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Congressman: Trigger lock caused pilot's gun to fire

By LISA ZAGAROLI
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WASHINGTON — The pilot of a US Airways flight headed to Charlotte was putting a lock on his gun when it discharged in the cockpit, a congressman who was briefed by federal security officials said Wednesday.

Rep. John Mica of Florida, the ranking Republican on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said he remained convinced after a briefing from the Transportation Security Administration that the March 22 midair discharge of the weapon was a one-time incident and didn't indicate problems with the armed pilot program.

"The explanation I had from TSA about this was that to ensure even more safety in the program, they require the gun to be secured with some sort of lock," Mica said. "The misfiring of the weapon was due to this additional requirement in either installing or applying the lock to the weapon, that instead of going in back of the trigger it went in front. That's how the gun fired."

Mica, who helped initiate the Federal Flight Deck Officer program, which allows trained pilots to carry weapons while flying, said he spoke to TSA on Tuesday as part of a briefing on several other matters.

A Charlotte airport police report said that the weapon discharged when the pilot was stowing it as the plane was descending into Charlotte from Denver. No one was injured in the incident, and the plane landed safely, though the bullet passed through the cockpit's wall and exited the plane's fuselage.

Pilots are required to have trigger locks on pistols when they're transporting them outside planes.

The .40-caliber Heckler & Koch pistol carried by pilots has a lock that's intended to pass through a hole in the holster and behind the gun's trigger. If the gun isn't securely in the holster — perhaps loosened while being transferred — the lock can end up in front of the trigger, pilots and gun experts have said.

Though many pilot groups support the program, they've criticized some of the requirements for how the weapon is transported.

TSA didn't return phone calls seeking confirmation of Mica's account. Officials have declined to reveal

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details of the shooting while it's under investigation.

Lawmakers on the House Homeland Security Committee are scheduled to be briefed by TSA on the shooting next week.

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