

LEARNING FROM History

I hate to rely on overused literary references, but recent events compel me to do just that. In 1905, philosopher George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” It seems that, lately, aviation has been repeating more than a few dark moments from the past. As I write, investigators in Spain are considering the possibility that the recent crash of a Spanair McDonnell Douglas MD-82 may have been a case of improper setting of slats and flaps on takeoff. That same scenario resulted in the deadly crash of an MD-80 in Detroit in 1987. That is a very personal memory for me. I was an air traffic controller in Detroit at the time and helped support that investigation. The crash in Spain brings back sights, smells and emotions that had been filed away for a long time. It is difficult to even consider the possibility that a decades-old tragedy could repeat itself in this day and age of safety improvements.

Unfortunately, that is not the only case of repetition that lately has come to my attention. Just a few weeks ago, I was in Taipei, Taiwan, watching a presentation from a young aviation occurrence investigator. He was pointing out this same unfortunate pattern of ignored warnings and repeated mistakes. One example he cited was the crash of an Avions de Transport Regional (ATR) 72 in Roselawn, Indiana, U.S., in 1994, caused by icing. Then he listed seven similar incidents and accidents that have occurred since then in icing conditions with ATR 42s and ATR 72s. Two weeks later, I was in Norway, listening to a briefing from another investigator. She described another serious incident she was investigating, involving one of the same model aircraft under similar circumstances.

We see this “forgetful pattern” in ongoing work at the Foundation. Our recent efforts to put together a tool kit for runway excursions keep pointing us back to old lessons that have been learned too many times at the cost of too many lives, often basic lessons about stabilized approaches and the proper use of braking and reverse thrust.

We have achieved great safety improvements over the past several decades by predicting problems before they turn into tragedies. *Predicting* is important, but there is something always to be gained by *remembering*, as well. To a great extent, that is one of the things we do in this magazine. We detail the hard-won lessons of the past to share them with the rest of the world. At the Foundation, we do our part by making this publication available electronically, free, for anyone who wants it.

Many companies put out in-house safety publications of their own, which have great value in being able to focus on the specifics of that firm's operations. But as our industry faces difficult financial times, and looks for even more places to cut costs, aviation executives around the world need to be warned: That safety newsletter filled with accounts of incidents and “war stories” is not a luxury that can be cut without risking severe consequences. That small budget line is the cost of remembering. The cost of forgetting is something that no company can afford.



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