



NOT GOOD

Enough

Not exactly a fear of success, but a fear of the consequences of success has been growing in the global aviation community. The safety foot soldiers, especially those hard at work on specific safety programs in the developed world, looking at this new fear from the framework of their own dedication may see it as irrational, reflecting a need to worry about something — anything — all of the time.

The increasing rarity of fatal commercial aircraft accidents in the developed world, combined with increasingly sophisticated safety programs rooting out accident-triggering events and chain enablers, lead many to believe that an accident rate already sharply improved will decline even more over the next decade. They probably are correct.

This, say the worriers, is exactly the problem.

Mike Ambrose, director general of the European Regions Airline Association, is a dedicated worrier. He remembers the state of airline safety when he joined a U.K. carrier at the start of his career: “It was normal for a large airline to have one hull loss accident each year. Now, few current airline CEOs have had the experience of an accident.”

It’s said that generals who early in their careers experienced war first-hand are the most reluctant to leap into battle on slim pretexts because they know all too well the consequences of crossing that line, a concern that weighs less heavily on the generals minted in the luxury of a peacetime in which war is gamed, not fought, thus becoming an abstraction. Similarly, could a new airline manager have the same depth of concern about safety as one who has dealt with an accident aftermath or walked through hot wreckage?

Ambrose and others fear that the heavy lifting that got us where we are today will be given scant consideration by the new managers of today and, even worse, tomorrow. “They can tend to believe this level of safety is a given, so will more easily pass responsibility for safety down the authority chain.” He hastens to add that this is not the case with the first-rank carriers around the world.

To be sure, sometimes the way we talk about safety advancements can tend to foster a perception that safety is a “given,” that it can be installed.

The real-world *deus ex machina* of aviation safety technology, most would agree, is the protection offered by terrain awareness and warning systems (TAWS) against the deadliest type of accident. We keep repeating that no aircraft with an operating TAWS has suffered a controlled flight into terrain accident. While everyone connected to aviation safety knows that humans retain the ability to put an aircraft into such a perilous position

that even TAWS cannot save it, is it not plausible that newly minted managers coming from outside the industry will take in the sage wisdom about the efficacy of TAWS and assign safety a lower rung on his worry ladder?

At press time the widely read newspaper *USA Today* had a lead story headlined “Airways are the safest ever,” by Alan Levin, an experienced and skeptical observer of the aviation industry. He led the piece relating a TAWS save similar to the series Dan Gurney is writing for this publication. Levin goes on to say, “Risks in the airways have hardly disappeared. ... But there is also little doubt that safety is improving dramatically.” He acknowledges, “Dozens of safety enhancements have driven the accident rate down,” and says safety professionals worry that a string of nasty accidents could begin tomorrow.

All of this is precisely the case. And while we can take satisfaction for accomplishments to date, we cannot relax or allow others to do so.

Outgoing International Civil Aviation Organization Council President Dr. Assad Kotaite in these pages last month warned against overconfidence: “There is absolutely no room for complacency where safety is concerned, there never was and there never will be.”

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