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A New System to Warn Planes of Air Turbulence, Preventing Injuries: Cameron on Transportation

Author : David Gurliacci

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“Buckle up, folks. There’s some bumpy air ahead,” the pilot said on a recent flight. No need to remind me; my seat belt is always fastened, as “bumpy air” — a euphemism for air turbulence — is my worst fear in flying. It’s the whole “fear of death” thing.

Intellectually, I know that modern aircraft can survive all manner of stress from changing or violent winds, but can I? I’ve been on flights where our aircraft plummeted hundreds of feet without notice, sending passengers, their drinks and laptops flying. There’s not much you can do in a situation like that except hang

on, breathe deeply and pray.

Thanks to climate change, there are dire predictions that [in-flight turbulence is getting worse](#), increasing by several hundred percent in some areas. Even today, severe air turbulence is thought to cost airlines \$200 million a year and is the [single biggest cause of passenger injuries](#).

[According to the Federal Aviation Administration](#), there were 27 passengers and crew injured by turbulence in 2015. In 2016, that number was 42. And with more people flying, those numbers will climb.

Only a few years ago, United Airlines offered passengers an in-flight audio channel so they could listen to air traffic control handling their and other flights. That was my favorite channel as I heard our flight being cleared to higher altitudes, warned about other aircraft and being guided across the country.

It was reassuring to hear the professionalism of the flight crew and ATC, but the channel was only available at the pilot's discretion. When it was turned off mid-flight, I always knew something nasty was coming our way.

Pilots regularly ask ATC for "ride reports" from other aircraft at the same altitude and flight path, always seeking the smoothest flight. But sometimes the turbulence is unexpected, the so-called "clear air turbulence." You can be cruising along at 35,000 feet when, without notice, [you get slammed](#).

On a Turkish Airlines flight to JFK last March, the 777 jetliner encountered clear air turbulence over Maine that sent everything flying. The terror lasted about 10 minutes and when the plane finally landed, 30 passengers were taken to the hospital.

That's why you should always keep your seat belt fastened, so if the plane drops, you don't crash into the ceiling.

Now there's new technology that may help us all have a smoother flight.

The [International Air Transport Association](#) is testing an automatic tracking and reporting system to warn flights of "bumpy air." So far, 15 major airlines are sharing data in the test phase of the program.

Their planes are equipped with a black box measuring changes in the flight's speed and tilt eight times each second. That data is transmitted to the ground, and within 30 seconds, flights in the area can be warned of trouble ahead.

The participating airlines are generating 115,000 reports a day to the IATA Turbulence Aware system. The system will be most valuable on long, overseas routes where there are fewer aircraft flying the same corridor.

[The Turbulence Aware system](#) should be fully operational this year when airlines will have installed the gear on most of their planes. American Airlines alone hopes to have 800 airliners gathering and reporting data in

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the coming months.

In the meantime — buckle up, friends! There's bumpy air ahead.

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for more than 25 years. He is the founder of the [Commuter Action Group](#), sits on the [Merritt Parkway Conservancy](#) board and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column, republished with permission of Hearst CT Media, are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.