

## 17 Eastern Airlines Flight 401 (EAL 401)

On 29 December 1972, Eastern Airlines Flight 401, a Lockheed L-1011, departed JFK International Airport bound for the Miami International Airport with one hundred sixty-three passengers and thirteen crew members on board. The regularly scheduled flight was uneventful until the approach to Miami, when the landing-gear handle was placed in the down position but the green light in the cockpit, which would have indicated to the flight crew that the nose landing gear was fully extended and locked, failed to illuminate. The Captain tried repeatedly to lower the landing gear, but the green 'gear-down' indicator still failed to light.

**2332:35**

**CAPTAIN:** Miami Tower, Eastern 401 just turned on final [landing approach].

**2332:52**

**CAPTAIN:** Miami Tower, do you read, Eastern 401 just turned on final?

**2332:56**

**MIAMI TOWER:** Eastern 401 heavy, continue approach to 9 Left.

**2333:00**

**CAPTAIN:** Continue approach, roger.

**2333:00.5**

**SECOND OFFICER:** Continuous ignition. No smoke.

**CAPTAIN:** Coming on.

**SECOND OFFICER:** Brake system.

**CAPTAIN:** Okay.

**SECOND OFFICER:** Radar.

- CAPTAIN:** Up, off.
- SECOND OFFICER:** Hydraulic panels checked.
- FIRST OFFICER:** Thirty-five [degrees flaps], thirty-five.
- CAPTAIN:** Bert, is that handle in?
- SECOND OFFICER:** Engine cross bleeds are open.
- 2333:22**
- FIRST OFFICER:** Gear down.
- CAPTAIN:** I gotta . . .
- FIRST OFFICER:** No nose gear.
- 2333:25**
- CAPTAIN:** I gotta raise it back up.
- 2333:47**
- CAPTAIN:** Now I'm gonna try it down one more time.
- FIRST OFFICER:** All right. (SOUND OF ALTITUDE ALERT HORN.) Right gear. Well, want to tell 'em we'll take it around and circle around and . . . around?
- 2334:05**
- CAPTAIN (TO MIAMI TOWER):** Well, ah, tower, this is Eastern, ah, 401. It looks like we're gonna have to circle. We don't have a light on our nose gear yet.
- 2334:14**
- MIAMI TOWER:** Eastern 401 heavy, roger. Pull up, climb straight ahead to two thousand, go back to Approach Control, one twenty-six.
- 2334:19**
- FIRST OFFICER:** Twenty-two degrees. Twenty-two degrees, gear up.
- CAPTAIN:** Put power on it first, Bert. Thatta boy. Leave the damn gear down till we find out what we got [wrong].
- FIRST OFFICER:** All right.
- SECOND OFFICER:** You want me to test the [green] lights or not?
- CAPTAIN:** Yeah.
- FIRST OFFICER (TO CAPTAIN):** Ah, Bob, it might be the light [that is malfunctioning]. Could you jiggle the, the light?

- SECOND OFFICER:** It's [the light] gotta, gotta come out a little bit and then snap in.
- CAPTAIN (TO MIAMI TOWER):** Okay, going up to two thousand, one twenty-eight six.
- 2334:58**
- FIRST OFFICER:** We're up to two thousand. [To the Captain] You want me to fly it, Bob?
- CAPTAIN:** What frequency did he want us on, Bert?
- FIRST OFFICER:** One twenty-eight six.
- CAPTAIN:** I'll talk to 'em.
- SECOND OFFICER:** [Speaking of the warning lights] I can't make it pull out, either.
- CAPTAIN:** We got pressure.
- SECOND OFFICER:** Yes, sir, all systems.
- 2335:09**
- CAPTAIN:** All right, ah, Approach Control, Eastern 401, we're right over the airport here and climbing to two thousand feet. In fact, we've just reached two thousand feet and we've got to get a green light on our nose gear.
- 2335:20**
- MIAMI APPROACH:** Eastern 401, roger. Turn left heading three six zero and maintain two thousand, vectors to 9 Left final.
- CAPTAIN:** Left three six zero.
- 2336:04**
- CAPTAIN:** Put the . . . on autopilot here.
- SECOND OFFICER:** All right.
- CAPTAIN:** See if you can get that light out.
- FIRST OFFICER:** All right.
- CAPTAIN:** Now push the switches just a . . . forward. Okay. You got it sideways, then. Naw, I don't think it'll fit. You gotta turn it one quarter turn to the left [referring to the faulty warning light].

