

Pilots Called Heroes After Crash Landing

By [Alexandra Odynova](#)

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Rescue workers inspecting a Tu-154 jet operated by Alrosa airlines after a dramatic crash landing in the Komi taiga. All 81 people on board escaped injury.

Seventy-two passengers settled into their seats as their Tu-154 jet lifted off the runway of the Sakha republic's Polyarny Airport for a five-hour flight to Moscow.

But 3 1/2 hours later, the plane suffered an electrical failure and made a remarkable emergency landing at an unmapped, abandoned military airfield in the Komi republic — with no injuries among the passengers and nine crew members.

In fact, rescuers found some of the passengers foraging for mushrooms in the taiga forest where the plane had come to a stop after overrunning the short runway, said Pyotr Dityatev, head of the Izhma district, where the airfield is located.

"I saw from a distance how it was landing quietly. The speed was quite high," Dityatev said of the plane.

"When we arrived at the scene, the captain came out and said no one was hurt," he said Wednesday by telephone from the village of Izhma.

The plane's four pilots are being praised as heroes, and the Federal Air Transportation Agency, which oversees civil aircraft, is considering presenting them with awards, RIA-Novosti reported.

The aging Soviet-built Tu-154, operated by Alrosa airlines, [took off](#) from Polyarny Airport near the town of Udachny at 10 a.m. Tuesday for a regular flight to Moscow's Domodedovo Airport.

Just over halfway through the flight, the plane began to shake in what passengers thought was light turbulence.

"We were flying and everything was fine," passenger Tatyana Plavdis said in an interview with Russia television.

She said that after the plane began shaking, a pilot asked the passengers to prepare for an emergency landing.

What the passengers were not told was that the plane's electrical systems had failed, leading to a loss of navigation devices and fuel pumps, crash investigators said.

But the cockpit crew, headed by pilot Yevgeny Novosyolov, 41, managed to dump the fuel and somehow spot the Izhma military airfield, which was abandoned 12 years ago and is not listed on the latest maps.

Without electrical systems, the pilots had no radio support as they prepared to land, the Prosecutor General's Office said in a statement.

With the passengers and flight attendants ducking down in their seats in crash positions, [the plane](#) quickly overran the short, 1,400-meter runway and plowed about 180 meters into the taiga forest of pine and birch trees before grinding to a halt.

No one was injured in the incident, and the aircraft only sustained minor damage, the Investigative Committee said in a statement. But Gazeta.ru said it [was unclear](#) whether it would be possible to get the plane out of the forest.

"We didn't even have time to get frightened. Only when we got out and saw the mowed-down field, then it was scary," passenger Alexei Grishin told Russia after arriving in Moscow.

The passengers, including three children and one pregnant woman, slid down emergency chutes and calmly bided their time, waiting for rescuers.

Dityatev, the official from Izhma, located 400 kilometers northwest of Syktyvkar, the capital of Komi republic, said he was surprised to see some of them hunting for mushrooms, a popular Russian pastime.

The passengers were taken to the village, fed and provided with beds for the night, he said.

Several helicopters were dispatched to take the passengers to Sakha's Ukhta Airport on Tuesday.

Only one couple chose to take a train to Moscow, while the rest of the passengers flew to Domodedovo on another Tu-154.

A preliminary investigation has found that an unspecified disruption to the plane's power supply caused the electrical failure, prosecutors said.

Data from the plane's black boxes were not made public on Wednesday.

The Alrosa airline is owned by the state diamond monopoly Alrosa.

An airline representative, Igor Zakharov, said the airline had no clear answers about what had prompted the electrical failure and was waiting for the results of the government's investigation.

Zakharov praised the pilots' teamwork and professional skills, saying the landing had been very difficult.

"In such circumstances, few can land such a heavy aircraft at an absolutely unprepared airfield," Zakharov said by telephone.

"There might have been a bit of luck, too," he said.

Valentin Dudin, a former pilot and an expert in aviation security, said the landing was a rare but not unique event.

In January 2009, an Airbus crash-landed in the Hudson River in New York with 155 people on board and no casualties.

Dudin said the Tu-154 crew was lucky that the plane landed on small taiga trees.

"If there had been bigger and harder trees, the aircraft would have been chopped up — like what happened with the Polish plane," he said, referring to the Tu-154 plane crash that killed Polish President Lech Kaczynski and 95 other people in a forest near Smolensk in April.

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