DOHSA's Commercial Aviation Exception: How Mass Airline Disasters Influenced Congress on Compensation for Deaths on the High Seas

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DOHSA’S COMMERCIAL AVIATION EXCEPTION: HOW
MASS AIRLINE DISASTERS INFLUENCED CONGRESS
ON COMPENSATION FOR DEATHS ON
THE HIGH SEAS

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I. INTRODUCTION

EIGHTEEN YEARS BEFORE 9/11, there was 9/1—a Cold
War event so tragic and catastrophic that, like the attacks on
the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by Arab fanatics in
the new millennium, it seared itself into the consciousness of
three nations. On August 31, 1983, a Boeing 747 aircraft, oper-
ated by Korean Air Lines (KAL) and carrying 269 passengers,
departed New York City at approximately 11:50 p.m. After a

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Honorable Albert Lee Stephens, Jr., United States District Judge, Central District
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Southwestern University School of Law, 1982 (cum laude). The author
formulated the defense strategy leading to the court’s Commercial Aviation
Exception ruling in Eberli v. Cirrus Design Corp. and Teledyne Continental
Motors, Inc., 615 F. Supp. 2d 1369 (S.D. Fla. 2009), and was a member of the
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2d 1369 (S.D. Fla. 2009).
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actions.

1 Both South Korea and Japan have national memorials for the victims of Ko-
orean Air Flight 007, and for many years in the United States, the event was memo-
rialized annually by the families of the American passengers who perished in the
attack.

2 REPORT OF THE COMPLETION OF THE FACT FINDING INVESTIGATION REGARDING
THE SHOOTING DOWN OF KOREAN AIR LINES BOEING 747 (FLIGHT KE007) ON Au-
GUST 31, 1983 4–6 (1993) [hereinafter ICAO FLIGHT 007 REPORT]. See In re Ko-
fuel stop in Anchorage, Alaska, the flight would proceed to its final destination, Seoul, Korea, where it would land on September 1, 1983. The pilots, however, inadvertently failed to program the aircraft’s inertial navigation system properly. Flying in the dark over the North Pacific at 35,000 feet, the aircraft slowly drifted off course, until it entered Soviet airspace near Sakhalin Island. With the belief that a spy plane was approaching, the Soviet air force scrambled three fighter jets to intercept the wayward aircraft. Within minutes, and without warning, the Soviet jets fired heat-seeking missiles at the aircraft. The exploding missiles damaged the aircraft’s hydraulic systems, and shrapnel penetrated the cabin, causing a rapid decompression. The crippled aircraft entered a long, spiraling descent before it slammed into the Sea of Japan and was destroyed. All 269 passengers and crew on board the aircraft perished, including 105 Koreans, 28 Japanese, and 62 Americans.

Although it was impossible to foresee at the time, the KAL Flight 007 disaster would permanently change the body of jurisprudence under the federal maritime wrongful death statute, The Death on the High Seas Act (DOHSA). Not only did the disaster have a significant impact on Cold War relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, it spawned two deci-

3 ICAO FLIGHT 007 REPORT, supra note 2, at 4.
4 In re Korean Air Lines Disaster, 932 F.2d at 1476–1477. ICAO FLIGHT 007 REPORT, supra note 2, at 59. In 1983, the Global Positioning System was used solely by the military. As a result of the attack on Flight 007, President Ronald Reagan issued an order making GPS available for civilian use. See Wikipedia, Korean Air Lines Flight 007, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_Air_Lines_Flight_007 (last visited Feb. 15, 2010).
5 ICAO FLIGHT 007 REPORT, supra note 2, at 59.
7 ICAO FLIGHT 007 REPORT, supra note 2, at 33, 35.
8 Id.
9 Id.
12 President Ronald Reagan condemned the shootdown as the “Korean airline massacre,” a “crime against humanity [that] must never be forgotten” and an “act of barbarism” and “inhuman brutality.” President Ronald Reagan, Address to the Nation on the Soviet Attack on a Korean Civilian Airliner (Sept. 5, 1983), availa-
sions by the U.S. Supreme Court that swept away recovery of non-pecuniary damages in DOHSA cases. Those decisions were handed down in the mid-1990s against the backdrop of another noteworthy mass airline disaster: TWA Flight 800. In response to an outpouring of sympathy for the families of the victims of TWA Flight 800, Congress took up the question of compensation for non-pecuniary damages in cases governed by DOHSA. The result was an amendment to DOHSA known as the “Commercial Aviation Exception,” which allows recovery of

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loss of society damages in actions arising from a "commercial aviation accident."\textsuperscript{16}

The purpose of this article is to show how mass airline disasters, beginning with the Soviet shootdown of KAL Flight 007, constituted the major influence on Congress in its enactment of the Commercial Aviation Exception, and that the Commercial Aviation Exception was never intended to apply to general aviation cases. The article will provide a brief history of DOHSA, and an analysis of how attempts to circumvent DOHSA's limitations on recoverable damages in the KAL Flight 007 litigation led to two landmark U.S. Supreme Court rulings on non-pecuniary damages.\textsuperscript{17} The article will next describe how the explosion of TWA Flight 800 over the waters near Long Island motivated Congress to create a limited exception to the rule against non-pecuniary damages in DOHSA. Finally, the article will address the only two federal district court cases that have, to date, interpreted the Commercial Aviation Exception in the context of general aviation accidents.\textsuperscript{18} The article concludes that the only reasonable construction of the Commercial Aviation Exception is that it has no application in wrongful death actions arising from general aviation accidents, but, to the contrary, applies solely to actions arising from commercial airline accidents on the high seas.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF DOHSA

