a Coast Guard vice admiral, was nominated for the post by President Trump in 2017 and still serves as the head of the agency.

TSA was one of the federal government's most concrete responses to 9/11. The patchwork of private-security firms that had previously screened passengers at U.S. airports was deemed too variable to ward off terrorist attacks. (Two of the 9/11 hijackers began their exploit passing through lax security at the Portland, Maine, airport, hopping a flight to Boston where the plot began in earnest.)

The federal takeover of airport security in 2002 was intended to standardize practices, leave no soft spots in the system, and prevent a future catastrophic attack. TSA's policies now define the experience

The site on Ketron Island in Washington state where an Horizon Air plane crashed.

Ted S. Warren/AP

of travel for Americans. Its dictates — to toss out liquids in excess of 3.4 ounces or remove footwear — were imposed suddenly, decisively, and permanently.

But the comings and goings of airport personnel are not standardized by the TSA. To receive a work badge granting access to restricted areas, airport workers must pass periodic criminal background checks, but there's wide variation in how and even whether employees are screened before work. Every airport has an individual Airport Security Program cleared by the TSA; as Reiter, the director of aviation security for SeaTac, testified to the U.S. House: "If you've seen one airport, you've seen one airport."

John Pistole is a former TSA administrator who served during the Obama years. He describes a strange dichotomy: By default, TSA treats a ticketed passenger with high suspicion, as "if they're a terrorist," Pistole says. But the agency treats airport personnel as belonging to a "known and trusted group," he says, not unlike what he once enjoyed as an armed FBI agent, able to skirt security checkpoints to board an airplane.

At most airports, work badges are sufficient to gain entry to the secure areas of the airport; instead of passing through a magnetometer, employees are subject to random spot searches. In recent years, airport workers had exploited this vulnerability. In 2014, five airline personnel were caught smuggling $400,000 through Boston's airport. That same year, a baggage handler was caught in a scheme smuggling weapons — some of them loaded — including an AK-47, from Atlanta into New York. The scandal briefly made headlines and drew strong words from Washington: "When guns, drugs, and even explosives are as easy to carry on board a plane as a neck pillow, then we have to seriously — and immediately — overhaul our airport security practices," said Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.). In 2015, an FAA employee used his badge to circumvent a security checkpoint and board a flight with an unauthorized gun. In response, TSA increased the frequency of its spot screenings and the FAA suspended the use of its badges to bypass security checkpoints. In 2017, the House took action, unanimously passing the Aviation Employee Screening and Security Enhancement Act, meant to counter such threats, but the bill died in the Mitch McConnell-controlled Senate.

Through a panoply of task forces and subcommittees, TSA had been studying the insider threat since at least 2009. But by the July 2018 report, TSA's Aviation Security Advisory Committee was still struggling to formulate a basic definition for the term. Through 23 pages and appendices, the report offered no concrete recommendations except to praise "the DHS 'If You See Something, Say Something' campaign" in which "vigilant aviation workers reported suspicious activity to the airport operator."

NORAD finally scrambled jets out of Portland International Airport after the FAA put out an update on the DEN that "the pilot was a danger and threat." Citing national security, the military is cagey about the timeline of its intercept. But Maj. John "Dash" Dalrymple, mission crew commander of the Western Air Defense Sector, testified to the Washington State Legislature that the twin F-15s took "less than seven minutes" from takeoff to a visual intercept of the Q400. "They were authorized supersonic as well," Dalrymple bragged. "So they pushed it up."

The jets were each armed with a mix of heat-seeking and radar-controlled missiles and a "hot gun" with several hundred 20 mm rounds. They intercepted Russell's Q400 at 8:15 p.m. — meaning they would have taken off sometime after 8:08 p.m. In other words, Russell enjoyed nearly 20 minutes of uncontested flight time from when a scramble of jets was first requested to when the jets lifted off from PDX. Armstrong, the NORAD official, attributes the gap to an initial lack of clarity about the threat. (He also said the gap was shorter than Dalrymple indicated, but would not provide details.) Early dispatches from the DEN described a departure without clearance, which could have been a benign mistake instead of a stolen airliner. "It took another couple of minutes before we really understood the severity of the situation," Armstrong says. As Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-N.J.) said in a House hearing, that delay could have been deadly: "If this individual had had different intentions, or if we had simply been less lucky, the incident could have placed all of downtown Seattle in grave danger." There were deadly targets across the Seattle metro that evening, including an open-air Pearl Jam concert at Seattle's baseball stadium. A different pilot might have taken out the Space Needle.

