

PRICE ON LIVES

Air sick

In the wake of the Air India crash off Ireland, the Tristar accident in Dallas and the Japan Airline disaster, the victims lying in the make shift mortuary of hangar no. 7 at Manchester Airport last month brought the total number of dead from air travel accidents this summer over the thousand mark.

Everyone hopes they can avoid just such a tragedy. But is luck all we have to rely on? Is our fate totally out with our control as one aviation specialist would have us believe, "God was not with that flight"? As the Chairman of the British Airline Pilots Association said:

. . . we have had a string of survivable accidents on all types of aircraft in which we believe the effects of smoke and fire have been critical for people trapped in the fuselage. . . a lot more people have died in these incidents than should have done. (*Guardian* 29th August 1985)

So what factors are within our technical capacities; what safety measures are there available?

FUEL: ICI have developed a fuel additive which will prevent misting and so lessen the flammability of fuel. But to do this took seventeen years of research and ICI are waiting for funding before developing the life saving additive. Although undoubtedly safer, there is no guarantee that it will even be used - some airlines still use JP4 gasoline rather than the less flammable Jet A kerosene. A study by Cranfield Institute of Technology shows that, on average, five times as many passengers will be burnt to death before they can escape, if JP4 is used. JP4, though, is cheaper. (*Flight International* 14th September 1985)

MATERIALS: Most deaths in aircraft fires are due to the inhalation of toxic fumes from the combustion of the foam inside seats. Airlines have been slow to introduce new, safer upholstery, as regulations will require by 1987. The cost to the airline is \$200 a seat, and will give passengers an extra ninety seconds to escape. Of course, even safer materials are available, but they are found only in the Space Shuttle as the cost of replacement by the airline companies is too large. (*Newsnight*, BBC 2, 22nd August 1985)

WEIGHT: "Every gramme of structure (is) a gramme of commercial payload lost" (*The Safe Airline* - J M Ramaden 1976).

Therefore light aluminium alloys are use for the aircraft body although they have very poor heat resistance. This argument has long been used by the

airlines to counter the requests for more, or improved, safety equipment.

The standard Boeing 737 flight has one hundred and fourteen passengers in nineteen rows. A charter flight like that which crashed at Manchester - packs in an extra three rows, giving three inches less of space for each person. The Air correspondent for BBC News asks,

Why were 130 of those souls crammed into seats spaced just thirty inches apart? . . . The answer, of course, that the average passenger represents 140 lbs of high-value merchandise, and that if you can compress three additional rows of seats designed to provide comfort for one hundred and fifteen people, it means you can earn another £600 or so on a Mediterranean flight Multiply that by ten aircraft making a couple of round trips a day during the peak summer and winter holidays, and you come out with substantial earnings approaching an additional million pounds a year. (*The Listener*, 5th September 1985)

So it is simply a case of the inexorable law of capitalism - payload and profits come a long way before safety. As David Vearmount of the Civil Aviation Authority said, "Airlines don't mind applying the safety rules as long as all their competitors do so".

(*Flight International*" 14th September 1985)

Considering the controversy that has surrounded the use of the emergency exits in the Manchester crash, it is important to note that British Airways are intending sealing two exits on their 747 jumbo jets in order to increase seating capacity. (In case you had forgotten, BA are the airline that once claimed to "take more care of you").

The risk, then, is quantified by the airline. Each passenger effectively has a price on their head - doubtless down to two decimal places. Under the façade of efficiency that is the accountants' balance-sheets, the benefits of cost savings on cheaper fuel, or lighter planes, or more passengers is weighed against "acceptable" risks to safety:

It is on the definition of just what is an acceptable risk, however, that pilots and operators have some of their most bitter arguments, and many safety-conscious but disillusioned pilots have, perhaps unfairly, echoed Nevil Shute's bitter comment, "of course operators are all for safety -just as long as it doesn't cost them any money!" . . . an airline may accept a risk, because to lessen it would put one or more particular departments over the allotted budget; while if a crash occurs, it is not the operator who foots the bill, but the insurer. (*Pilot Error - A Professional Study of Contributory Factors*, Ronald Aupt (Ed), 1976)

The definition of acceptable risk is rightly troublesome - whose risk is it, to fly (as passengers or crew) in a plane that could be safer? But who accepts the benefits?

The simple inequality, based on an inequality of ownership and control, explains why the interests of consumers (like the passengers flying on holiday) and of producers (like the cabin crew), are ignored in order to meet these needs of the minority class of owners, who don't need to live on wages or salaries, and certainly don't live for package flights to the Med once a year.

And as the bereaved families picked up their lives again, they were already being hounded by lawyers from America, who can get higher rewards - and a higher cut - from suits filed over there. One was reported to have booked into a hotel near Manchester Airport within 48 hours of the crash, fresh from a killing at Bhopal and now "ambulance-chasing" in Manchester.

Definitely business as usual.

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