Like the Commercial Aviation Exception, DOHSA itself was a legislative response by Congress to a tragic accident on the high seas.\textsuperscript{19} On May 16, 1877, the steamer \textit{Harrisburg} was cruising in the waters of the Nantucket Sound between Massachusetts and the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, when it collided with the schooner \textit{Marietta Tilton}.\textsuperscript{20} As a result of the collision, the first officer of the \textit{Marietta Tilton}, Silas T. Rickards, drowned at sea.\textsuperscript{21} At the time of the accident, the \textit{Harrisburg} was

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Dooley}, 524 U.S. 116; \textit{Zicherman}, 516 U.S. 217.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{See generally}, Robert Hughes, \textit{Death Actions in Admiralty}, 31 \textit{Yale L.J.} 115 (1921).
\textsuperscript{20} The \textit{Harrisburg}, 119 U.S. 199, 199 (1886).
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Id.} at 199–201.
engaged in the domestic coasting trade, and was owned by the Port of Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{22}

Rickards's widow filed suit in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania on February 25, 1882, nearly five years after the accident.\textsuperscript{23} Both Pennsylvania law and Massachusetts law allowed an action for wrongful death, but the statute of limitations under each law was one year.\textsuperscript{24} The district court found that the action sounded in admiralty law, that general maritime law applied, that the one year statute of limitations did not bar the action, and that the \textit{Harrisburg} was negligent: "The drowning complained of was caused by the improper navigation, negligence, and fault of the said steamer, producing the collision aforesaid, and the libellants are entitled to recover."\textsuperscript{25} Accordingly, the district court issued a judgment against the \textit{Harrisburg} in the amount of $5,100.\textsuperscript{26}

On appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, the judgment was reversed.\textsuperscript{27} In an opinion by Chief Justice Morrison Waite, the Court held that under both the common law\textsuperscript{28} and admiralty law "no civil action lies for an injury which results in death."\textsuperscript{29} Chief Justice Waite canvassed not only U.S. law, but also the law of foreign nations on this issue:

\begin{quote}
[W]e know of no country that has adopted a different rule on this subject for the sea[s] from that which it maintains on the land; and the maritime law, as accepted and received by maritime nations generally, leave the matter untouched. It is not mentioned in the laws of Oleron, of Wisbuy, or of the Hanse Towns, (1 Pet. Adm. Dec. Appx.;) nor in the Marine Ordinance of Louis XIV., (2 Pet. Adm. Dec. Appx.;) and the understanding of the leading text writers in this country has been that no such action will lie in the absence of a statute giving a remedy at law for the wrong. Ben. Adm. (2d Ed.) § 309; 2 Pars. Shipp. & Adm. 350; Henry, Adm. Jur. 74.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Id.} at 199.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Id.} at 200.
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Id.} at 204.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Id.} at 200. This would be approximately $102,000 today.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Harrisburg}, 119 U.S. at 214.
\textsuperscript{28} For this proposition, the \textit{Harrisburg} court relied on its own decision in \textit{Insurance Co. v. Brame}, 95 U.S. 754 (1877). \textit{See Harrisburg}, 119 U.S. at 204, 213–14.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Harrisburg}, 119 U.S. at 204–05. This rule was premised on the notion that since a right of action was personal to the victim, the right expired when the victim died. \textit{Id.} at 213.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Id.} at 213.
On this basis, the Harrisburg court concluded that no wrongful death action “will lie in the courts of the United States under the general maritime law,” and the judgment was reversed. In the years after The Harrisburg was decided, several attempts were made by the Maritime Law Association to draft and submit to Congress proposed legislation for a maritime death remedy. During this time, it appears that many maritime law experts were hostile to the holding of The Harrisburg. One court noted that “[c]ritics of The Harrisburg maintained that the rule of that case had been rejected by ‘[e]very country of western Europe,’ and was a ‘disgrace to a civilized people.’” Although the early efforts to pass a maritime death statute were unsuccessful, renewed efforts started to gain traction in the aftermath of the Titanic disaster on April 14–15, 1912, in which 1,517 passengers and crew perished. Ultimately, in 1920, Congress passed the DOHSA legislation, which created an exclusively federal wrongful death action and a comprehensive statutory scheme for compensation in actions arising from deaths on the high seas. The statute was patterned after Lord Campbell’s Act, and it created

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51 Id.
52 Id. at 214. The Harrisburg court went on to ask the question whether the lawsuit could be maintained under the laws of Pennsylvania or Massachusetts, but did not reach an answer. “About this we express no opinion, as we are entirely satisfied that this suit was begun too late.” Id. at 214.
54 Long Island, 209 F.3d at 204.
55 Id.
57 As one court put it, [o]riginally, the admiralty, as did the common law Courts, denied a right of action for damages for death on the high seas. However, in 1920, Congress passed the DOHSA permitting the personal representatives of a decedent to institute an action for wrongful death on the high seas. Since Libellants had nothing before Section One of the DOHSA was passed, Section One gives them all they now have. Noel v. United Aircraft Corp., 204 F. Supp. 929, 931 (D. Del. 1962) (emphasis added) (citation omitted).
58 See Calvert Magruder & Marshall Grout, Wrongful Death Within The Admiralty Jurisdiction, 35 YALE L. J. 395, 402 (1926) (quoting Lord Campbell’s Act (1846) 9 & 10 Vict. c. 93). At the time of Lord Campbell’s Act, the common law was in transition from notions of “trespass” to the concept of “negligence.” W. PAGE KEETON ET AL., PROSSER AND KEETON ON TORTS 30 (5th ed. 1984). Certainly product liability theories, such as strict liability, would not emerge for another 100
a maritime negligence action for deaths on the high seas "caused by wrongful act, neglect, or default."\(^5\)