The air-traffic controller kept his cool after Russell's angry outburst. "Now, Rich, don't say stuff like that," he said. Russell responded after a moment, clarifying his intent: "Naw, I don't want to hurt no one," he said, before making another joke, his voice a little shaky: "I just want you to whisper sweet nothings in my ear."

Russell's banter soon returned to barroom bravado: "Hey, you think if I land this successfully Alaska will give me a job as pilot?" he asked. The pilot coaching his flight replied gamely: "I think they would give you a job doing anything if you could pull this off." Russell retorted with an acid shot of resentment: "Yeah, right!" he said. "Naw, I'm a white guy!"

Both the pilot and air-traffic control pressed Russell to consider the possibility of a water landing. But Russell brushed it off: "I want the coordinates of that orca," he said. "You know, the mama orca with the baby." A local killer whale, Tahlequah, had recently suffered the death of a calf and made national news for carrying it around the Salish Sea in mourning. Russell said: "I want to go see that guy."

SeaTac was better than average in its approach to securing the "ramp" — airline jargon for the areas of the airport outside the terminal. Reiter told Congress that her airport goes "above and beyond" what's required, and highlighted SeaTac's differentiated badges that limit employees to relevant portions of the airport. These badges were also backstopped by a fingerprint scan to link each badge to each employee. Since 2017, SeaTac had also become a rare airport where ramp agents were subject to a physical screening, much like ticketed passengers.

But at SeaTac, many ramp agents scraped by. The airport, which is also a local city jurisdiction, made history by passing the nation's first $15 minimum wage in 2013. But the law had loopholes, and while the cashier at the Sbarro inside the terminal was making $15, some ramp agents at Horizon were reportedly making as much as $3 an hour less. (Alaska Air did not answer specific questions about its compensation practices.) Russell didn't leave a manifesto. But during his ill-fated flight, without an obvious prompt, he told air-traffic control: "Minimum wage. We'll chalk it up to that." He added, "Maybe that will grease the gears a little bit with the higher-ups."

As Russell's exploit unfolded, SeaTac was bedlam. The after-incident report describes how Russell's theft unleashed an "ad hoc, nonstandard notification of key first responders and executive leadership." It adds that "attempts to ascertain if the plane was actually stolen caused a delay in contacting law enforcement" including what it describes as a "25-minute lag" in notifying the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force of the potential threat to national security.

Air traffic ground to a halt: Seventeen incoming flights were diverted to nearby airports; 75 were delayed; five were canceled. Jon Ostrower is an aviation journalist, a CNN alum who is now editor-in-chief of his own industry publication, *The Air Current*. He lives within earshot of SeaTac. "I remember getting ready for dinner, and I started to think, it's *really* quiet," he says. "I stepped on the balcony; it was a beautiful evening, absolutely gorgeous. And I just didn't hear anything." Ostrower hopped on Twitter, then the open air-traffic-control channels, and soon was listening to Russell banter with air-traffic control. He could hardly fathom what was happening. "Given everything that's gone on since 9/11," he says, "you shouldn't be able to steal a commercial airliner and take off from the ninth-busiest airport in the country."

With the F-15s trailing at a close distance, Russell set course for the Olympic Mountains. As he soared over the Sound, he grew reflective — and started to say goodbye. "I got a lot of people that care about me, and it's going to disappoint them to hear that I did this," he said, his voice more sober now. "I would like to apologize to each and every one of them," adding in a confessional tone: "[I'm] just a broken guy. Got a few screws loose, I guess. Never really knew it till now."

Soon Russell was buzzing by the second mountain range of his flight: "Man, have you been to the Olympics? These guys are gorgeous. Holy smokes." NORAD had gathered top decision-makers, including then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis, into what it calls an Operation Noble Eagle Conference. They debated Russell's fate on a classified network. The F-15s were authorized to "head-butt" — to execute sharp turns in front of the Q400 — and even to drop warning flares to gain Russell's compliance. "We

never actually got to the execution stage," says Armstrong, "just because he became so erratic in his flight."

Looping back toward the southern Sound, Russell broke in with an alarming request: "Hey, pilot guy," he said. "Can this thing do a backflip, ya think?" It was just before 8:30 p.m.; the sky was turning twilight. Russell was coming up with a plan. And it didn't involve a landing. "Think I'm gonna try to do a barrel roll," he said, "and if that goes good, then I'll just nose down and call it a night."

