

# Boeing hushed critical safety find, expert says

## He says software flaw could have led to crash

By Bill Richards  
P-I Reporter

A former Boeing computer expert said yesterday that the company ordered him to play down his discovery of a software flaw in a critical control unit that could have triggered last May's fatal crash of a Lauda Air Boeing 767.

Darrell Smith, a computer software engineer employed as a troubleshooter by Boeing in 1989 and 1990, said in an interview with the Post-Intelligencer that he warned the company last year of the "proximity switch electronics unit" (PSEU) on Boeing's 747 and 767 jetliners.

The device allows the plane's computerized parts to electronically converse. Smith said he told

Boeing officials the software could trigger a rogue signal that would cause the plane's computer-driven systems to malfunction.

But Smith said Boeing officials in charge of the troubleshooting program told him they "didn't want to get anybody excited" and ordered him to omit any mention of potential system-wide problems resulting from the flawed software from his formal report. Instead, he was told to report just on the PSEU's internal problems, he said.

"They said this is a non-critical system and I couldn't use terms like 'crash' or 'catastrophic' in the report because they didn't want people to get excited," he said.

Boeing spokesman Chris Villiers said yesterday the company hasn't had time to study all of Smith's allegations. Villiers said

See **BOEING**, Page A7

systems linked to auto-restow, which is supposed to automatically retract a jet's backup ground braking system, the thrust reverser, if it accidentally starts to deploy in flight.

The reverser system is only supposed to be activated on the ground during landings. But federal aviation experts have found that the system deployed during flight shortly before the Lauda jet crashed in Thailand last May, killing all 223 aboard.

Laboratory simulations of the accident showed the thrust reverser could have caused the pilots to lose control and crash.

While Villiers said that the PSEU can electronically converse with the auto-restow system, he said it could also cause the system to

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braking system deployed.

Smith said yesterday he left Boeing because he had been forced by his superiors there to hand in the report with no mention of the PSEU software's threat to other aircraft systems.

Nonetheless, Smith's report to Boeing does warn of potentially serious problems with the PSEU software. Smith said he passed on the report to Boeing Corp. of Lynnwood, Wash. The software flaw was the find...

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