The DOHSA legislation enacted by Congress in 1920 provided, inter alia, that: (1) a cause of action exists for the death of a person caused by the wrongful act, neglect, or default, occurring on the high seas;\(^6\) (2) the action may be maintained by the personal representative of the decedent's estate for the exclusive benefit of the decedent's beneficiaries;\(^7\) (3) in situations where the plaintiff is injured, but dies prior to the completion of his lawsuit, the personal representative of the estate may be substituted in and the action may proceed as a DOHSA action;\(^8\) (4) a two year statute of limitations period;\(^9\) (5) provisions governing foreign causes of action;\(^10\) and (6) a bar to contributory negligence as a complete defense.\(^11\) In its original formulation,
DOHSA limited damages to "fair and just compensation for the pecuniary loss sustained by the persons for whose benefit the suit is brought," and punitive damages were—and still are—expressly prohibited. In its deliberations, Congress expressly rejected trial by jury for a DOHSA cause of action, and accordingly all cases governed by DOHSA must be tried to the court sitting without a jury.

As will be seen below, even though the original intent of Congress in enacting DOHSA was to limit recovery to pecuniary damages, attempts to circumvent this limitation in the litigation arising from the KAL Flight 007 shootdown led to two landmark Supreme Court rulings on non-pecuniary damages, Zicherman and Dooley.

III. ZICHERMAN AND DOOLEY

In the aftermath of the Flight 007 attack, numerous wrongful death lawsuits were filed across the United States against KAL, Boeing, Litton, Jeppesen, and the United States. The cases, which ultimately grew from 42 filed initially to 190, were consolidated in multi-district proceedings in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. In a series of pre-trial rulings, the district court dismissed plaintiffs’ actions against Boeing and Lit-
ton, Jeppesen, and the United States, and denied KAL's motion for summary judgment on the grounds that there were material issues of fact that required a trial. The parties agreed to a bifurcated proceeding in which liability was tried first, and plaintiffs' case against KAL went to trial before a jury in the District of Columbia on the issue whether KAL had committed "willful misconduct" within the meaning of Article 25 of the Warsaw Convention. On August 2, 1989, the jury rendered a verdict in plaintiffs' favor on the issue of liability, finding that the destruction of KAL Flight 007 was proximately caused by the willful misconduct of the flight crew in allowing the aircraft to stray over Soviet airspace. The jury also awarded $50 million dollars in punitive damages against KAL. On appeal, the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that there was sufficient evidence to uphold the jury's verdict on willful misconduct, but reversed the award of punitive damages. A petition for certiorari to the

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55 In re Korean Air Lines Disaster of Sept. 1, 1983, 704 F. Supp. 1135, 1158 (D.D.C. 1988). The Court also denied KAL's motion to strike plaintiff's jury demand, on the grounds that jury trials are available in Warsaw Convention cases. Id. at 1151–58. As discussed infra at notes 69–72 and accompanying text, this ruling was probably error under the Supreme Court's analysis in Zicherman.
58 Id.
59 Id. at 1475, 1479–1481, 1484–1490. Even though Russian divers had recovered Flight 007's flight data recorder and cockpit voice recorder almost immediately after the crash, both of these were withheld from the official ICAO investigation into the cause of the tragedy. Wikipedia, Korean Air Lines Flight 007, supra note 4. Accordingly, these crucial pieces of evidence were never admitted into evidence at the liability trial. Subsequently, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, delivered the Flight 007 cockpit voice recorder and flight data recorder to the President of South Korea as a peace offering in October 1992. Id. These devices were analyzed by
Supreme Court was denied, and the individual cases were remanded by the Judicial Panel on Multidistrict Litigation to the original transferor courts for trial on damages.

One of the cases that proceeded to a damages trial involved passenger Muriel Kole. Ms. Kole’s mother, Marjorie Zicherman, and her sister, Muriel Mahalek, filed their wrongful death action in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York. Plaintiffs argued that, under the Warsaw Convention, KAL was liable for “damage sustained,” that accordingly all damages were recoverable, including loss of society, mental anguish and grief, and the decedent’s pre-death pain and suffering. The district court agreed, and allowed plaintiffs to introduce evidence of non-pecuniary damages at trial. The jury returned a verdict for the decedent’s sister in the amount of $251,000, and for decedent’s mother in the amount of $124,000. Included in these verdicts were compensation for loss of society in the amount of $70,000 to decedent’s sister and $28,000 for decedent’s mother.

