

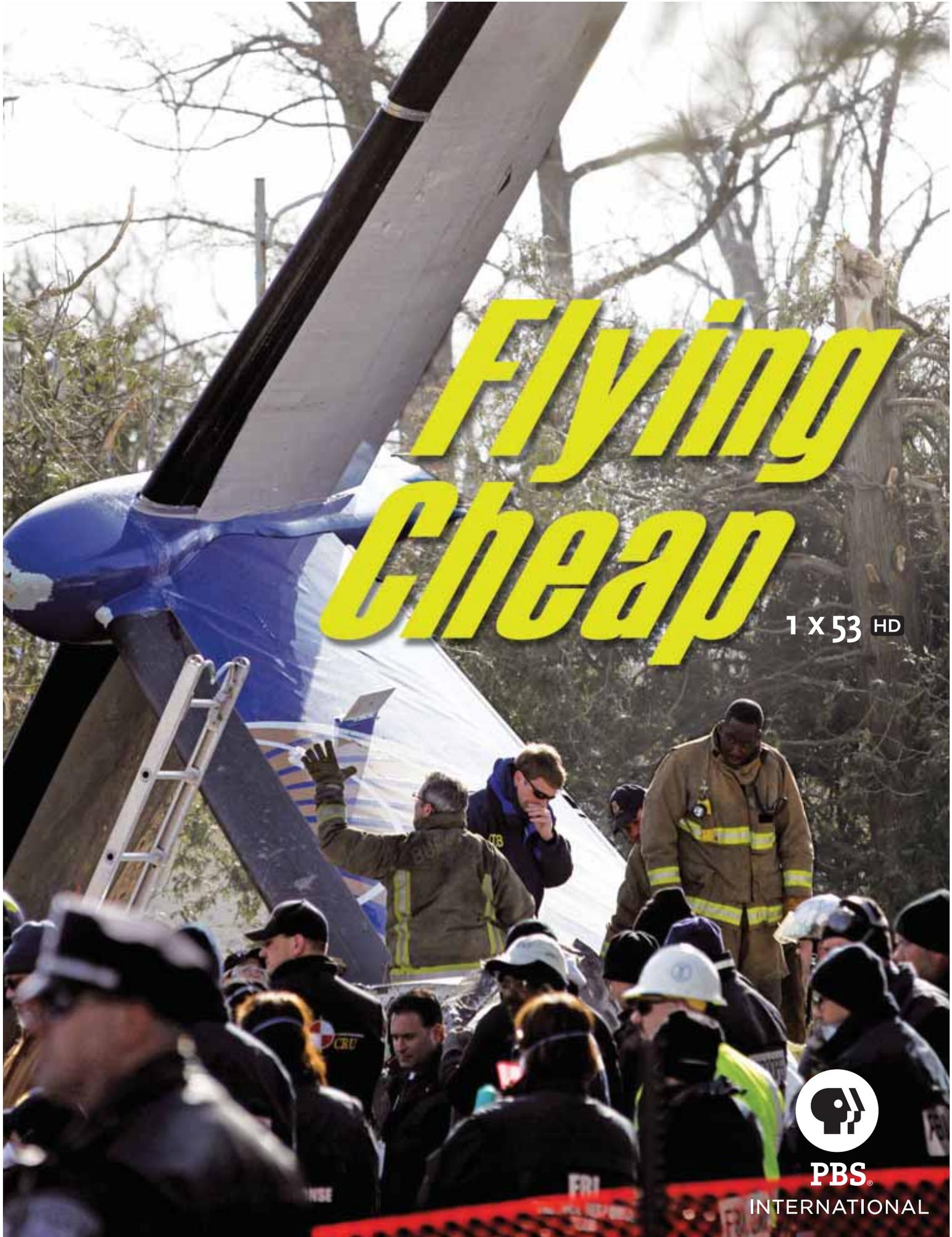
# *Flying Cheap*

1 X 53 HD



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Last February, Continental Flight 3407 crashed outside Buffalo, New York, killing 49 people onboard and one on the ground. Although 3407 was painted in the colors of Continental Connection, it was actually operated by Colgan Air, a regional airline that flies routes under contract for US Airways, United, and Continental. The crash and subsequent investigation revealed a little-known trend in the airline industry: major airlines have outsourced more and more of their flights to obscure regional carriers. Today, with regional airlines accounting for more than half of all scheduled domestic flights in the United States and responsible for the last six fatal commercial airline accidents, FRONTLINE investigates the safety issues associated with outsourcing.

The industry turned to regional outsourcing in the wake of deregulation and competitive pressure from new low-cost carriers such as Southwest. Former Continental CEO Gordon Bethune was a leader in the new formula. Outsourcing helped Continental remain more competitive and avoid another bankruptcy as they bid more routes out. John Prater, president of the Air Line Pilots Association, says: "The major airlines created the regional industry as a way of lowering costs. They wanted to find a way of getting rid of experience. They wanted to find a way of getting rid of that expensive employee, and let's start this new industry and call it the regional industry."

An investigation of the crash by the National Transportation Safety Board will soon be completed and, according to preliminary reports, is likely to identify pilot error as a major factor in the accident. But the investigation has also put the spotlight on operations of regional airlines like Colgan Air, where the first officer on 3407 made less than \$16,000 the previous year and the captain had failed five flight tests and received inadequate training on a critical safety system involved in the crash.

FRONTLINE talked with many regional pilots, including several former Colgan pilots who speak publicly for the first time. They talk about the pressures to meet contractual responsibilities and avoid delays or canceled flights in spite of sickness, fatigue, or broken plane parts. It is a practice in the industry known as pilot pushing. "They said safety was a priority a lot," says one former Colgan pilot. "In my experience, however, on a day-to-day basis, being on time and completing the flight was much more important, much more important."

This program also examines how well the Federal Aviation Administration, the agency responsible for overseeing safety of the airline industry, has been doing its job. Documents and interviews obtained by FRONTLINE indicate the agency was aware of significant and repeated safety concerns at Colgan Air dating back more than a decade.

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CREDITS

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