

John Barnett on Why He Won't Fly on a Boeing 787 Dreamliner

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*For almost three decades, **John Barnett** was a quality manager at Boeing.*

For 28 of those years, he was with Boeing in Everett, Washington.

Barnett loved Boeing. He loved Boeing planes. He loved his work.

Then, in 2010, Barnett was transferred to Boeing's new plant in Charleston, South Carolina. That's where Boeing builds the 787 Dreamliner.

And things started going downhill.

"The new leadership didn't understand processes," Barnett told Corporate Crime Reporter in an interview last week. "They brought them in from other areas of the company. The new leadership team - from my director down - they all came from St. Louis, Missouri. They said they were all buddies there."

"That entire team came down. They were from the military side. My impression was their mindset was - we are going to do it the way we want to do it. Their motto at the time was - we are in Charleston and we can do anything we want."

"They started pressuring us to not document defects, to work outside the procedures, to allow defective material to be installed without being corrected. They started bypassing procedures and not maintaining configuration control of airplanes, not maintaining control of non conforming parts - they just wanted to get the planes pushed out the door and make the cash register ring."

What were some of the more egregious examples of that?

"Back in 2011 and 2012, it was more of paperwork administrative issues - they didn't want us documenting defects, they didn't want us to complete paperwork correctly. They wanted us to just close jobs that weren't done just to get the jobs closed out. It was more administrative."

"As time went on over the next several years they started ignoring safety issues and the defective parts. They wanted to just close those jobs out and not research them - that type of thing. Over the years, it just got worse and worse."

“Finally, we ended up with three pretty significant safety issues. I reported them inside the company. I pursued every avenue within the company to try and get them addressed. I filed an ethics complaint and they came back and substantiated my complaint, but they did nothing to correct it.”

“Over time it got worse and worse. Not only were they ignoring the administrative procedures, but they were also getting into ignoring safety of flight conditions and aircraft safety issues.”

What were the three significant safety issues?

“When the floor boards are installed on an airplane, they are installed with titanium fasteners. When they are installed, the nut peels off the titanium threads. And they were leaving up to three inch long razor sharp titanium slivers that fall on the surfaces below the floor board. That surface below the floor board is where all of your flight control wires are, that’s where all of your electronic equipment is. It controls systems on the airplane, it controls the power of the airplane. All of your electronic equipment is down where all of these metal slivers are falling.”

“After I filed my complaint, the FAA came in and did a spot audit. They audited five airplanes in Everett and five airplanes in Charleston. And they found the metal slivers in all ten airplanes they inspected.”

“The second issue was - my team and I found out that the emergency oxygen equipment - when the mask falls - we discovered that 25 percent of the oxygen systems don’t work properly. In the event of a decompression event when those oxygen masks fall, 25 percent of them are not going to work. They are not going to supply oxygen.”

“The third issue was the lost defective parts. Many of them that were lost were shown to have been installed on the airplane without being repaired. We didn’t know where a lot of them went. Some of them were significant structural components. I know there were several aft pressure bulkheads that were delivered with pretty significant defects. And they were installed without being corrected.”

“The defective parts was the third major issue I brought up. After I filed my complaint, the FAA went in and did an audit and substantiated my complaint that they weren’t tracking non conforming parts properly.”

When did you file your internal complaint with Boeing?

“I actually filed several within Boeing. Within the Boeing process, it is kind of a hierarchy. If you don’t agree with your leadership, you talk with them. If they don’t respond appropriately, you take it to human resources. Then you take it to ethics. I filed complaints with all of those people. My first complaint was filed in 2014.”

Obviously, your managers knew you had filed it. How did your managers respond?

“Prior to filing my complaint, I was working on what we call the production floor. In final assembly, each time the airplane moves to a different position, you have a quality manager who oversees that position with a team of inspectors to inspect that airplane. And all of the quality managers that work

on a production floor meet every morning. They are a team. They bounce ideas off each other. They discuss issues.”

“After I filed my complaint, I was reassigned to Material Review Segregation Area (MRSA). That’s a stand alone area. It’s isolated. They isolated me from the other quality managers. I was basically by myself. There were pressures to buy off the lost non conforming parts. My leadership was pressing me to close them out and buy them off without looking for the parts and figuring out where they go. I strongly objected to it and refused to do it.”

“They were constantly denigrating me. I was in a hostile work environment. Nothing I could do was right. Anytime I brought up procedures, I was told to work in the grey areas of the procedures and find a way to keep production moving. “

You said the ethics office came back and confirmed your complaint but didn’t do anything about it. What was your next step?

“They sent me an email and said they had substantiated my original complaint and that they had opened a second investigation against my boss for the hostile work environment. They started a second investigation. That went away. I never got a follow up. They took no action to correct anything. It just went into a black hole somewhere.”

When did you decide to go outside the company?

“I went through the process inside the company. I filed the ethics complaints. I went to leadership. I wrote an email to the vice president of Boeing ethics in Washington, D.C. I sent her an email and said – I need help. I’m being harassed and blacklisted. And she wrote back and said – we will look into your complaint. In that email, I specifically asked that my complaints be investigated by people outside of Charleston. The people in Charleston all seemed to be working together and sharing information and covering things up. I specifically asked that my complaints be investigated by somebody outside of Charleston. They assured me it would.”