On appeal, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed. The Zicherman court conducted a lengthy analysis of the meaning of Article 17, and held that Article 17 merely established carrier liability under the Warsaw Convention, but left the question of compensable damages to the applicable domestic law of the treaty’s contracting States. Under a traditional choice of law analysis, the applicable law in Zicherman would be the law of the United States, and there was “little doubt” that the U.S. law gov-

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63 Id.
64 Article 17 of the Warsaw Convention provides, in pertinent part, that “[t]he carrier shall be liable for damage sustained in the event of the death or wounding of a passenger . . . .” Warsaw Convention, supra note 56, art. 17 (emphasis added).
65 Zicherman, 43 F.3d at 20.
66 Id. at 20–21.
67 Id. at 20.
68 Id. at 21.
70 Id. at 223–27.
The Court had no difficulty concluding that since DOHSA limited recovery to pecuniary damages, plaintiff was precluded from recovering loss of society damages. After the Supreme Court handed down Zicherman, KAL filed a motion to dismiss all claims for non-pecuniary damages in the multidistrict litigation. Having been foreclosed from recovery of loss of society damages under Warsaw Convention Article 17, plaintiffs resorted to two alternative theories in opposing KAL’s motion. First, plaintiffs argued that they should be able to recover survivor’s mental anguish and grief under Korean law pursuant to § 764 of DOHSA, which provides that “[w]henever a right of action is granted by the law of any foreign State on account of death by wrongful act, neglect or default, occurring upon the high seas, such right may be maintained in an appropriate action in admiralty in the courts of the United States.” First, Plaintiffs argued that the remedies contained in §§ 761 and 764 were cumulative, and that plaintiffs “are entitled to recover all pecuniary damages allowed by virtue of [§ 761] and in addition any damages allowed by Korean law pursuant to [§ 764].” Second, plaintiffs argued that they should be allowed to supplement a DOHSA cause of action with a general maritime survival action for pre-death pain and suffering. Plaintiffs contended that “their survival claims are distinct from wrongful death claims and are available under general maritime law.”

The district court rejected both of these arguments. The court observed that under its choice of law analysis, U.S. law governed damages issues in the litigation and that accordingly, plaintiffs’ argument that mental anguish and grief damages were available under Korean law was “irrelevant.” Similarly, the district court rejected plaintiffs’ argument that the remedies

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71 Id. at 225–26, 229–30.
72 Id. at 230–31.
74 Id.
75 Id.
77 In re Korean Air Lines Disaster, 935 F. Supp. at 14 n.2.
78 Id. at 15.
79 Id.
80 Id. at 14–15.
81 Id. at 14 n.2.
in §§ 761 and 764 were "cumulative." "The court finds that [§ 761] and [§ 764] are mutually exclusive rather than cumulative." Finally, the district court concluded that a survival cause of action for pre-death pain and suffering under general maritime law was not permitted because "it appears tothis Court that with Zicherman, the Supreme Court has held that DOHSA provides the exclusive remedy for damages which cannot be supplemented with general maritime principles." The district court certified its ruling for an interlocutory appeal by plaintiffs, and the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals unanimously affirmed the district court's ruling in Dooley v. Korean Air Lines, Co.

Plaintiffs successfully petitioned for certiorari to the Supreme Court, where they contended that "because DOHSA is a wrongful-death statute—giving surviving relatives a cause of action for losses they suffered as a result of the decedent's death—it has no bearing on the availability of a survival action." The Dooley court soundly rejected this contention:

We disagree. DOHSA expresses Congress' judgment that there should be no such cause of action in cases of death on the high seas. Byauthorizing only certain surviving relatives to recover damages, and by limiting damages to the pecuniary losses sustained by those relatives, Congress provided the exclusive recovery for deaths that occur on the high seas.

Taken together, Zicherman and Dooley eliminated recovery of any non-pecuniary damages in cases governed by DOHSA. This set the stage for a death compensation dilemma confronting Congress in the aftermath of the TWA Flight 800 catastrophe.

IV. TWA FLIGHT 800, THE ZICHERMAN DILEMMA, AND THE COMMERCIAL AVIATION SOLUTION

On July 17, 1996, at approximately 8:30 p.m., a Boeing 747-131 aircraft, operated by Trans World Airlines as TWA Flight 800, departed from John F. Kennedy Airport in New York City for Rome, Italy, with a planned intermediate stop in Paris, France. As the aircraft climbed up over the ocean near Long

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82 Id.
83 Id. at 15.
84 117 F.3d 1477, 1478, 1485 (D.C. Cir. 1997).
86 Id. at 123.
87 NTSB FLIGHT 800 REPORT, supra note 14, at 1. See Lahr v. NTSB, 569 F.3d 964, 969 (9th Cir. 2009); In re Air Crash Off Long Island, New York, on July 17, 1996, 209 F.3d 200, 201 (2d Cir. 2000).
Island, all radio communications abruptly ceased, and the flight data recorder stopped recording data. The pilot of an Eastwind Airlines Boeing 737 reported seeing TWA Flight 800 suddenly explode, break apart in mid-flight, and crash into the sea. Other witnesses reported that the loud explosion was accompanied by a large fireball over the ocean. All 230 passengers and crew onboard the aircraft perished.

The spectacular destruction of TWA Flight 800 generated intense public interest and speculation. One initial theory was that the crash was caused by a terrorist missile attack. Another theory was that TWA Flight 800 had been brought down by an inadvertent missile strike, possibly from a Navy vessel in the area. Still another theory was that the aircraft was destroyed by a bomb on board the aircraft. In the days that followed the calamity, no one knew what had caused the aircraft to blow-up. Any one of these initial, uncorroborated theories could ultimately prove to be the cause. Accordingly, in addition to the accident investigation conducted by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), the crash precipitated a parallel investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

The FBI interviewed more than 700 witnesses in its investigation. The wreckage was carefully analyzed by both NTSB and FBI investigators to determine the sequence of events leading to the catastrophe. After the longest and most extensive accident investigation in aviation history, lasting more than four years, the NTSB dismissed all theories that the aircraft had been attacked, and concluded that the probable cause of the crash was an explosion of the center wing fuel tank (CWT), resulting from ignition of the flammable fuel/air mixture in the tank. The source of ignition energy for the explosion could not be determined with certainty, but, of the sources evaluated by the investigation, the most likely was a short circuit outside of the CWT.