**2336:27****MIAMI APPROACH:** Eastern 401, turn left heading three zero zero.**CAPTAIN:** Okay. Three zero zero, Eastern 401.**2337:08****CAPTAIN:** Hey, hey, get down there [in the nose-wheel well] and see if that damn nose wheel's down. You better do that.**FIRST OFFICER:** You got a handkerchief or something so I can get a little better grip on this [warning light]? Anything I can do with it?**CAPTAIN:** Get down there and see if that, see if that damned thing . . .**FIRST OFFICER:** This [light] won't come out, Bob. If I had a pair of pliers, I could cushion it with that Kleenex.**SECOND OFFICER:** I can give you pliers but if you force it, you'll break it, just believe me.**FIRST OFFICER:** Yeah, I'll cushion it with Kleenex.**SECOND OFFICER:** Oh, we can give you pliers.**2337:48****MIAMI APPROACH:** Eastern, ah, 401, turn left, heading two seven zero.**2337:53****CAPTAIN:** Left two seven zero, roger.**2338:34****CAPTAIN:** To hell with it, to hell with this. Go down and see if it's lined up with the red line. That's all we care. [Don't screw] around with that damned twenty-cent piece of light equipment we got on this [panel].**2338:46****CAPTAIN:** Eastern 401 . . . ah, one'll go, ah, out west just a little further if we can here and, ah, see if we can get this light to come on here.**2338:54****MIAMI APPROACH:** All right, ah, we got you headed westbound there now, Eastern 401.

**2338:56****CAPTAIN:** All right. [To Second Officer] How much fuel we got left on this . . . ?**SECOND OFFICER:** Fifty-two five.**FIRST OFFICER:** [About the warning light] it won't come out, no way.**2339:37****CAPTAIN:** We can tell if that [gear's] down by looking down at our indices. I'm sure it's down. There's no way it couldn't help but be.**FIRST OFFICER:** I'm sure it is.**CAPTAIN:** It free falls down.**FIRST OFFICER:** The tests don't show that the lights worked, anyway.**CAPTAIN:** That's right.**FIRST OFFICER:** It's a faulty light.**2341:05****FIRST OFFICER:** Bob, this [light] just won't come out.**CAPTAIN:** All right, just leave it there.**SECOND OFFICER:** I don't see it [the wheel] down there.**CAPTAIN:** Huh?**SECOND OFFICER:** I don't see it.**CAPTAIN:** You can see that the indis . . . for the nose wheel, ah, there's a place in there you can look and see if they're lined up . . .**SECOND OFFICER:** I know. A little like a telescope.**CAPTAIN:** Yeah.**SECOND OFFICER:** Well . . .**CAPTAIN:** It's not lined up?**SECOND OFFICER:** I can't see it. It's pitch dark and I throw the little light I get, ah, nothing.**2341:31****CAPTAIN:** [Are the] well-wheel lights on?**SECOND OFFICER:** Pardon?**CAPTAIN:** Well-wheel lights on?

- SECOND OFFICER:** Yeah, well-wheel lights always on if the gear's down.
- CAPTAIN:** Now try it.
- 2341:40**
- MIAMI APPROACH:** Eastern 401, how are things coming along out there?
- 2341:44**
- CAPTAIN:** Okay. We'd like to turn around and come, come back in. Clear on left.
- MIAMI APPROACH:** Eastern 401, turn left heading one eight zero.
- 2341:50**
- CAPTAIN:** Huh?
- 2342:05**
- FIRST OFFICER:** [We did] something to the altitude.
- CAPTAIN:** What?
- 2342:07**
- FIRST OFFICER:** We're still at two thousand, right?
- 2342:09**
- CAPTAIN:** Hey, what's happening here? I . . .
- 2342:12** (SOUND OF IMPACT).

The crew of Eastern 401 had failed to monitor the flight instruments and to detect the descent soon enough to prevent impact with the ground. Preoccupation with the nose landing gear allowed the descent to go unnoticed. The aircraft crashed at 2342 Eastern Standard Time, 18.7 miles west-northwest of Miami International Airport. Of the one hundred sixty-three passengers and thirteen crew members aboard, ninety-four passengers and five crew members received fatal injuries. The aircraft was destroyed.