“Within a couple of days, it was turned over to the human resources rep that should have been under investigation. And they gave it to her to investigate. Not surprisingly, she closed it out very quickly saying she couldn’t substantiate my complaint.”

“At the same time, I was going through health issues and having anxiety attacks. At that time, I decided I had to go outside the company. I felt like I had reached as far as I could reach within the company. I had to go outside.”

How did you do that?

“I followed an AIR21 complaint. It goes to OSHA for them to investigate. Within that complaint, I listed safety items I had identified, the hostility and denigration and being black listed and blackballed from other jobs. I know of at least two jobs that I was supposed to get a job offer for and my leadership said that I wasn’t going anywhere.”

You filed that in January 2017. What is that status of that complaint?

“OSHA is still investigating. And they have not made any type of determination at this point.”

Do you have a sense as to when OSHA will decide?

“I do not. The FAA also has the information. They investigated immediately. They substantiated my complaint about the titanium slivers, they substantiated my complaint about lost non conforming parts. And as far as the oxygen systems, they said that Boeing was aware and that there was a large investigation going on.”

What did the FAA do about it?

“For the titanium slivers, they wrote a DAI - a designated airworthiness inspection requirement. That DAI is for Boeing only. They told Boeing - you are not allowed to deliver any more planes with these metal slivers. And during that process, Boeing came back and determined that the slivers were not a safety of flight issue, so they did not notify the customers of the planes that had already been delivered that those slivers were on the plane. And at the time, I think we were up around 800 airplanes that had been delivered. Every 787 out there has these slivers out there.”

They are not going to be recalled?

“From what I understand, they are not going to notify the customers.”

Are you convinced that these slivers could result in a catastrophic event?

“Absolutely. And it’s not just my opinion. We have examples of incidents where it has created fires. We have had several fires at the Charleston plant where metal FOD (foreign object debris) got into one of the tower panels and caught it on fire. We had to replace the whole power panel. We had other instances where metal FOD got into electrical areas and caused shorts and fires. Yes, I’m convinced it’s a safety of flight issue.”

“I don’t understand how Boeing could determine it is not a safety of flight issue.”

How big are the shavings?

“They are up to three inches long. They are razor sharp titanium slivers. When the fasteners are installed to hold down the floorboards, the threads are getting peeled off the fasteners. And those threads are falling down on top of the wire bundles and electronic equipment. Over time, as the vibrations of the airplane work the slivers into the wire bundles and into the connectors, they are going to short something out eventually. I don’t see how it is possible that they don’t.”

What is your own personal practice on flying Boeing aircraft now?

“When I worked on the 747, the 767, the 777 in Everett, those are beautiful planes. And the people there fully understood what it took to build a safe and airworthy aircraft. I hate to throw the entire label over the whole product line. But as far as the 787, I would change flights before I would fly a 787. I’ve told my family — please don’t fly a 787. Fly something else. Try to get a different ticket. I want the people to know what they are riding on.”

Other than the OSHA case, is there civil litigation – you against Boeing?

“Not right now. My goal right now is to get these safety issues addressed and make sure these airplanes are safe and airworthy. I have issues with the way I was treated, but I will fight that battle later.”

“Safety, quality and integrity are at the core of Boeing’s values,” Boeing said in a statement provided to Corporate Crime Reporter. “Speaking up is a cornerstone of that safety culture and we look into all issues that are raised. Boeing offers its employees a number of channels for raising concerns and complaints and has rigorous processes in place, both to ensure that such complaints receive thorough consideration and to protect the confidentiality of employees who make them. Accordingly, Boeing does not comment on the substance or existence of such internal complaints.”

“Boeing and the FAA implement a rigorous inspection process to ensure that all our airplanes are safe and built with the highest levels of safety and quality. FAA inspectors are located at all Boeing final assembly facilities and as part of their normal regulatory oversight process, and have complete access to the factory and flight line. All our planes go through multiple safety and test flights, as well as extensive Boeing, FAA, and airline inspections before they leave our factory and before the traveling public boards those planes for the first time. We encourage and expect our employees to raise concerns and when they do, we thoroughly investigate and fully resolve them, in cooperation with the FAA, where appropriate.”

“Further, in 2017, foreign object debris (FOD) associated with the e-nuts was discovered in South Carolina and Everett production airplanes. In response, the FAA issued a Delegated Airworthiness Inspection (DAI) requiring 100% inspection of 787 production planes to ensure no metal shaving FOD issues prior to delivery, and Boeing continues to comply with the DAI. Boeing’s flight safety board analyzed the issue and determined it does not present a safety of flight issue. Boeing is currently working with its e-nut supplier to improve the e-nut design and production process to eliminate the potential for FOD. Boeing also engaged a third-party to inspect the e-nuts at the supplier as they are produced. The existing Airplane Maintenance Manual already instructs in-service operators to check for FOD when removing and reinstalling floor panels.”

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