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89 Id. at 243.
90 Id. at 231–32.
91 In re Air Crash Off Long Island, 209 F.3d at 201.
93 Lahr v. NTSB, 569 F.3d 964, 969 (9th Cir. 2009).
94 Id.
95 Id.
97 Id. at 230.
that allowed excessive voltage to enter it through electrical wiring associated with the fuel quantity indication system.\textsuperscript{98}

The TWA Flight 800 tragedy galvanized congressional interest in increased compensation for the families of airline accidents on the high seas.\textsuperscript{99} Earlier that year, on January 16, 1996, the Supreme Court had issued its Zicherman decision, which, as discussed above, held that in a wrongful death action arising from an international commercial aviation crash on the high seas, no loss of society damages were recoverable.\textsuperscript{100} The problem created by the Zicherman decision for the families of the TWA Flight 800 passengers was described by Congressman William Shuster of Pennsylvania, who authored the House Report entitled Non-applicability of Death on the High Seas Act to Aviation Incidents:

One issue that has arisen, affecting the families of the TWA 800 crash and also an earlier crash, involving Korean Airlines 007, involves the Death on the High Seas Act, 46 U.S.C. 761 et seq. The issue arises because the Supreme Court recently decided, in the case of Zicherman v. Korean Airlines, 116 S. Ct. 629 (1996), that the Death on the High Seas Act (DOHSA) applies to lawsuits that arise out of an aircraft crash in the ocean more than a marine league (about 3 miles) from land.

In the Zicherman case, the court concluded that Articles 17 and 24(2) of the Warsaw Convention governing international air transportation, Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules Relating to International Transportation by Air, Oct. 12, 1929, 49 Stat. 3000, T.S. No. 876 (1934) (reprinted in note following 49 U.S.C. App 1502 (1988 ed.)), permit compensation only for a legally recognized harm, but leave the determination of what harm is legally recognizable to the applicable domestic law. The court further concluded that when a plane crashes into the high seas, the applicable domestic law is DOHSA. Under DOHSA, only pecuniary losses are recognized. Therefore, the family of a deceased passenger could recover damages for the wages that the person would have received but not for the pain and suffering of that person or the loss of companionship of their loved one.

The effect of this decision is to treat families differently depending on whether their relative died in an aircraft that crashed

\textsuperscript{98} Id. at xvi.

\textsuperscript{99} See In re Air Crash Disaster Near Peggy's Cove, 210 F. Supp. 2d 570, 583 n.12 (E.D. Pa. 2002) (stating "the impetus to legislate stemmed not from the TWA Flight 800 [court] decision but from the tragedy itself, as evidenced by the fact that Congressional resolutions on the issue of amending DOHSA were debated as early as 1997, three years before the case was decided." (citations omitted)).

into the ocean or one that crashed into land. If the plane crashes into the ocean, DOHSA applies and the family is entitled only to pecuniary damages. However, if a plane crashes into the land or within 3 miles of land, the applicable State tort law would apply. These generally permit the award of non-pecuniary damages such as loss of companionship.

Given the nature and speed of air travel, it is often a matter of happenstance as to where an aircraft crashes. The result is that a family’s rights under the law depend on pure chance. At the Subcommittee’s hearing on this issue, parents noted that where DOHSA applied, the life of their child was made to appear practically worthless in the eyes of the law.

The Supreme Court recognized the inequity of this result and stated that “Congress may chose to enact special provisions applicable to Warsaw Convention cases, as some countries have done.” The reported bill (H.R. 2005) would do this and in such a way as to ensure that all families would be treated the same regardless of where a plane happened to crash.\footnote{H.R. Rep. No. 105-201, at 2–3 (1997); see also Peggy’s Cove, 210 F. Supp. 2d at 583.}

In these initial hearings and discussions, Congress’s approach to the problem was to make DOHSA inapplicable to airline accidents on the high seas. As Congressman Shuster explained, \footnote{H.R. Rep. No. 105-201, at 3.}

[t]he reported bill amends the aviation laws in Title 49 to make clear that DOHSA does not apply in the case of aviation accidents. This change would apply to all pending cases if the court of original jurisdiction had not yet rendered a final decision. It would apply even if the court had rendered a decision on preliminary matters in the case, including the applicability of DOHSA, as long as the court had not rendered a final decision in the case. This change to Title 49 would effectively prevent others similarly situated to the family in the Zicherman case from being adversely affected by the decision in that case.\footnote{See Peggy’s Cove, 210 F. Supp. 2d at 584 n.13 (“The court notes that the House Resolution for which this report was submitted, to eliminate DOHSA’s application to aviation incidents entirely, was ultimately rejected.”).}

However, this approach was ultimately rejected by Congress in favor of the Commercial Aviation Exception.\footnote{See Peggy’s Cove, 210 F. Supp. 2d at 584 n.13 (“The court notes that the House Resolution for which this report was submitted, to eliminate DOHSA’s application to aviation incidents entirely, was ultimately rejected.”).} Congress feared that if it made DOHSA inapplicable to commercial airline accidents on the high seas, courts would be left with “a dizzying array of State, Federal, foreign, or perhaps, no law about which
lawyers can fight endlessly, further postponing recovery.” Nevertheless, it is clear from H.R. Rep. 105-201, and from a subsequent House Report entitled *To Clarify the Application of the Act Popularly Known As the “Death on the High Seas Act” to Aviation Incidents* that Congress’s focus was on the families of commercial airline passengers: “In the Committee’s view, the reported bill will help to ensure that families of airline accident victims will receive fair treatment under the law.” Finally, as if to leave no doubt about its intentions, Congress made the Commercial Aviation Exception retroactive to July 16, 1996, the day before TWA Flight 800 exploded and crashed into the waters off Long Island.

