

2012 the safest year ever for air travel again

by Paul Hayes

In 1943 the Curtiss-Wright Corporation delivered a secret report to the U.S. Government on the expected development of commercial aviation after the end of World War II...

The report was extremely positive and foresaw very considerable growth in air transport in the coming years. The only negative the company saw was the airline industry's poor level of safety. It concluded that 'if the accident rate remains the same as in the 1930s, the expected growth in commercial aviation after the War will result in an unacceptable number of accidents. This will, ultimately, limit this growth.'

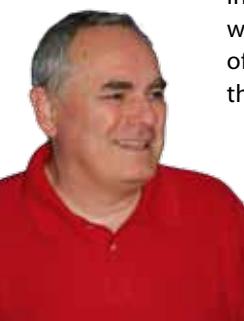
In the late 1930s the US airline passenger fatality rate was about one per 50,000 passengers carried (the world passenger fatality rate at this time was probably closer to one per 10,000 passengers carried).

US (and world) airline safety did begin to improve after the War and, by 1950, when US airlines, including major airlines like American, Eastern, Northwest, TWA etc, suffered 15 fatal accidents in which 31 crew and 182 passengers died, the passenger fatality rate was twice as good as in the late 1930s - one passenger fatality per 100,000 carried.

Globally in 1950 there were at least 43 fatal accidents on revenue passenger flights resulting in some 831 passenger fatalities. In 2012 there were just 10 fatal accidents on revenue passenger flights world wide resulting in 362 passenger fatalities. None of the accidents in 2012 involved a US airline, 'major' or otherwise. In fact none of the airlines involved in the 2012 accidents is probably known outside the markets it serves.

Airline safety has continued to improve since 1950 and has

not only managed to keep up with the huge expansion of air travel but has also got ahead of it, actually reducing the frequency of fatal accidents. In the immediate post-War years, typically, there may have been 40 to 50 fatal accidents involving revenue passengers each year but this has now more than halved to between 10 and 20 a year. Curtiss-Wright's fear that the public would be driven away from flying by increasing numbers of accidents has thankfully not been realized although, of course, there are still people who are scared of flying.



Paul Hayes

Few people in aviation can match Paul's nearly 35 years' experience in air safety and his achievements as a trusted advisor to governments, regulators, insurance markets and airlines worldwide. Paul joined Ascend in 1974, having previously worked for National Air Traffic Services at London Heathrow Airport.



and 362 passenger fatalities in 2012 and I am sure the general media, as always, ran 'thoughtful' stories questioning global airline safety, it will be noted that the passenger fatality rate last year was 100 times better than in 1950 and perhaps 1,000 times better than in the 1930's.

Last year, 2012, the estimated passenger fatality rate had reached a high of one per 9.9 million passengers carried. This makes 2012 the safest year ever and some 20% better than 2011 when the passenger fatality rate was one per 8.2 million passengers carried; 2011 had itself previously been called 'the safest year ever.'

Although there were still 10 fatal accidents on revenue passenger flights

These numbers probably do not carry much impact by themselves – what, after all, do 100 or 1,000 times better mean in reality? However, put simplistically, without this 100 fold improvement in the passenger fatality rate, 2012 traffic levels, if still exposed to 1950 levels of safety, might have given rise to 1,000 fatal accidents – almost 20 per week or three every single day of the year – killing more than 36,000 passengers.

Would this accident frequency and death toll have limited the industry's

growth or would fatal air crashes have simply ceased to be news? After all a similar number of people are killed on US or EU roads every year and road traffic accidents only get reported by the media in exceptional cases.

However, unfortunately, we do not believe that the world's airlines have become this much safer this quickly and 2012's accident rate, perhaps, should be considered currently to be more of a fluke than the new norm. We believe that the underlying global passenger fatality rate is probably about one per six million passengers carried – about three times better than during the 1990s but 'only' perhaps 60 times better than the 1950s. Nevertheless, airline safety is continuing to improve rapidly. The industry, on average, probably becomes twice as safe about every 10 years while traffic growth globally is only forecast to be between perhaps 3 and 4% per year over the same period. So, on average, we might expect about 30% fewer fatal accidents a year by 2023.

Meanwhile, 2012's accident rate has set the air safety bar very high and it may well be that this year (2013) will fall short with a worse rate and more accidents than last year but that would not mean that airlines have suddenly become less safe. ■