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 peace-time 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.”