In the legislative history discussed above, there is no mention of any concern by Congress for accidents involving purely private, general aviation aircraft. Indeed, there was no reason for such flights to even be on Congress’s radar screen, since in the 1996–2000 time period (as well as the present time) transoceanic flights by general aviation aircraft were virtually unheard of, unless it was a ferry flight to deliver an aircraft on another continent. Due to the technological limitations of general aviation aircraft, general aviation pilots do not fly passengers from New York to London on demand, because the distances

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107 The terms “commercial aviation” and “general aviation” appear to be so widely understood to refer to the domestic and international airline industry that there has never been a need to define them in any statute, as a Westlaw computer search of the United States Code reveals. For example, in one aeronautical dictionary “commercial aviation” is defined as “(i) Aircraft operated by a commercial concern for profit, as distinguished from military or private aviation (ICAO). (ii) The business and activities connected with employing commercial aircraft.” AN ILLUSTRATED DICTIONARY OF AVIATION 162 (2005). “General Aviation” is defined as

[a] term used to describe the total field of aviation operation other than the military and the airlines. General aviation includes business flying (corporate, or executive), agricultural aviation, personal flying for sport or pleasure, flight schools, and flying clubs. The manufacturers of the aircraft and the maintenance facilities that service them are also a part of general aviation.

are too great and because of the availability of scheduled commercial airline flights on modern jet aircraft. Even for flights undertaken for the purpose of delivering aircraft to another continent, ferry fuel tanks must be installed to carry enough fuel to fly over the vast distances involved in trans-oceanic aviation.

On the contrary, Congress's sole focus in enacting the Commercial Aviation Exception was fair treatment for families of passengers killed in airline crashes on the high seas. As noted by one court,

[i]t is clear from this report [H.R. Rep. 106-32], which distinguishes only "land" and "close to land" from "ocean," that Congress was not concerned with any problem arising from aviation accidents occurring in foreign territorial waters. Instead, Congress was intent on fashioning a uniform remedy "regardless of where a plane happened to crash," focusing upon remedying the disparity between DOHSA actions, which did not allow non-pecuniary damages, and actions under state and maritime law, which did.

V. DIVERGING INTERPRETATIONS IN THE FEDERAL COURTS

Surprisingly, only two reported federal court decisions have considered the meaning of the term "commercial aviation" since Congress enacted the Commercial Aviation Exception in 2000. Brown v. Eurocopter S.A., decided in 2000, was the first

109 Peggy's Cove, 210 F. Supp. 2d at 583–84.

While [plaintiffs] were involved in a commercial aviation accident that occurred on the high seas [an accident involving a helicopter transporting eight employees], neither man died as a result of the accident. The plain language of the DOHSA amendment illustrates that Congress intended to allow recovery of nonpecuniary damages only where death resulted from a commercial aviation accident. By permitting plaintiffs to recover nonpecuniary damages as a result of being injured in a commercial aviation accident, the Court would be sanctioning a more expansive remedy in a general maritime claim than that remedy granted by Congress in DOHSA.

reported decision to address the meaning of the term “commercial aviation” after the enactment of the Commercial Aviation Exception. The district court held that “commercial aviation” means any flight by anyone in an airplane that has a trade or commercial purpose. Nine years later, the district court in *Eberli v. Cirrus Design Corp.* specifically disagreed with the analysis in *Brown* and declined to follow it. Instead, the *Eberli* court held that the “commercial aviation” exception should apply only in cases involving the types of aviation disasters, such as the crash of TWA flight 800, which motivated Congress to enact the Commercial Aviation Exception.

*Brown* involved the crash of a Eurocopter AS350B2 helicopter during an emergency landing at the High Island A20 platform in the Gulf of Mexico located approximately twenty-five to thirty miles southeast of Galveston, Texas. David Nathan Brown, a commercial helicopter pilot for Petroleum Helicopters, Inc., was flying two platform workers from one fixed platform to another. The flight originated from High Island 446 platform at 3:04 p.m. and was *en route* to its destination of High Island 105 platform. At 3:26 p.m., Mr. Brown reported that the “tail rotor” gear box chip light [had] illuminated,” and he was experiencing a “very high vibration,” which “settled down a little bit at a slower airspeed.” One minute later, Mr. Brown reported that he was heading towards a platform about 3 miles to his north. At 3:31 p.m., he reported that on his first attempt to land on the High Island A20 platform that he was “not able to control the tail rotor” and that he would try to land one more time. There were no further communications with Mr. Brown.

The helicopter wreckage was located approximately thirty-five feet from the High Island A20 platform in about fifty feet of

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111 See *Brown*, 111 F. Supp. 2d at 862–64.
112 Id.
113 *Eberli*, 615 F. Supp. 2d at 1373.
114 See id. at 1374.
115 *Brown*, 111 F. Supp. 2d at 860.
116 Id.
118 Id.
119 Id.
120 Id.
121 Id.
water. An examination of the platform revealed no evidence that the helicopter contacted the heliport. However, there was damage to the roof of the platform control shed, located one level below the heliport.

