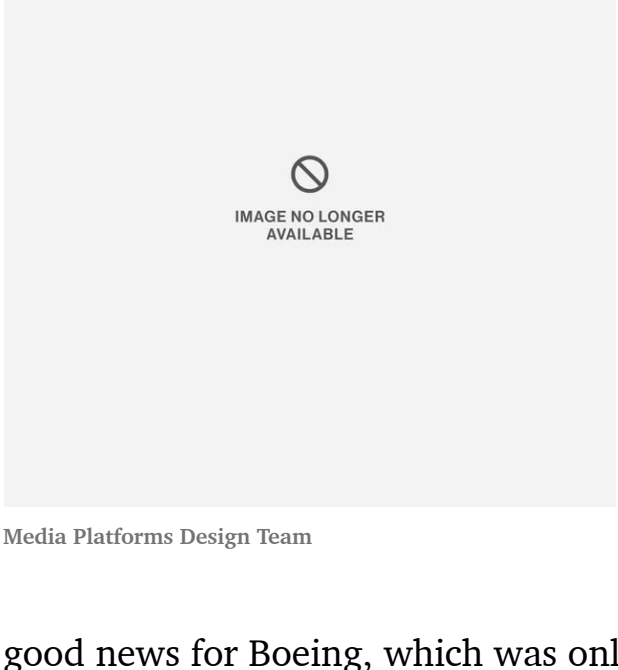


The Good and Bad News About the Latest 787 Fire

Investigators say Friday's fire on board a Boeing Dreamliner at Heathrow Airport in London was probably not connected to battery problems that grounded the 787 earlier this year. But that's not necessarily great news for Boeing.

BY BEN IANNOTTA PUBLISHED: JUL 15, 2013 1:58 PM EDT



Media Platforms Design Team

U.K. investigators say Friday's fire on an Ethiopian Airlines 787 at London's Heathrow Airport was a "serious incident" that produced "smoke throughout the fuselage and extensive heat damage in the upper portion of the rear fuselage," the UK investigators said. But they don't think the problem came from one of the plane's two lithium-ion batteries.

That might—or might not—be good news for Boeing, which was only just recovering from the **[battery fires](#)** that grounded its new Dreamliner for four months earlier this year.

The good news is that the preliminary evidence does not point to a reoccurrence of those battery fires. The scorching seen at the tail of the plane involved in this most recent incident was a long way from the nearest battery, which is located near the wings and supplies electricity to the plane's auxiliary power unit, a device that provides electricity for the 787 while the plane is on the ground.

"Heat damage is remote from the area in which the aircraft main and APU (Auxiliary Power Unit) batteries are located, and, at this stage, there is no evidence of a direct causal relationship," Britain's Air Accidents Investigation Branch said in a prepared statement.

Instead, the scorching suggests an electrical problem of some sort, according to one independent accident investigator under the condition of anonymity. If that's the case, Boeing may be wrestling with a second design problem on the plane, the investigator said, a major setback as Boeing tries to salvage the plane's reputation and ramp up 787 sales in the coming years. So far, **[the New York Times reports](#)**, the major airlines are standing by the Dreamliner.

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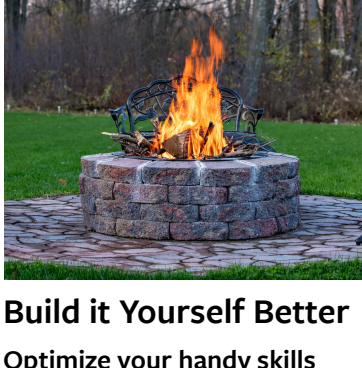


At this point U.K. investigators (and the team from Boeing that is in London to assist them) aren't saying much. However, they are probably exploring whether the fire was caused by an electrical malfunction like the one that grounded the 787 test planes from November to December

in 2010, this expert said. Back then, a 787 test plane made an emergency landing at Laredo, Texas, after smoke filled the back of the cabin, the **[Seattle Times](#)** reported at the time. Thirty to 40 workers aboard the plane were evacuated on the runway. Boeing acknowledged the "in-flight electrical incident" and installed updated power distribution system software before resuming flights in December 2010.

And **[Reuters today reports](#)** on another big question for Boeing: just how to fix a hole in this futuristic plane's fuselage. The Dreamliner is made of a carbon-composite material meant to make the plane lighter, but repairs of this magnitude have not been attempted on a commercial plane in service. Boeing must either patch the plane's composite skin or replace a whole large piece of the fuselage, and we don't know how expensive that fix could prove to be.

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