As Russell steeled himself, regret was again a companion: "The sights went by so fast," he said. "I was thinking, like, I'm going to have this moment of serenity. You know? I'll be able to take in all the sights. There's a lot of pretty stuff," he added. "But, uh, I think they're prettier in a different context."

After several minutes Russell continued: "I feel like I need to be — what do you think? — like 5,000 feet, at least, to be able to pull this barrel roll off?" The amateur video of capturing what happens next defies belief. The 108-foot-long passenger plane soars skyward before suddenly tipping over, clockwise. The Q400 rolls into a diving, upside-down swoop toward earth, nearly coming vertical before flipping over again. As the craft rolls, it never falters, leveling off right above the water of the Puget Sound for a few perilous seconds, before ascending anew into the dusk-pink sky.

An eyewitness report came over the radio from one of the intercepting F-15s, whose pilot referred to the Q400 as "Track of Interest 1" or "TOI1." His radio transmission sounds somewhat awestruck: "TOI1 just completed a barrel roll."

The other F-15 pilot responded, sounding professional but incredulous. "Confirm he did a barrel roll?"

"Affirm," the first pilot said, allowing a chuckle of disbelief. "He cleared the surface of the water by approximately 10 feet."

The civilian pilot coaching Russell tried to settle the daredevil's nerves: "All right, Rich, this is Captain Bill. Congratulations, you did that," he said. "Now let's try to land that airplane safely and not hurt anybody on the ground."

"All right!" Russell responded. His voice became wild as he broke in with a darker transmission: "Aw. Dammit. I dunno, man, I dunno! I don't want to! I was kind of hoping that was going to be it. You know?"

The TSA flatly refuses to discuss the Horizon Air incident and would not release its own civil investigation into the matter. TSA would not arrange any interviews with *Rolling Stone,* even to discuss the insider threat generally. Administrator Pekoske did not respond to a direct request to discuss the incident, or his department's stonewalling of it.

Although Russell's exploit resembled a hijacking, because of a lack of passengers, it was treated as a theft. The FBI took the lead on the investigation. Federal law enforcement would not release the flight data recorder or the cockpit recordings, although the FBI characterized public recordings, grabbed by amateur aviation enthusiasts, as capturing all "significant" communications.

The agency determined Russell had no formal flight training, although he'd searched for instructional videos online and was "familiar with the checklist of actions for starting an airplane." Les Abend was a pilot for 34 years with American Airlines. He says Russell was uncannily skilled, suggesting he had likely logged a lot of hours on PC flight-simulator software. "If somebody that had no real concept of how to fly that airplane actually got it started and took off, they would have been in the drink," Abend says. "But this guy knew what he was doing." In a press conference on August 11th, airline executives were dumbfounded — and in their shock sounded oddly chuffed about Russell's aerobatics. "There were some maneuvers that were done that were incredible maneuvers with the aircraft," said Horizon CEO Gary Beck.

At every level — corporate, airport, and governmental — authorities in this case have emphasized that there were no violations of security procedure, no one to blame, and no clear lapses to reform. SeaTac's Reiter asserted that "what happened on August 10th was not a breakdown of any existing airport protocols." TSA, summarizing its undisclosed investigation, "found Horizon Air and SeaTac International Airport to be in compliance with all security requirements." In the agency's only on-

the-record comment to *Rolling Stone,* TSA spokeswoman Lorie Dankers underscored: "There were no security violations related to this incident."

But Abend describes the ease with which Russell commandeered a plane as "unfathomable." Those who knew Russell are still perplexed that there were no effective safeguards in place to prevent his flight: "How is it this was even possible?" asks Schaefers, from Coos Bay, "for an unauthorized person who is not a pilot to get in a plane and fly it off the tarmac?"

The day after Russell's exploits, an ashen-faced Brad Tilden, then CEO of Alaska Airlines, tried to answer similar questions from reporters: "This is aviation in America," he said. "The doors to the airplanes are not keyed like a car. There's not an ignition key like there would be in a car." The Q400 was parked inside the airport's fenced perimeter and presumed safe. "We secure the airfield and then we have the mindset that we have employees that are credentialed," he said. "So the system that works is we secure the employees that are there."