The families of the decedents filed a wrongful death action against the manufacturer of the helicopter in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas. Plaintiffs' complaint asserted product liability causes of action under Texas state law. When the district court ruled that the action would be governed by DOHSA, plaintiffs argued that the Commercial Aviation Exception should apply and that they should be permitted to recover damages for loss of care, comfort, and companionship. Defendants argued that the Commercial Aviation Exception was inapplicable because Congress did not intend for the phrase "commercial aviation accident" to apply to aviation disasters such as Mr. Brown's fatal helicopter crash. The district court held that the "inescapable conclusion is that Brown's flight falls within the plain meaning of 'commercial aviation accident,' and thus the amended DOHSHA provisions are applicable." The district court relied in part on definitions of "commercial," "commercial activity," and "aviation" in reaching its conclusion. Defendants argued for the district court to in-

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122 Id. at 1a.
123 Id.
124 Id.
126 Id.
127 Id. at 861.
128 Defendants cited 46 U.S.C. § 30307, which provides that
   (1) If the death resulted from a commercial aviation accident occurring on the high seas beyond 12 nautical miles from the shore of any State, or the District of Columbia, or the Territories or dependencies of the United States, additional compensation for nonpecuniary damages for wrongful death of a decedent is recoverable. Punitive damages are not recoverable. (2) In this subsection, the term "nonpecuniary damages" means damages for loss of care, comfort, and companionship.
129 Brown, 111 F. Supp. 2d at 862.
130 Id. (stating "[t]he legal dictionary definition of 'commercial' is that which 'relates to or is connected with trade and traffic or commerce in general; is occupied with business or commerce.' BLACK'S LAW DICTIONARY 270 (9th ed. 2004). 'Commercial activities' are defined as 'any type of business or activity which is carried on for a profit.' Id. at 38. The term 'aviation' is defined as 'the operation of heavier-than-air aircraft.' WEBSTER'S ELEVENTH NEW COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY 119 (2003).").
interpret "commercial aviation" to mean "regularly scheduled, international jumbo-jet airline service involving tickets and fare paying customers." The district court rejected defendants' interpretation holding that:

Defendants can point to nothing in the language or structure of [Commercial Aviation Exception] which reveals a Congressional intent to restrict the meaning of "commercial aviation" to this sort of flight. Nor can Defendants point to any aspect of the legislative history which suggests a legislative intent to adopt a more narrow definition of "commercial aviation." The legislative history clearly reveals an intention to include within the definition accidents involving regularly scheduled, international flights (such as TWA 800), but there is nothing to suggest a desire to restrict the definition beyond what is already implied by the adjectives "commercial" and "aviation." The Court rejects Defendants' artificially narrow definition.

The decision in Brown is, to say the least, puzzling. Instead of thoroughly analyzing the legislative history of the Commercial Aviation Exception, the district court gave no indication that it even understood it, much less gave it serious consideration. The district court supported its decision with the definitions "commercial" and "commercial activity" from Black's Law Dictionary, and the definition of "aviation" from Webster's Dictionary, and relied on language contained in several obscure federal aviation regulations never considered by Congress when enacting the Commercial Aviation Exception. The Brown court's failure to analyze the legislative history of the Commercial Aviation Exception—which as set forth above, tells a compelling story about the origins of the amendment—is inexplicable.

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131 Brown, 111 F. Supp. 2d at 862.
132 Id. at 862–63.
133 The district court referred to various definitions from the Federal Aviation Regulations ("commercial operator," "air commerce," and "on-demand operation"), the Department of the Navy's definition of "commercial aviation", and the Internal Revenue Code's definition of "noncommercial aviation." Id. at 863–64.
134 The Brown decision was authored by Judge Samuel B. Kent, United States District Judge, Southern District of Texas, and was issued in August 2000. Its anomalous nature could possibly be traced to personal difficulties that Judge Kent was experiencing at the time. In an article published in the Wall Street Journal, Judge Kent acknowledged "that after the death of his first wife in 2000, he 'had a drinking problem' and sometimes drank during work days. . ." Peter Lattman, Embattled Federal Judge Breaks Silence to Houston Chron, WALL ST. J. L. BLOG (Jan. 14, 2008, 9:05 AM), http://blogs.wsj.com/law/2008/01/14/embattled-federal-judge-breaks-silence/; see also H.R. REP. No. 111-159, at 19–20 (2009). Judge Kent subsequently pled guilty to obstruction of justice and was sentenced
Since the Brown decision in 2000, Eberli is the only other decision to address the meaning of the terms “commercial aviation.” Eberli involved the crash of a single-engine, Cirrus SR20 aircraft into the Labrador Sea off the coast of Greenland. Fritz Ernest Schoder, a licensed commercial pilot, was ferrying the aircraft for delivery to Royal Airport Services Co., Ltd. in Thailand. Mr. Schoder’s aircraft was accompanied by two other Cirrus SR20 aircraft as part of a three aircraft ferry mission. On February 2, 2007, at 2:05 p.m., the three aircraft departed Goose Bay Airport in Labrador, Canada with a planned stop in Reykjavik, Iceland. Due to deteriorating weather conditions, the pilots decided to divert to Narsarauq, Greenland. Approximately eighty nautical miles from Simiutaq, Greenland, Mr. Schoder reported to the other two pilots that there was an indication of fluctuating oil pressure, but the oil temperature was not increasing, and the engine sounded normal.

