



On Whose Side Is Lady Luck?

BY ROBERT T. FRANCIS

Aviation safety officials have recently attributed positive outcomes in accidents or close calls to Lady Luck's intervention. I wonder whether we could cite an equal number of instances where she has been missing.

One example where "good luck" prevailed was the Air France A340 accident in Toronto. Considerable "expert" commentary said how lucky we were that no one was killed. But was Lady Luck on duty that day?

I would argue that the fact that no one was killed was much more attributable to decades of work by numerous aviation professionals and those who empower them. Were not hull structural integrity, flammability of fabrics, 16 g seats, flight attendant training, emergency slides, and aircraft rescue and fire fighting training among the reasons for the extraordinary safety record that we have? Is there not truth in the old adage that "you make your own luck"?

Another recent "near miss" involved an Asiana 747 on approach to Los Angeles International Airport. With Asiana on final, a controller cleared a Southwest 737 on the same runway for takeoff. The controller did not notice the error, but

the 747 crew saw the 737 and initiated a go-around. Luck? The Asiana crew was doing what it had been trained to do. One pilot was flying the aircraft and the other was looking out the window. If our Lady friend was involved, she was certainly aided by thousands of hours of research in the fields of human factors, crew resource management and training.

Was Lady Luck absent on the day in 2001 when American Airlines Flight 585 crashed in New York? She may have been, but that certainly took a back seat to poor design certification and poor pilot training.

If we accept, as most safety professionals do, that the runway and airport environment should be the focus of significant expenditures of resources, how do we prioritize? Again, we get back to systems involved in the pre-emptive approach to aviation safety. Flight operational quality assurance (FOQA), aviation safety action programs (ASAP) and line operations safety audits (LOSA) are enormously useful in developing the data from which to prioritize.

However, one sometimes-overlooked factor is the importance of having qualified analysts to ensure that the products

of FOQA, ASAP and LOSA are being used properly to reduce risk. "Data-driven" action needs people who are competent to draw the correct conclusions and recommend the most effective responses.

In the higher-risk runway and airport environment, important work continues to be done involving radar, transponders, better signage and lighting, runway friction measurement and overrun protection using engineered materials arresting systems and better overrun areas.

Let's keep making our own luck. ●



The Honorable Robert T. Francis is a former vice-chairman of the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board and is a member of the Flight Safety Foundation executive committee.