Except that the system hadn't worked. It had just failed spectacularly. Ostrower calls the incident "incredibly, incredibly serious," and an affront to an airport system oriented to keeping bad actors out, not preventing good actors from breaking bad. "The entire system operates based on trust; this was an incredible violation of that trust," he says of Russell, who'd previously passed at least two FBI background checks. "I mean, he broke the Maginot Line."

Family and friends left a tribute to him on the island where he died. In the years since, he's become something of a folk hero.

Washington Department of Natural Resources

Russell's last transmission was concerning and cryptic. His fuel reserves were perilously low. "Not for long," he said. "I feel like one of my engines is going out or something." Moments later, the Q400 crashed into woods at the southern end of tiny Ketron Island, just offshore in the Puget Sound, between Tacoma and Olympia. The Q400 tore down trees. Its wings were shorn from the fuselage. The crash sparked a two-acre fire. According to the FBI, Russell died of "multiple traumatic injuries."

Despite sideslip, consistent with flying with only one engine, the FBI concluded "the final descent to the ground appears to have been intentional," adding that the plane had nosed farther down "about six seconds prior to the end" of the flight-data record. The crash occurred at 8:46 p.m. — after 73 minutes in flight. The FBI concluded that Russell acted alone, died by suicide, and was not connected to a criminal plot or terrorist ideology. Investigators interviewed family, friends, and colleagues, and combed through Russell's background for "possible stressors" in his work and personal life. But Matt Scott, the FBI agent, insists "there was never really a clear cut, definitive 'This is why.' " The FBI agent discloses that Russell did text his wife during the incident: "The gist of it is that he's telling her that she deserved better."

In quieter times, the theft of a passenger plane in broad daylight, a high-speed chase by F-15 fighters, a barrel roll, and a fiery crash on a sparsely inhabited island would have captivated the national attention. But amid the maelstrom of the Trump presidency, the Friday-night flight was barely news by Monday. Even the loss of a $30 million aircraft was, in the end, easy to forget. When Alaska Air reported the event to shareholders, it assured them: "The loss of the aircraft is a fully insured event with no deductibles."

The Port of Seattle's after-incident report offered a suite of safeguards that could help prevent a copycat **crime**, including offering "mental-health screening and services for the broader population of workers with restricted-area access" and mandating "two-person teams for all functions involving aircraft access." The authors added that "physical fail-safe measures may be possible, but costs may be considerable."

Pistole, the former official, says TSA could demand sweeping changes, up to and including locks on the outside doors of airplanes. But the TSA acts less like a regulator than a partner to airport authorities and airlines. New locks could cost billions to install and maintain, and the agency, as Pistole describes it, is reluctant to harm the bottom lines of its partners: "Nobody likes an unfunded mandate," he says.

Alaska Airlines, Horizon's sister company, wasted no time in fending off regulatory oversight. Lobbying reports reveal that by August 15th the airline had hired two lobbyists to make its case to DHS, TSA, and Congress on "security issues related to unauthorized operation of a Horizon Air aircraft."

In September 2018 Senate testimony, Pekoske unflappably assured lawmakers that "there is an awful lot of work being done" within TSA and its partners to confront the insider threat. But he insisted he needed to await the final results of then-ongoing investigations to "determine whether changes are needed." Pekoske clarified that he would be interested in "low- or no-cost" security technologies.

In reality, TSA continued to drag its feet — making so little progress that the Government Accountability Office called it out in February 2020 for lacking any strategic plan related to the insider threat. That May, TSA produced its Insider Threat Roadmap 2020. Characteristically vacuous, it outlines no concrete reforms, instead emphasizing operational awareness, agility, and the ability of airport partners to "self-police." Despite the existence of actual keys, a vague "path forward" argues there is "no 'turn-key' solution to mitigating insider threat."

NORAD, by contrast, responded with significant changes. Most important: It empowered its air-defense sectors to act without waiting for approval from higher-ups. "We now allow them to make the decision of whether or not to scramble our fighters," says Armstrong. "It saves minutes."

For those who knew Russell, his final flight is still met with pain and disbelief. "Something snapped," says Schaefers, the former Campus Crusade adviser, who listened to the air-traffic recordings. "I heard someone who is very troubled. And I think he knew it. But it was amazing to me as I listened — that sense of not wanting to hurt anyone. And it was still him. The kindness was still there. The good heartness was still there," Schaefers says. "Obviously, leaving people behind was very harmful," he adds. "But that's a different aspect."