The three aircraft continued towards Simiutaq. A short while later, Mr. Schoder reported to the other pilots that the oil temperature suddenly increased and then returned to normal. At 5:29 p.m., Mr. Schoder advised Sondrestrom FIC that he might have to declare an emergency due to low oil pressure. About twenty minutes later, Mr. Schoder declared an
emergency and reported his position as approximately fifty nautical miles from Simiutaq. At 6:00 p.m., Mr. Schoder reported that he was getting ready to ditch and was putting on his survival suit. He successfully ditched the aircraft at approximately 6:11 p.m.; however, due to the lack of an adequate survival suit providing insulation and flotation, Mr. Schoder perished in the frigid waters of the Labrador Sea. A rescue helicopter dispatched from Niaqornaq, Greenland, located the ditched aircraft. Mr. Schoder’s body was found floating near the open cabin door. By the time Mr. Schoder’s body was recovered several hours later, the aircraft had sunk and was never recovered.

Mr. Schoder’s widow filed a wrongful death action against the aircraft manufacturer, Cirrus Design Corporation, and the aircraft engine manufacturer, Teledyne Continental Motors, in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida alleging product liability causes of action under Florida state law. The district court held, however, that plaintiff’s action was governed by DOHSA. As a result, plaintiff argued that because Mr. Schoder was ferrying an aircraft as part of a commercial activity carried out for profit and related to commerce, the accident qualified as “commercial aviation accident” under DOHSA’s Commercial Aviation Exception. Defendants argued that the Commercial Aviation Exception had no application to an accident involving the ferrying of a general aviation aircraft.

The district court began its analysis by noting that the phrase “commercial aviation accident” was ambiguous because it gave rise to at least two different interpretations. The phrase could either be (1) an accident that occurs during the course of aviation involving commerce (as plaintiff argued relying on the
Brown decision) or (2) an accident that occurs during the transportation of passengers or cargo for commercial purposes (as defendants argued). Based on the Operating Limitations of the Certificate of Airworthiness for the aircraft and the legislative history of the amendment to DOHSA, the district court held that Mr. Schoder's death during the ferrying of the subject aircraft fell outside the scope of "commercial aviation accident" and therefore the Commercial Aviation Exception was inapplicable.

Unlike the district court in Brown, the Eberli court specifically considered the legislative history of the Commercial Aviation Exception:

Finally, a review of the legislative history of the statute supports the Court's interpretation of the statute. There appears to be general agreement that the [Commercial Aviation Exception] was enacted in the aftermath of a number of international air disasters and the lawsuits arising out of such air disasters, in which the families of the victims were denied loss of society damages under DOHSA. Recognizing the unfairness of allowing or denying the families of airline passengers nonpecuniary damages solely on the basis of where the crash occurred, Congress acted to "ensure that all families would be treated the same regardless of where a plane happened to crash."

Relying on language in the House Reports, plaintiff attempted to argue that the impetus behind the enactment of the Commercial Aviation Exception was to establish similar treat-

153 Id. at 1373.

154 The district court noted that the section of the transportation code that delineates when an aircraft is engaged in commercial or public flight operations defines "commercial purposes" as "the transportation of person or property for compensation or hire." Id. at 1373 (citing 49 U.S.C. § 40125). The subject aircraft Certificate of Airworthiness specified that "no person may operate this aircraft for carrying passengers or property for compensation or hire." See id. Likewise, the court rejected plaintiff's argument that Mr. Schoder was a "commercial operator" as defined under the FAR because "Mr. Schoder was carrying property—the aircraft itself—for compensation as part of his ferrying business, and that he, therefore, was a commercial operator engaged in commercial aviation." Id. The court stated that it "does not see how the subject aircraft could qualify as 'property' for purpose of the FAR, considering that the Operating Limitations, which were written with Mr. Schoder's ferrying operation in mind, specifically state that the aircraft cannot be operated to carry property." Id.

155 See id.

156 Id. at 1373–74 (quoting H.R. REP. No. 105-201, at 2).
ment of the families of all air crash victims. The district court dismissed this argument, stating that

[p]laintiff seizes upon the language in the House Reports that laments how families of air crash victims were treated differently prior to the enactment of section 30307 based on the location of the crash. However, were it true that this concern—that the families of all air crash victims should be treated the same—was the driving force behind section 30307, the statute would have made nonpecuniary damages recoverable under DOHSA for all aviation-related accidents. The fact that Congress limited the scope of section 30307 to “commercial aviation accidents” leads this Court to believe that Congress wanted the statute to apply only in cases involving the types of aviation disasters, such as the crash of TWA flight 800, that motivated Congress to enact section 30307."

The *Eberli* court concluded that in enacting the Commercial Aviation Exception, Congress had no intention that the statute should be applied to accidents involving the ferrying of general aviation aircraft.

### VI. CONCLUSION

The Commercial Aviation Exception was enacted by Congress in response to a series of commercial airline accidents, and it allows recovery of loss of society damages in actions arising from a “commercial aviation accident.” The legislative history of this amendment to DOHSA makes it clear that the only reasonable construction of the Commercial Aviation Exception is that the provision applies solely to actions arising from commercial airline accidents on the high seas and has no application whatsoever in wrongful death actions arising from general aviation accidents on the high seas. The decision in *Eberli v. Cirrus Design Corp.* correctly concluded that the Commercial Aviation Exception should only apply to commercial aviation disasters, such as the crash of TWA flight 800, which motivated Congress to enact the Commercial Aviation Exception.

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157 *Id.* at 1374.
158 *Id.*
159 *Id.* at 1369.