Russell's family released a statement after his death. "Beebo was a warm, compassionate man," it said. "He was a faithful husband, a loving man, and a good friend." They described their "complete shock" at his actions and thanked Jesus for holding the family together in their moment of grief, adding of Russell: "He was right in saying that there are so many people who loved him." At the time, the

family asked for privacy to mourn. The passage of time has not found many of Russell's family or friends willing to talk to the press. One family member responded to *Rolling Stone*: "Out of respect for Beebo's widow, we have agreed as a family to not speak on this."

For some of Russell's friends and family, the search for answers about his mental state circles back to his days on the football field. A former high school teammate, Zachary Orr, told a TV interviewer he suspected Russell had chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, a progressive neurodegenerative disease caused by repeated head trauma that can drive extreme mood changes, depression, aggression, and impulsivity. "He played hard," Orr recalled. Danny Punturo, Russell's stepbrother, agreed in a 2018 TV interview: "My only hypothetical that kinda fits is possibly injuries from playing football," he said. "He did suffer some concussions. So in my mind, it was a little bit out of his hands."

Despite the suicidal circumstances of his flight, Russell has also become, for some, a folk hero. There are long Reddit threads and a Facebook page dedicated to a man they call "Sky King." People who watched video of Russell's maneuvers and listened to his radio banter felt connected to his struggle. The anonymous founder of the Richard "Beebo" Russell SkyKing Tribute Page wrote: "It's been haunting me because I feel I understand him and have experienced the same pain. . . . I feel like I'm trying to mourn someone I never met." Another devotee writes: "His story hurts me in a way that only losing the closest of friends and family have hurt me."

To those for whom Russell was a real person, the Sky King treatment is objectionable. "He is certainly no hero," Schaefers says, "and I don't think anyone close to him would suggest that." But Schaefers recognizes why strangers are attracted to the "whole folk-hero thing." They see a guy who "stole a plane, and barrel rolled, and crashed it, and 'wasn't that awesome?' Like, no. It was not."

But the truth is that Russell's legacy is no longer simply a private affair. "One of the fascinating pieces of this," Ostrower says, "is how quickly it transitioned into myth, legend, and meme. I mean, it was almost instantaneous," he says, pointing to people who were soon hawking T-shirts and swag with slogans like "Puget Sound Flight Club: Fly It Like You Stole It." Russell's exploits are now the stuff of folk songs posted to YouTube, including "Lookin' for that Orca" and "SkyKing — a song for Richard Russell." Over the objection of his family, alt-right "groypers" have also claimed Russell as one of their own, seizing on his "Naw, I'm a white guy" line.

In short, a rupture now exists between the intimate tragedy of his short life and the public interpretation of it. "It happens a lot, where a real thing all of a sudden enters this spin cycle," Ostrower says, and "it becomes this plotline in the realm of the internet."

The real Beebo Russell was a man in despair who spent his final minutes scared, lightheaded, covered in his own sick, seeking a moment of Zen from thousands of feet in the air that never arrived. He'd set in motion a criminal plot he couldn't walk back, and ultimately resolved to take his own life rather than return safely to the ground.

The internet Beebo Russell is an archetype: a modern-day Icarus whose dramatic dying act has become a blank slate for others to project meaning upon that informs their own lives. They see a working man, broken down by indifferent bosses — a human cog in the airport machinery who suddenly revolted, stole an airplane, buzzed a volcano, sassed air-traffic controllers, and performed air-show stunts in a final dogged display of the human spirit. As one member of the Sky King community puts it, "His story's true Americana."

The flesh-and-blood Russell would almost certainly have gotten a kick out of his internet alter ego, seeing his exploits become fodder for the same kind of dank expressions of edgy and viral humor he'd collected on Pinterest, and hoped to create himself. In September 2017, he boasted on his blog that he'd "Finally learned Photoshop! Meme World here I come!"

In the end, perhaps, it's a meme that offers some sense of closure for Russell's legacy. On a Pinterest board called "Boom," he'd once pinned a "demotivational" poster from Despair.com. It features a photo of a snowboarder careening off a towering, rocky cliff and bold capital letters that spell "Regret."

"It hurts to admit when you make mistakes," the smaller text reads. "But when they're big enough, the pain only lasts a second."

Suicide is preventable. If you or someone you know is in crisis, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK.

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Tim Dickinson
The Sky Thief
How did Beebo Russell — a goofy, God-fearing baggage handler — steal a passenger plane from the Seattle-Tacoma airport and end up alone in a cockpit, with no plan to come down?
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